

“Running Up that Hill: *How students can address barriers to the outdoors*”

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“Takin’ a wee break?” Asked a friendly Scottish woman, far more chipper than my friends and I, sitting drenched in sweat on a rocky outcrop about halfway up Duncolm. We’d plopped down less than a meter away from the trail, kicked off our shoes, and started inhaling the sandwiches we’d packed. The woman, noticing our group’s discarded boots and trainers, smiled kindly at us:

“They’re never quite spot-on with the bog factor, are they?” We’d all laughed, partly remorseful for our soaked feet and partly comforted at the thought that this woman, with her trekking poles (*were we supposed to have those?*) and shiny waterproof boots, had been where we were.

Our hike’s setback was due to a common feature in Scotland: rain and its lasting effects. We’d relied on a website that rated different aspects of trails, including their bog factor (the amount of sitting water and mud you’d have to plod through if there’d been rain recently.)

Weather is one of many concrete obstacles Scotland’s residents face when getting outdoors. There are also financial, social, and physiological concerns that keep people off the trails. My friends and I all had an interest in hiking and at least some experience with outdoor activities before then. Our motley crew also included one long term UK resident who warned us that the bogs, and the hill itself, could pose a threat to our toes and our morale. Without realistic expectations, and preparing with our fastest drying socks, our soggy tale would have been quite miserable, and probably put us off hiking for good.

The reality is even without the ideal gear and perfect conditions, we were still far more privileged than the droves of people who are systematically unable to reap the benefits of time outdoors. Outdoor activities in Scotland are simply out of reach for the nation’s most disenfranchised populations: those who are financially unstable, racial minorities, the displaced, and those lacking experience or knowledge of the outdoors. A report by the James Hutton Institute spanning 2014-2016 highlights this trend that continues today in a Covid-influenced hill-scape, with people of color, residents in Scotland’s most deprived areas, and people with a disability least able to participate in weekly outdoor recreation. These groups, to whom “bagging Munros” is a wealthy, white practice, see outdoor recreation for its demanding cost of entry: the price of gear and transportation, the physical risks and requirements, and the lack of social support from people inside and out of the hill walking communities.

While the situation seems grim, there are a few steps students are able to take toward inclusion. First, while it can seem impossible as a student to organize transportation and collect the requisite gear, there are a few ways to make it cheaper (and even free.) For transportation, get a free bus pass if you’re under 22! The bus system connects you with nearly any trail you could want to take a crack at. For gear, borrow things like shoes and rain jackets from friends of the same size, or get on Facebook Marketplace to take advantage of secondhand deals. Know that for most trails closest to Glasgow, you will not need things like trekking poles or

boots suited to ice. Solid footwear (water resistance is important no matter the time of year), layers that you already have in your wardrobe, and more water and snacks than you think you'll consume are all the essentials you need. You can also join the University's own Hill Walking society to get on board organized trips and connect with kind gear lenders.

Finally, for students to begin addressing the socio-cultural exclusion factors, it's essential to be thoughtful and inclusive. If you have experience outdoors or are privileged enough to find yourself outside of one of the groups discussed above, reach out to those that aren't in the same position. Making your peers feel welcome in the outdoors is as simple as making them feel safe. Take away the intimidation factor, share gear, and prioritise accessible hikes. If you are in a group with less access to the outdoors or are new to Scotland, reach out to the people involved in activities that pique your interest. As intimidating as it can seem, you're likely to find a welcoming community that'll be more than happy to walk along with you (and even share a trail sandwich.)

Be like the kind woman who made my friends and me feel better about being rookies, or have the courage to trust that you'll find people like her on your way up Scotland's hills.