

tiny, tiny numbers. Just before we set off, my local newspaper in New Hampshire had an interview with a trail maintainer who noted that twenty years ago the three campsites in his section averaged about a dozen visitors a week in July and August and that now they sometimes got as many as a hundred in a week. The amazing thing about that, if you ask me, is that they got so few for so long. Anyway, a hundred visitors a week for three campsites at the height of summer hardly seems overwhelming.

Perhaps I was coming at this from the wrong direction, having hiked in crowded little England for so long, but what never ceased to astonish me throughout our long summer was how empty the trail was. Nobody knows how many people hike the Appalachian Trail, but most estimates put the number at around three or four million a year. If four million is right, and we assume that probably three-quarters of that hiking is done during the six warmest months, that means an average of 16,500 people on the trail a day in season, or 7.5 people for each mile of trail, one person every 700 feet. In fact, few sections will experience anything like that high a density. A very high proportion of those four million annual hikers will be concentrated in certain popular places for a day or a week-end—the Presidential range in New Hampshire, Baxter State Park in Maine, Mount Greylock in Massachusetts, in the Smokies, and Shenandoah National Park. That four million will also include a high proportion of what you might call Reebok hikers—people who park their car, walk 400 yards, get back in their car, drive off, and never do anything as breathtaking as that again. Believe me, no matter what anyone tells you, the Appalachian Trail is not crowded.

When people bleat on about the trail being too crowded, what they mean is that the shelters are too crowded, and this is indubitably sometimes so. The problem, however, is not that there are too many hikers for the shelters but too few shelters for the hikers. Shenandoah National Park has just eight huts, each able to accommodate no more than eight people in comfort, ten at a pinch, in 101 miles of national park. That's about average for the trail overall. Although the distances between shelters can vary enormously,

there is on average an AT shelter, cabin, hut, or lean-to (240 of them altogether) about every ten miles. That means adequate covered sleeping space for just 2,500 hikers over 2,200 miles of trail. When you consider that more than 100 million Americans live within a day's drive of the Appalachian Trail, it is hardly surprising that 2,500 sleeping spaces is sometimes not enough. Yet, perversely, pressure is growing in some quarters to reduce the number of shelters to discourage what is seen—amazingly to me—as overuse of the trail.

So, as always when the conversation turned to the crowdedness of the trail and the fact that you now sometimes see a dozen people in a day when formerly you would have been lucky to see two, I listened politely and said, "You guys ought to try hiking in England."

Jim turned to me and said, in a kindly, patient way, "But you see, Bill, we're not *in* England." Perhaps he had a point.

Now here is another reason I am exceptionally fond of Shenandoah National Park, and why I am probably not cut out to be a proper American trail hiker—cheeseburgers. You can get cheeseburgers quite regularly in Shenandoah National Park, and Coca-Cola with ice, and french fries and ice cream, and a good deal else. Although the rampant commercialization I spoke of a moment ago never happened (and thank goodness, of course), something of that *esprit de commerce* lives on in Shenandoah. The park is liberally sprinkled with public campgrounds and rest stops with restaurants and shops—and the AT, God bless it, pays nearly every one of them a call. It is entirely against the spirit of the AT to have restaurant breaks along the trail, but I never met a hiker who didn't appreciate it to bits.

Katz, Connolly, and I had our first experience of it the next morning, after we had said farewell to Jim and Chuck and the Boy Scouts, who were all headed south, when we arrived about lunchtime at a lively commercial sprawl called Big Meadows.

Big Meadows had a campground, a lodge, a restaurant, a gift