BAXTER STATE PARK VS. SCOTT JUREK
THE CLASH OF COMMERCIAL SPORTS AND WILDERNESS PRESERVATION
KATAHDIN

JUL 17, 2015 : JORDAN BOWMAN

NEWS

Baxter State Park vs. Scott Jurek: The Clash of Commercial Sports and Wilderness Preservation

On July 12, Scott Jurek stepped onto the summit of Mount Katahdin and into the record books: after 46 days, 8 hours, and 7 minutes of hiking, Jurek officially broke the speed record for an assisted thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail.

The world record was not the only thing he earned, however. According to a post on Baxter State Park's Facebook page, Jurek was issued three summonses by a BSP ranger while celebrating his victory atop Baxter Peak, the Northern Terminus of the A.T. The post states that Jurek had been cited for the following offenses:

> *…for the drinking of alcoholic beverages in public places (BSP Rule 7 and Maine State General Law), for littering (BSP Rule 4.5) and for hiking with an oversize group (BSP Rule 2.2). In addition, media personnel were issued a summons for violation of a commercial media permit which prohibited filming within 500′ of Baxter Peak.*

Scott Jurek caresses the Katahdin summit sign after breaking the A.T. thru-hike speed record. Image courtesy of Scott Jurek's Instagram page.

The Baxter State Park Authority (BSPA) has made no secret of their concern for the influx of thru-hikers over the past several years—in particular, the unwanted behavior that sometimes accompanies some of the thru-hiking community. In late 2014, the BSPA issued a letter to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy voicing these concerns, concluding that if there was not a "commitment to sustainable use of the AT and preserving the wild experience along the trail," then "elocating key portions of the trail or the trail terminus would be another option."

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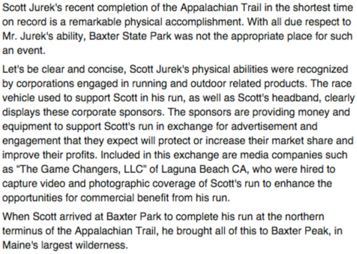
In other words, if the ATC and thru-hikers are not able to find a way to coexist with the conservation efforts of the BSPA, the northern terminus of the A.T. may have to find a new home.

This point was reiterated in the post concerning Jurek's recent summonses. While the post praises Jurek's athletic accomplishment, it openly takes issue with much of the hoopla surrounding his entrance into the park, most notably the large crowds and the presence of corporate advertising on his clothing and support vehicle:



Scott Jurek's recent completion of the Appalachian Trail in the shortest time on record is a remarkable physical accomplishment. With all due respect to Mr. Jurek's ability, Baxter State Park was not the appropriate place for such an event.

Let's be clear and concise, Scott Jurek's physical abilities were recognized by corporations engaged in running and outdoor related products. The race vehicle used to support Scott in his run, as well as Scott's headband, clearly displays these corporate sponsors. The sponsors are providing money and equipment to support Scott's run in exchange for advertisement and engagement that they expect will protect or increase their market share and improve their profits. Included in this exchange are media companies such as "The Game Changers, LLC" of Laguna Beach CA, who were hired to capture video and photographic coverage of Scott's run to enhance the opportunities for commercial benefit from his run.

When Scott arrived at Baxter Park to complete his run at the northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail, he brought all of this to Baxter Peak, in Maine's largest wilderness.

While Jurek's violation of park rules are certainly a concern for the BSPA—particularly given that such a high-profile figure as Jurek was openly violating several park and state regulations while thousands were watching his every move—it is clear that park administrators are primarily concerned with the impact this sort of activity will have on both the physical and idealistic properties of the wilderness sanctuary BSP is attempting to protect. The post continues:

These "corporate events" have no place in the Park and are incongruous with the Park's mission of resource protection, the appreciation of nature and the respect of the experience of others in the Park. We hope for the support of the AT and BSP communities to help us steer these events to more appropriate venues in the future.

Why, in a time when corporate-sponsored sporting events are as common as black flies in Maine, is the prevalence of Jurek's corporate sponsors such a big deal in the eyes of the BSPA? In order to understand this reaction, it is important to know a bit of the history and legacy that Baxter State Park represents.

"...the state's crowning glory..."

Image courtesy of WhatToSeeIn.net

Baxter State Park was the dream project of Percival Baxter, who served as Maine's Governor from 1921 to 1924. Entranced with the backwoods of his home state, the wealthy politician used his resources to purchase 6,000 acres—including Katahdin itself, which Baxter described as "the state's crowning glory"—and donated the land to the state. Baxter did, however, have one overriding condition for his donation:

… shall forever be used for public park and recreational purposes, shall forever be left in the natural wild state, shall forever be kept as a sanctuary for wild beasts and birds, that no road or ways for motor vehicles shall hereafter ever be constructed thereon or therein.

Since the initial creation of BSP, Baxter and additional donors increased the park's size to 209,644 acres, expanding the "wild state" of the park to almost 35 times its original size.

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The endowments provided by Percival Baxter allows BSP to operate much more independently than other state or national parks. Image courtesy of the BSPA.

Wary of potential dangers to the longevity of his investment, Baxter endowed BSP with a trust of nearly $7 million to ensure that the park would always remain funded without having to compete for tax dollars like other state and national parks. Today, further capital is provided by entrance and parking fees, all of which is dedicated to maintaining the wilderness sanctuary of BSP.

In short, unlike national and state parks—and the Appalachian Trail itself—the BSPA has total control over how the park is run, and they do not need public money in order to keep Baxter's original dream alive.

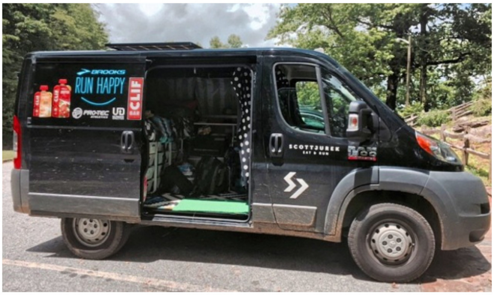
And that dream did not include advertisements for Clif Bars and Brooks Running apparel.

Running a Business

Jurek donned labels for Clif Bars and Brooks Running shoes and clothing throughout his record-breaking thru-hike. Image courtesy of Outside Online.

While Jurek's latest accomplishment has rocketed him even further into the public eye, he has been recognized for decades as one of the most prolific and accomplished long-distance runners in the world. He has won multiple ultramarathons, three consecutive Spartathalons, and, in 2010, set the record for the longest distance run within a 24-hour period by an American—an incredible 165.7 miles. These accomplishments, as well as his profile in the bestselling non-fiction *Born to Run*, made Scott Jurek a household name for running enthusiasts.

Yet running by itself does not pay the rent. While winning competitions does award some prize money, the real compensation in sports—particularly extreme sports—comes from corporate sponsorships.



Jurek's support van bears the logos of many of his corporate sponsors and was specifically cited by the BSPA as "incongruous with the Park's mission." Image courtesy of Mountain Crossings at Neel Gap.

Many athletes, particularly those who are just starting out or are attempting to break into the field, do not have the financial resources to commit full-time to their passion. Also, according to Runner's World, "sponsorship can lend credibility to your event," showing the world that multi-million dollar companies have placed their faith in your capabilities. Thus, sponsorship has become a necessary element for many full-time athletes, even when, one can only assume, many would prefer not to serve the role of "human billboard."

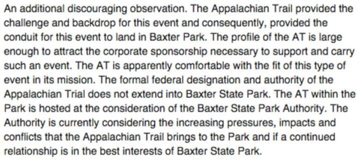
Whether or not Jurek needed the support of his sponsors in order to make this accomplishment a reality, it is hard to say. Nor, in truth, does it really matter: the presence of this type of "corporate event," as the BSP note states, directly contradicts what the park administrators feel wilderness preservation represents—an escape, both physically and mentally, from the trappings of society at large.

Coexisting with the Wild

Scott Jurek speeds along through the Green Tunnel. Image courtesy of DailyCamera.com

From its place of financial independence, the BSPA is able to take a stance against public figures such as Jurek—or, at the very least, the companies he is representing—while he is reaping praise from most of the media for his unquestionably-impressive physical accomplishment. And while celebrating the feats that the human body can accomplish is a passion that unites us all, this incident does raise the question of what we are willing to lose in our wilderness experiences in order to fund and promote these adventures.

The BSPA has taken a stance, and in addition broadcast its obvious disdain that the ATC allowed something like Jurek's well-publicized trek to diminish the A.T.'s much-lauded "wilderness experience":



An additional discouraging observation. The Appalachian Trail provided the challenge and backdrop for this event and consequently, provided the conduit for this event to land in Baxter Park. The profile of the AT is large enough to attract the corporate sponsorship necessary to support and carry such an event. The AT is apparently comfortable with the fit of this type of event in its mission. The formal federal designation and authority of the Appalachian Trial does not extend into Baxter State Park. The AT within the Park is hosted at the consideration of the Baxter State Park Authority. The Authority is currently considering the increasing pressures, impacts and conflicts that the Appalachian Trail brings to the Park and if a continued relationship is in the best interests of Baxter State Park.

While this statement is harsh, perhaps even vitriolic, toward the current policies of the ATC, it does highlight the BSPA's primary concern—that by allowing the wilderness to be opened to commercial pursuits, we are abandoning the intended purpose of the trail. Jurek's success has highlighted what the human body is capable of doing; but does it reflect what we *should* be doing in these environments? Should we dismiss the intended purpose of the trail to meander, focusing instead on individual accomplishment and expanding a brand? Is there a place for both to exist on "The People's Trail" and beyond?

For the BSPA, the answer is undeniable: the wilderness is sullied when societal diversions are allowed to enter.

For competitive runners such as Jurek, the trail may be seen as a challenge to overcome—and, for their sponsors, as an opportunity to be capitalized upon.

I like to think, admittedly through a veil of whimsy, that the answer lies in the words of a prolific Maine woodsman, the first 2,000-miler on the Appalachian Trail:

To those who would see the Maine wilderness, tramp day by day through a succession of ever delightful forest, past lake and stream, and over mountains, we would say: Follow the Appalachian Trail across Maine. It cannot be followed on horse or awheel. Remote for detachment, narrow for chosen company, winding for leisure, lonely for contemplation, it beckons not merely north and south but upward to the body, mind and soul of man.

-Myron Avery
In the Maine Woods, 1934

I did not personally witness any of the transgressions that the BSPA is claiming in regard to Jurek's adventure, but their concern is undoubtedly real: if we provide too many concessions to corporate events and large gatherings within our wilderness areas, then we risk losing them

—if not literally, then at least in spirit. Regardless of the harsh tone they adopted in broaching this topic, the BSPA should be lauded for opening the door to the conversation, allowing the AT community writ large to debate the future purpose and use of the trail so that we can ensure that it remains protected and open to all who wish to experience it.

KATAHDIN
TERMINUS OF APPALACHIAN TRAIL: A MOUNTAIN FOOT-PATH 2056 MILES LONG TO OGLETHORPE GEORGIA

Myron Avery rests with his ever-present measuring wheel and fellow surveyors atop Mount Katahdin. Image courtesy of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy.

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Jordan Bowman's Bio

If you yelled "Yo Teach!" on the A.T. in 2014, it wasn't long before I showed up to give a lesson. As a writer, teacher, hiker, and general know-it-all, I'm happy to talk your ear off about movies, books, running, Star Wars and, of course, hiking the A.T. I enjoy writing almost as much as a brisk mountainside afternoon and have professional experience writing for websites, magazines, and old-fashioned newspapers.

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Gary Sizer
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Book Review: Where's the Next Shelter?

There were several times when reading Gary Sizer's Where's the Next...

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Comments 28

RACHEL MARCUS ELLIOTT : JUL 18TH

Good article but the date of Jurek's completion at the very beginning is wrong – I believe it was July 12th not May 12th. You may want to edit.

REPLY

JORDAN : JUL 18TH

Fixed. Of everything we fact-checked and edited, this error still slipped through somehow. Thanks for the heads up.

REPLY

PAMELA EARNEST : MAR 29TH

Excellent article on the encroachment of commercialism on the A.T. Let's keep it "wild" & leave the "name brands" to the ones who are seeking their own glory & fame. Dude, is the date the only thing you have to comment about. You missed the point of the article.

REPLY

MAURA HALKIOTIS : JUL 18TH

I hear you but I still think it is sad that they "used" Scott's accomplishment as a teaching tool. People accuse Scott of "grandstanding" but so didn't the BSPA.

REPLY

GARY SIZER : JUL 18TH

If you read the actual statement made by BSP, you'll quickly see one of the top comments was written by someone who was actually there. The theme of her message is that the statements made by the park were inaccurate. It's well written and makes a ton of good points that aren't getting the attention they deserve. I suggest that anyone who wants to see more than one side of this issue should check it out. I'll summarize, and then offer my own opinion.

1. The "crowd" at the summit was about the same as you'd see on any typical day atop Katahdin.
2. The "crowd" wasn't Jurek's team, but several small groups who climbed that day and decided to stay when they heard what was happening. He didn't "organize a corporate event".
3. The littering charge was for the cork from the champagne bottle, which someone picked up.
4. Yes, he drank alcohol, which is against the rules. A sip of champagne after breaking a world record. I had champagne up there too. So did nearly every one of the thousands of people who climb that mountain every year. Yes, he broke the rule, but in his defense BSP has never enforced that rule. Less than a year ago, a ranger there told me that they don't care as long as no one is causing problems (violence/vandalism/etc).

It seems that many of the people who are siding with BSP on this are the same people who poo-poo'ed this whole thing from the start. I actually saw an AT thru hiker call Scott Jurek "An entitled elitist jerk" because "someone else carried his pack." Another common sentiment is "speeding through the trail detracts from the experience…" In other words, the same people who gave us "Hike Your Own Hike" are also saying "He's Doing It Wrong."

Since I'm already on a soapbox here, I'll tell you what I think about that.

Scott never claimed to be a thru hiker. No one else ever carried his pack because he never had one. He's a runner. Runners don't sleep in the woods or do laundry at a hostel while eating pizza with their trail family. Runners run, and that's what he did. His approach didn't detract from his experience at all; his approach was the whole point of his experience.

What he did was amazing and he deserves every accolade he receives.

While BSP is "technically" right on at least one of their charges, their approach to handling this was wrong. They should have issued the ticket and quietly collected the fine, but only if they also did the same for the thousands of others who have also celebrated at the top. Or, they could have just let it slide like they've done thousands of times too. Consistency is key, but then so is not publishing false accusations against a public figure.

REPLY

SHAWN HUDSON : JUL 18TH

Here's the deal. You do, I do, we all do. Doesn't matter. Baxter doesn't want anyone drinking on top of Katahdin. It isn't new, and Jurek should've abided by the rule. You want to think that's a stupid rule, then that's on you. They especially don't want it to be presented on such a national level … "Hey, here's a guy that every schmoe in the US or further abroad has now seen spraying champagne all over the summit of Katahdin." Oh, okay. Must be the norm. Let's all do it!

Jurek clearly doesn't give a fuck. But that's because despite being a record-holder, he has little care for the trail. It was simply another vehicle to propel his own shooting star along. I doubt he'll give much back, but he has certainly taken away … at least in the eyes of BSPA.

REPLY

BLAKE E : JUL 20TH

I am not sure that Jurek was aware of the no drinking rule and it was someone else that brought the champagne. To say the comments of Jurek doesn't give back is TOTALLY off base. I met Jurek on three different days on the AT and ran 8 miles with him on one of the days. He talked to every hiker he passed. Most he asked their trail name and if they were going to Katahdin. I saw others come running up after he had passed and ask to have their picture taken with him. He stopped and paused with each one that asked. Also, did you see the post where his wife collected his empty gel packs and other food trash and then sent it in for recycling? I have never seen someone so well known be so friendly as Jurek was when he was on the trail.

REPLY

TWOONIE : JUL 20TH

Good for Baxter State Park sticking by their mission to protect the wilderness, and by extension, the wilderness experience for people to enjoy. I have a long hike planned for next year. My original plan had been to hike the Appalachian Trail, but after watching a number of videos online posted by hikers, nope. Scenes of hikers sitting around shelters drinking and doing drugs, hikers harassing black bears, 'trail magic' littered all over the place, no chance of hiking solo for long periods unless you start in deep winter. The AT is more like a walking car camping experience than tramping through the wilderness. Would hate to see Baxter go the same way.

REPLY

MASTERY : SEP 5TH

I also had given much consideration to where my first thru-hike will be. Just as Twoonie has stated…after doing much research…I see what it has and is becoming. So…I've turned my attention to doing the PCT instead.

REPLY

ERIC : JUL 24TH

You are correct, he is not a hiker. The fact that he is a professional runner makes the incident that much worse. The runner came and deficated in the hikers backyard. The entire stunt was a corporate event, designed to provide maximum publicity for the sponsors. His actions have shown he does not care about what effect his stunt might have on the trail as a whole and BSP specifically. He has used the trail for his benefit and the benefit if his sponsors, unfortunately he didnt bother to dig a cat hole.

REPLY

THR BLOB : FEB 3RD

Jurek is an entitled elitist jack ass. He has no appreciation or respect for the natural world. His leave no trace practices are severely lacking. He should be held accountable for his poor desisions. What he did he did for fame and personal gain without thinking about the consequences. What a self centered narcissist. It only takes one to ruin it for all.

REPLY

LORI DOMINGO : JUL 18TH

I am hoping that this issue has made many users of the A.T. stop and think for a minute. I can't claim to be a thru hiker. I'm a section hiker with only about 120 or so miles under my belt. I've seen trash in practically every fire pit I've passed or camped near. I've witnessed how some people "relax" at the end of the day by pulling out there pot for a quick smoke. I've watched as people fly by me, chasing miles in comparison to my snail's pace. Still, I do not judge. Mr. Juerk's physical accomplishments are certainly something to be proud of. If he had passed me on the trail, I would have wished him luck as he left me in the background. I don't care who "slack packs" or who carries five times more than they actually need. For me, it is all about the peace I find while out on the A.T. and I want that to always be available to me since I can only capture a few miles of it each year. I'm hoping that the BSP officials and the ATC or anyone else who uses the A.T. can find common ground and keep the wilderness there for those of us who seek its solace. Because of this issue looming so larger than life now with the completion of Mr. Jurek's record-setting run, maybe now all of us who appreciate the trail for what it is and what it gives us can work together to keep it alive. This has to be a group effort, I think…not placed on the shoulders of a select few who are in the spotlight. I hope this can be used as a learning experience and that with everyone's help we can keep the A.T. alive and well for many generations to come. I sort of think that's what Benton MacKaye had in mind.

REPLY

DAVID HOWIE : JUL 18TH

Prior to reading the article, I was fairly certain where I stood on this topic. After finishimg it (and the thoughtful comments to this point), I'm now not sure where I stand. Good arguments from all sides.

REPLY

CAITLIN : JUL 18TH

Great article. While I agree with BSP's position, I think it's important to remember that the ATC does have the clause in their group policy that they explicitly do not support commercial events on the AT. While the ATC maintains and protects the trail, they are still a non-profit entity with no legal authority to stop people or events on the trail. It's the national park or forest service that would have to do that. The ATC has been trying to change the culture but, as the author said, it's up to us and the larger AT community to effect real change in the way people use the trail.

REPLY

DID YOU NOTICE : JUL 18TH

I respect Jennifer Pharr Davis ever more after learning about Jurek and commercialized for-profit stunt. I wish someone carried dry sock and shoes for me after every ford!

REPLY

TAYLOR : JUL 19TH

That's how I feel. Jurek beat her record by a few hours, wooptie doo. She didn't commercialize they crap out of it like he did plus she beat the old record by 25 hours.

REPLY

TAYLOR : JUL 19TH

Good on BSP for taking a stance and basically saying, if the hiking community doesn't start respecting this protected wilderness it will have to be protected from the hiking community. I don't know how many times I've read about how much trash people leave on the AT. Scott Jurek is obviously well known and somewhat of a celebrity which gives him a power; it is unfortunate that he wasn't more conscious of the image he was setting. He beat the previous record by 3 hours. Jennifer Pharr Davis beat the AT supported record by 26 hours with a completely different strategy than tried by her predecessors. Her support "crew" was her husband, not a commercialized van and tons of sponsors. She wasn't cited for littering. It's all about not thinking of yourself as being bigger than you are.

REPLY

BLAKE E : JUL 20TH

I do not know of Jennifer Pharr Davis finish celebration, but she didn’t finish in Katahdin so she did not have to worry about any issues with BSP. Jurek’s support crew was his wife in van. Other friends of his came out at points along with way, but his wife was his constant support crew. Others, like myself, merely tracked him online and went to join him where I knew he would be on the trail. His sponsors provided the gear that he used. The van they were in was provided by sponsors. Not exactly a huge corporate presence other than logos on the side. A rep for Brooks wasn’t there trying to sell you shoes while Scott ate his lunch.

REPLY

TBIRD73 : AUG 31ST

Wow Taylor, bitter much?