On November 21, 1990--the day before Thanksgiving--Bill Irwin, 50, arrived at the base of Mount Katahdin in Maine's Baxter State Park, thus completing a walk of the footpath known as the Appalachian Trail. Irwin's goal of hiking the entire Trail began on March 8, 1990. His excursion through extensive wilderness in 14 states included 8 national forests and about 60 state parks and game lands.

Unlike most thru-hikers--those attempting to walk the entire 2,144 miles of the Trail starting from Springer Mountain in northern Georgia to Mount Katahdin in one hiking season--Irwin's accomplishment attracted a great deal of national attention because of his disability. Irwin, a chemist turned Christian counselor from Burlington, North Carolina, is the first blind person (light perception but lacks visual acuity) to ever complete the walking Trail.

The Appalachian Trail Conference (ATC) located at Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, maintains and manages the trail. Completed in August of 1937, the Trail has become known as the world's longest continuously marked footpath, and in 1968 was designated by Congress as the country's first national scenic trail. The Trail follows the crests of the Nantahala and Great Smoky Mountains of North Carolina, the Blue Ridge Mountains from North Carolina to Pennsylvania, and ends with the Berkshire Highlands and the Green, White, and Mahoosuc Mountains in New England.

Most Trail users are day-hikers or backpackers who take trips of several days or weeks. According to records kept by ATC, about 1,000 hikers attempt the thru-hike each year but generally fewer than 200 succeed. Irwin was the last thru-hiker to complete the Trail in 1990, averaging 8.2 miles a day and finishing three and one-half weeks behind the next to last hiker of the year. As Irwin put it, "I was last by a landslide."

Alternative Resources Developed

Unlike most thru-hikers, Irwin did not use the ATC's Official Guides to the Appalachian Trail which contain detailed descriptions and topographic maps. Instead, his son, Billy, made audio cassette tapes containing information about the Trail from Georgia to the Delaware Water Gap in Pennsylvania, and Laurie Peele, an ATC staff member, volunteered to supply tapes for Irwin from the Water Gap to Mount Katahdin. The tapes, which reached Irwin by mail during the course of his journey, contained such pertinent information as mileage between major landmarks and streams, locations of shelters, huts, hostels, stores, post offices, bed and breakfasts, all-you-can-eat restaurants, and people on the trail who are friendly and welcome thru-hikers. Most information for the tapes came from two ATC resources: Appalachian Trail Date Book and The Philosopher's...
The trail consists of ups and downs along the Appalachian Mountains, the oldest mountain range in North America. Thru-hiking the entire trail is defined by hiking the entirety of the trail during one season, which spans from around March to October, but this can vary. This is a challenge that has a roughly 20-30% success rate. Determine why you want to hike and write it down. One thing to do would be to make a pro/con list with four columns. One: pros to completing your thru-hike; two: cons to completing your thru-hike; three: pros to not completing the hike; and four: cons to not completing the hike. These categories may seem very similar, but once you write you will notice that they approach the scenario each a little differently.

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