

Emerging Questions and Considerations on Leave No Trace and Walking Practices

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Abstract

Leave No Trace is an outdoor ethics education programme that has been designed as a guiding mindset for how one interacts with and influences the natural environments. As the act of walking experiences an upsurge in participants, our collective mark on the environment and its natural processes increase. As artists, one can argue that there is a responsibility in how one's engagements shape the culture around an activity, and as walking spreads into more fields of life and research, this consideration becomes all the more important.

This paper aims to ask some emerging questions into how walking practices could incorporate or consider Leave No Trace within the practice. To investigate this topic I will be drawing on my artistic research into walking as practice, and my experience of both becoming and working as a Leave No Trace Ireland trainer.



Part 1: The Trail Head

For the past several years, my walking, research, and artistic practice have woven a twisting myriad of trails, constantly overlapping and building atop one another. As I look back along the path, it is clear to me that the step that has led me here was taken on the 17th April 2017, when I handed back my apartment keys, shouldered a heavy backpack, and set out on a project to walk every National Waymarked Trail in Ireland.

The Irish National Waymarked Trails are typically defined as long-distance hiking trails, each trail ranging from in the range of 50 - 200km long, and with a combined total distance of 4,000km long. They are designed to immerse the walker within the local landscape, whether crossing rural, urban, or suburban spaces. During the years that this project spanned, it has led me to undertake a Practice-led Masters by Research, and provided the opportunity to learn from and work with Leave No Trace Ireland.

I was drawn to the Research Masters as I felt a growing need to consider how our interactions with, and visual framing of the landscape was being shaped more and more by social media - and from that, if we were collectively becoming more disconnected from nature and *'the outdoors.'*

Part 2: The Feeder Trails

In 2018 the Guardian published an article titled *Crisis in our national parks: how tourists are loving nature to death*.¹ In this piece a team of journalists discussed how Americans are flooding to their National Parks and landmarks simply to take a photo (of the landscape or themselves), which they can then post on social media, all towards building a specific visualisation of themselves that they want to share with the world. The article tells a cautionary tale: as visitor numbers go from a few thousand a year to five thousand per day, the human impact is unavoidable.

In the article, Simmonds writes that the National Parks of the US were once considered the “ultimate place to disconnect from the modern world” - however, today’s visitors “have fresh expectations – and in accommodating these new demands, some say parks are unwittingly driving the very behavior that’s spoiling them.”² Some consider the changes to the parks (such as the installation of camouflaged Wi-Fi towers) as a way of keeping parks ‘generationally relevant’, while others argue that the reason for visiting such places should be to experience the place without a screen interposing one’s view. As people flood to places that become ‘#instafamous’, outdoor ethics organisations have called upon people to avoid geo-tagging where they take their photos in a hope to lessen overcrowding and possibly the destruction of the wild space in question. Since its inception, social media has made people more aware of how each person can construct their individual online identity and how they could be perceived within a

1 Simmonds, Charlotte, et al. “Crisis in Our National Parks: How Tourists Are Loving Nature to Death.” *The Guardian*, The Guardian, 20 Nov. 2018, www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/nov/20/national-parks-america-overcrowding-crisis-tourism-visitation-solutions. Accessed 1 Apr. 2019.

2 Ibid.

space. However, I am not sure that we as a global community have taken the necessary step back to see the overall impact of the image. If a person's first few experiences of being outdoors is to queue for a photograph, how do they learn anything else?

Almost a year later in 2019, the Guardian published that roughly 96% of the U.S.A.'s National Parks are struggling with significant air quality issues, with the majority of the worst cases being the locations that had experienced extreme overcrowding in the year prior.³

However, for me the image of 2019 that highlighted the disconnect between our cultural and visual framing of the outdoors, as well as our terrifying impacts and consumption of it, was taken at supposedly one of the most difficult places to reach on the planet.

Almost 66 years to the day from when Mount Everest was first climbed, Nepalese mountaineer Nirmal Purja photographed 100 people queuing to reach the summit. 2019 is now considered to have been one of the deadliest climbing seasons on Everest. While the good weather window that year was short, the problem wasn't blizzards or avalanches, but too many people on the mountain. Veteran climbers and industry leaders have blamed these deaths on overpopulation, with particular focus on too many inexperienced climbers.⁴ The above image sent shockwaves around the world as those who knew "nothing about mountaineering were shocked by this contradiction between the mountain's reputation as a lonely and unattainable peak, and the banal reality of a rush-hour crush."⁵ That year saw a record number of permits to climb the mountain issued by the Nepalese government, and after the climbing season closed there were no signs that

3 Canon, Gabrielle. "Fresh Mountain Smog? 96% of National Parks Have Hazardous Air Quality – Study." *The Guardian*, 8 May 2019, www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/may/08/national-park-air-quality-hazardous-study.

4 Schultz, Kai, et al. "It Was Like a Zoo': Death on an Unruly, Overcrowded Everest." *The New York Times*, 26 May 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/05/26/world/asia/mount-everest-deaths.html.

5 Gentleman, Amelia. "'Everyone Is in That Fine Line between Death and Life': Inside Everest's Deadliest Queue." *The Guardian*, 6 June 2020, www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/06/everyone-is-in-that-fine-line-between-death-and-life-inside-everests-deadliest-queue.

numbers would be restricted in the following year. This uncontrollable consumption of natural habitats is not confined to the world’s most famous locations. While walking, I have seen many places in Ireland experiencing similar impacts and over-use.⁶

As our consumption of nature felt like it was spiraling out of control, the world was brought to a standstill by the global Covid-19 pandemic.



Queue for the summit of Mount Everest. Nirmal Purja, 2019

6 Irish Examples:

Helen Lawless, “Learning from Cuilcagh,” *The Irish Mountain Log*, Winter 2019. Issue 132.

Helen Lawless, “Much to Be Learned From Experience at Cuilcagh,” 2017, http://www.mountain-eering.ie/_files/2018125165027_89659124.pdf. Accessed 2 March 2020

Part 3: The Fall Line

When I started my research into walking I never expected a stage where I wouldn't be able to go further than a couple of kilometers beyond my house. Like many places in the world, Ireland has gone through a number of 'lockdowns', with movement restricted to specific distances from place of residence, or within regional counties. However, during these months there has been a marked increase in people 'finding' the outdoors here. Mountaineering Ireland,⁷ the recognised National Governing Body for mountaineering, hillwalking, rambling, and climbing, published an article by Helen Lawless in the Summer 2020 edition of *The Irish Mountain Log*. Titled '*Increase in physical activity seen during time of Covid-19 restrictions*', Lawless writes how although many people cannot partake in their usual activities during Covid-19 restrictions, "research has shown that many people have 'found' the outdoors at this time."⁸ This research, conducted by Ipsos MRBI on behalf of Sport Ireland,⁹ reports that "Irish adults walking at least once a week for recreation has increased throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, reaching 83% in May" 2020, and that "the percentage of people that are inactive is at its lowest ever (11%)."¹⁰

In her writing, Lawless highlights the importance of connection to the space and place one is visiting by the way one interacts with it - through whether

7 Mountaineering Ireland is the representative body for walkers and climbers in Ireland. It is recognised as the National Governing Body for mountaineering, hillwalking, rambling, and climbing by both Sport Ireland and Sport Northern Ireland. Mountaineering Ireland is governed by a Board of Directors, elected by the membership. It has a professional staff team based at Irish Sport HQ, National Sports Campus, Blanchardstown in Dublin and at Tollymore Mountain Centre in County Down.

Mountaineering Ireland. "About Us | Mountaineering Ireland." mountaineering.ie/mountaineering.ie/AboutUs/default.aspx. Accessed 25 Nov. 2020.

8 Lawless, Helen. "Increase in Physical Activity Seen during Time of Covid-19 Restrictions." *The Irish Mountain Log*, vol. Summer 2020, no. 134, 2020, pp. 58–59.

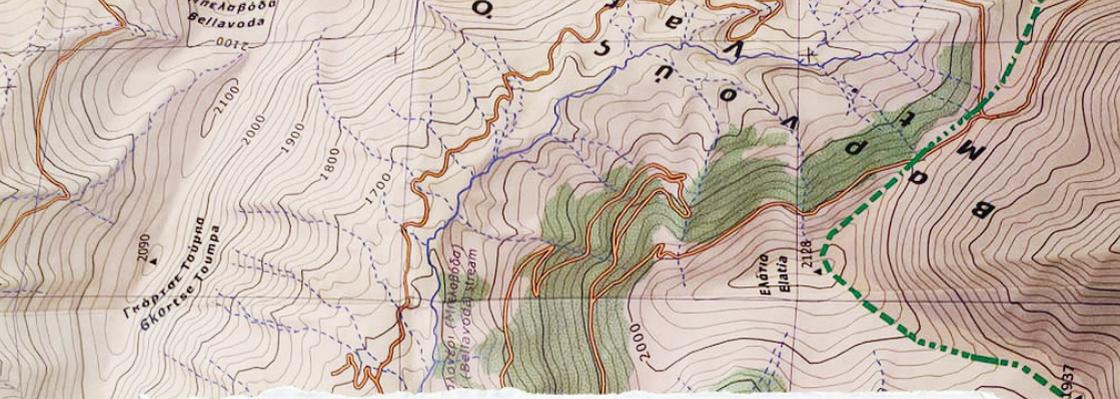
9 Ipsos MRBI. "Impact of Covid-19 Restrictions on Sport and Recreational Walking." Sport Ireland, May 2020.

10 Op. Cit. Lawless. 2020. p. 58.

a visitor knows the name of the area, or comes simply with the objective to recreate something they have seen online - or walk along a man made structure applied to the area rather than the mountain itself. Such an example is Cuilcagh, a mountain in the north-west of Ireland that recently had a boardwalk constructed all the way to its summit. After becoming famous on social media, it has been dubbed 'the stairway to heaven.' This boardwalk acts like an escalator, containing the viewer within the boardwalk through handrails and footpaths, completely avoiding any physical contact with the mountain itself. This disconnect heightens the concept of a here and there, where the person walking is not in the place, but looking out at the landscape. The area or nature is always held at arm's length, allowing the visitor to look out and frame their chosen area. It is undeniable that social media is a large part of many people's modern day life, and as a constant source of imagery, it helps build and define people's perceptions of space and place.

With a new wave of people interested and engaging with walking and the outdoors throughout 2020, there are questions around how this new level of participation can be sustained into the future.





Part 4: The Cairns

As an artist and researcher, I am aware that I have a responsibility in my framing and interactions with the landscape, and how I share that with others who might follow. When I walk, I write about my experiences of each trail, of the places I passed through, and of people I meet along the way. When it came to approaching methodologies of research, taking an ethnographic, reflective approach felt like the choice most akin to my experiences of walking.

Ethnography is one of the many approaches possible within social and visual research. It is generally accepted that there is no one set definition for ethnography, and that the term itself contains many variables. The ever-changing nature of ethnography has advantages, as “its sense has been reinterpreted and recontextualized in various ways, in order to deal with particular circumstances”, which allows for researchers to adapt their work to what they encounter.¹¹ In the variation of ethnography that I follow, one of the primary aspects of ethnographic research lies in the creation of field notes, or the writing down of experiences and interactions. In Zsuzsa Gille’s paper ‘*Critical Ethnography in the Time of Globalization: Toward a New Concept of Site*’, Gille discusses how ethnography remains useful within our age of globalisation, stating that “ethnography is the researcher’s commitment to let herself be surprised, to be caught off guard, and to be swept up by the events that occur in the field as a result of which even the original directions of the inquiry may significantly change.”¹² Ethnography has evolved from the nineteenth century domain of the documentation of ‘others’, to become an ever-changing

11 Hammersley, Martyn, and Paul Atkinson. *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*. London, Routledge, 2007. p. 2.

12 Gille, Zsuzsa. “Critical Ethnography in the Time of Globalization: Toward a New Concept of Site.” *Cultural Studies - Critical Methodologies*, vol. 1, no. 3, Aug. 2001, pp. 319–334, journals. [sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/153270860100100302](https://doi.org/10.1177/153270860100100302), 10.1177/153270860100100302. Accessed 10 Sept. 2020.

heterogeneous field that, while recognising the limitations of research, allows for fluidity, flexibility and humanity within practices. And in my experience, walking as a practice cannot exist without the recognition of limitations, and a large helping of flexibility, fluidity, and humanity. My method of implementing an ethnographic, reflective methodology was through documenting my writing, research, and developing thoughts within a Visual Research Journal.

The visual research journal is a place that captures the halting timeline, intuitive notes, recycling, reinterpretation, and rewalking of ideas - something that captures the real inner thinkings of your research. There are many purposes for using or keeping a research diary - one of the early benefits I experienced was that, by having a physical to encourage reflective thinking, the reflective and recontextualising of experience and knowledge that ethnography is grounded in became ingrained in how I walked and saw the world.

As this way of thinking followed me along the Ways I walked, the similarities between the reflectiveness I was developing within my artistic practice and the internalising of the principles of Leave No Trace became more apparent.

Κοίμησι της Θεοτόκου
Koimisi tis Theotokou

Ποτίστρα
potistra

1418

Αγιος Αθανάσιος
Agios Athanasios

Αγία Παρασκευή
Agia Paraskevi

Καλλιθέα
Kallithea



Part 5: The Waymarking

Leave No Trace is an outdoor ethics program, designed to help people learn about the natural environment and understand how their actions and choices can impact it, with the aim that each person who goes outside will be better equipped to 'leave no trace' that they were ever there. I was fortunate to grow up in households and situations that enabled me to learn the basics of Leave No Trace. As I walked, and wrote about walking, I realised how important accessible information is for others to learn too. Through writing online about how to camp safely in Ireland, I met the CEO of Leave No Trace Ireland. Sitting in the picnic area of a bustling campground in Co. Mayo, (the north-west coast of Ireland), we talked about how walking changes your understanding of places, and the balance and considerations of how to make nature a more accessible but also protected place. It was an enlightening conversation, and as I walked further along the trail I could feel those ideas stretching and evolving across the landscape that I passed through, starting another trail that would interlock with the layers of my life.

Throughout the following year of walking, I completed two courses with Leave No Trace Ireland.¹³ These days were invaluable, however, like using my visual research journals, it wasn't until I was constantly reflecting on the teaching and message of Leave No Trace that I fully began to understand how it is taught, and implemented, and the importance of that.

13 The one day awareness course, and the two day Leave No Trace Trainer course. I am now a qualified trainer with Leave No Trace Ireland.

The Ethics Game:

Objective: To have participants develop a greater appreciation and understanding of their own personal ethics as related to the Leave No Trace principles.

Materials: Ethics situation cards (must be pre-prepared).

Duration: 5 - 15 mins

Description: Gather participants and introduce principles. Establish 3 locations in the area as "ethics stations".

Explain to the group that this activity will help them explore their own existing personal LNT ethics.

This activity is a great introduction to what impacts are and how people view them differently.

Place 3 cards in 3 different locations (ethics stations?) on the ground, reading them aloud as you set them down. Each

participant should stand by a card with the situation that disturbs/offends them the most.

Moving from group to group, (maybe start with the group w/ the fewest), ask the participants to explain why they feel as they do about their "ethical situation."

After each group presents their arguments open up the floor for a brief discussion before moving onto the next scenario.

Bonus: After each round collect the Ethics card that had the most people at it. When the main game is finished, pull out the "worst of the worst" Ethics cards for a final round.

In Leave No Trace there are seven principles:

1. Plan Ahead & Prepare
2. Travel and Camp on Durable Ground
3. Leave What You Find
4. Respect Farm Animals & Wildlife
5. Be Considerate of Others
6. Dispose of Waste Properly
7. Minimise the Effects of Fire

The language used to describe this list - principles - is key. A principle is a guiding ethos, not a rule. Within each principle there is practical information, such as whether or not there are ways to build sustainable Leave No Trace campfires, but the core element of the principles are the conversations they start, and the instilling of reflecting on our own interactions and choices.

I want you to imagine you are walking through a forest. The trail you follow is old - smooth rocks mark the passage of feet, knotted roots on the surface creating a woven tapestry spilling away from you. There are leaves on the ground from varying species, and moss grows on the periphery. In this situation, what is the most durable ground to walk on?

Each person who walks through here might decide on a different option: the smooth rocks are hard and long lasting; the roots are stable and strong; the leaves are transient and are in the process of breaking down; or, not focusing on the surface but staying as central to the trail as possible so that the trail doesn't widen and impact any fragile ecosystems close by.

All of these choices have their validity. What is key is the thought process that went into each choice, and instilling the thought process in the first place.

To propose some of my emerging thoughts, and therefore questions, as to how Leave No Trace could be incorporated as a reflective method within a research or projects, I am going to turn to discuss Darren Newbury's paper on the different ways of using research diaries.



Part 6: The Fieldguide

“It is common to hear people talk about ‘writing up’ research. Implicit in the phrase is the sense that writing is a stage that occurs principally when the research has finished ... However, the process of research involves many forms of writing, from letter writing and minute taking to academic papers and formal research reports.”¹⁴

Darren Newbury’s article *Diaries and Fieldnotes in the Research Process* offers a straightforward introduction into the importance of recording your research as it is happening, along with a selection of methods of recording and reflecting. The diary is not a report or research paper, which cleans up the research and lays it out in a clear linear line, but a place that captures the halting timeline, intuitive notes, recycling and reinterpretation of ideas and methods - something that captures the real inner thinkings of your research. The purpose for keeping a research diary is to notice and record any observations, thoughts and questions, and to encourage reflective thinking.¹⁵ Unlike traditional logs or reports which are focused on the objective, a diary approach “provides a form through which the interaction of subjective and objective aspects of doing research can be openly acknowledged and brought into a productive relationship.”¹⁶ With this approach, the researcher can decide which events, data, and experiences are valid moments to record, and the diary becomes a melting pot for all the different aspects of the project.

Through utilising a research journal I have documented the developments of my research through recording observations, thoughts and questions as they occur, and to stimulate reflective

14 Newbury, Darren. “Diaries and Fieldnotes in the Research Process.” *Research Issues in Art Design and Media*, no. 1.

15 *Ibid.* p. 1.

16 *Ibid.* p. 2.



"Every step faces both ways" - Trail following a raised old railway line
Sú na Fíne, 2018.

thinking with regards to the research.

When considering this train of thought in relation to Leave No Trace, this melting pot of ideas and experience is indeed comparable to how to think about Leave No Trace. Because Leave No Trace is based on each person's thoughts and reflections, the actions you take will differ and change from person to person, and also as time passes - your own decisions and actions possibly changing after periods of doing things in specific ways, or developing new theories. Reflection is required throughout all of this. How an artist implements the principles within their practice is their own choice. One principle that might be the most interesting to discuss in relation to artistic practice is "Leave What You Find."

Many walking or nature-inspired artists that I have met might take something from the landscape as part of their work, which if we are to follow this principle as a 'rule', would be a topic null and void. Following as a conversation topic, or as an awareness flag, it becomes each individual's topic to think about and build on. If I am taking from the environment, what am I giving back? Is it in the finished artwork that might provide a space for those usually less-connected to nature to have a chance to engage with it? Or do you consider your choice of the place that you have taken from the landscape - only removing from places that can sustain the effects, or possibly even from places that you can care for afterwards? It is these reflective moments that become part of the 'intuitive notes, recycling and reinterpretation of ideas and methods' that build on top of each other as I have mentioned.

The principle "Plan Ahead & Prepare" often sees the least discussion, however in its purest form, it is what underpins all of the Leave No Trace ethos. Planning and preparing will result in the consideration of the other principles in relation to your activity or artwork, and is how one might consider how they can bring awareness of the environment to their work. If I am going on a hike through the mountains, I will have habits formed around it - always bringing specific footwear and my rain

jacket (in Ireland you can never be sure of the weather). If I am going grocery shopping I might always leave my reusable bag in a place that will make sure I see them as I walk out the door so that I form the habit of bringing them. It is these conscious habits, choices, or frameworks that help us enact change or reflection in our work.

When thinking about how to incorporate Leave No Trace into a visual research journal or project diary, we can consider the ‘models of note taking’ outlined by Newbury. In line with how we have discussed Leave No Trace and ethnography, Newbury also writes that his article isn’t designed to provide definitive rules, but rather to offer possible methods for compiling notes. Newbury discusses three different methods.¹⁷

All methods recommend an initial stage¹⁸ where simple, in-the-moment notes are transcribed to create a reliable resource. The second stage is to process the notes from stage one, reflecting on the experience, outlining the researcher’s involvement in the event, and any immediate meanings that can be derived from the event. The third stage are notes that the researcher is writing about themselves, statements that reflect an operational act, a reminder, or critique of a specific tactic.

What is interesting about this final stage, and something that Newbury emphasises, is that fieldnotes and diaries should not only reflect on “the way the researcher sees things,” but attempt “to understand how the research subjects organise their experiences, including their perceptions of the researcher”.¹⁹ One of the interesting powers of a diary within visual research is its ability to bring together words and media. In these situations the journal can provide a space where the

17 Each method does possess similar traits, suggesting that while there is not a set of specific rules, there is a broad consensus on effective ways to take and compile notes within qualitative research.

18 Or “package”, as they were referred to by Schatzman and Strauss in the article.

19 Ibid. p. 5.

The issues that Newbury highlights in regards to autobiographical or phenomenological work is of course highly relevant, as I have already mentioned within my discussion of a phenomenological approach.

“theoretical and methodological issue of how to write about the visual is struggled with and worked out.”²⁰

During my first reading of Newbury’s text I focused on the immediate connection between his descriptions of a ‘research diary’, and the ‘visual research journals’ I have been making. It was only as I returned to and reflected on his writing and how I had engaged with it before, that I was drawn to seeing this three stage process in a wider context. As I walked, I wrote in-the-moment notes which were compiled into online blog posts, and made photographs instinctually as I followed my route. I now see these as my initial stage, the first layer of my practice that allows all the rest to continue. Since starting this line of research, I have been processing the images, reflecting on the experiences recorded, and considering how different aspects might develop into their own paths. These thoughts have been collected within my visual research journals. I then saw the writing of my Research Masters, and now this paper, as the third stage of my research, where I contemplate on how my experiences of walking and creating can be used to encompass the theoretical standpoints I encounter along the paths I walk.

Leave No Trace can be tied into all of the above. In the initial phase of creation, interaction, and activity, the artist does their best to incorporate the principles in the ways that feel the best at that time. In the processing of the notes in stage two, the artist could highlight when they were aware of their impacts and interactions. In the third stage, where the artist writes a more in depth breakdown of how the activity went, possibly critiquing a specific tactic or reflecting on a part that went well - this is the point where a deeper consideration of what the Leave No Trace principles meant to this project. If an artist is creating work that seems to ‘clash’ or differ from a certain Leave No Trace principle, the artist could make public their reflections on the developments of the project to that point - enabling not just a conversation between those who view the work, but also enabling artists to learn from each other.

20 *Ibid.* p. 7.





Part 7: Paths for further walking

These questions of the impact of art on our natural landscape are far from new considerations. My aim with this paper was to consider some practical applications of the Leave No Trace within an artistic practice. As Newbury writes in his introduction, it is unfortunate that more researchers don't share how they compile their notes, even though keeping a diary and note taking is often mentioned by researchers in passing.²¹ In writing this piece, I hope I have contributed in some small way to how others might come to think about Leave No Trace whenever they walk out their front door.

In the future, I hope to look at the practices of artists who have engaged with Leave No Trace principles and see what we can learn from their way of working (such as *The Running Fence* - 1976, by Christo and Jeanne-Claude, who pioneered the Environmental Impact Assessment Report for artworks).²²

21 Ibid. p. 3.

22 Athié, Mauricio. "The first EIR of an Art Work: *The Running Fence*." International Finance Corporation, Impact Assessment for Social and Economic Development. 2014.

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About

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For more of her work, visit ellieberry.com

From 2017 - 2019 she and her partner Carl Lange walked every National Waymarked Trail in Ireland, becoming the first two people to walk all 42 trails.

To see more of their work together, visit toughsoles.ie



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