



## What is the Point of This?

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*Unique to 2016 was a combined backpacking trip with three school districts: Colfax, Frederic, and Lodi. This trip provided students opportunities to move outside their comfort zone with four days of hiking and to share the experience with new friends.*

One of my favorite questions from a recent Sauntering experience is, “What is the point of this?” Spoken by a 3rd grader, with bright red cheeks and too heavy pack, as the group walked through the lightly glaciated hills of Dane County.

At first the question caught me as, quite frankly, thankless and snotty. Did this kid even know how much goes into creating this experience for them? Of course not.

However, this very notion, spoken simply and directly, opened a line of thinking that stayed with me during the hike and since then. Truly, the question “What is the point of this?” may only be fully understood through a lifetime of contemplation. But, more immediately, what is the point of walking eight miles a day in midsummer heat? What is the point of relying on fellow hikers? What is the point of moving so slowly?

There is not one truth in answer to these questions, since so much of Sauntering relies on the Saunterer. Some will grow to love the walk. Some will count the seconds to when the hike is over. However, all will remember their

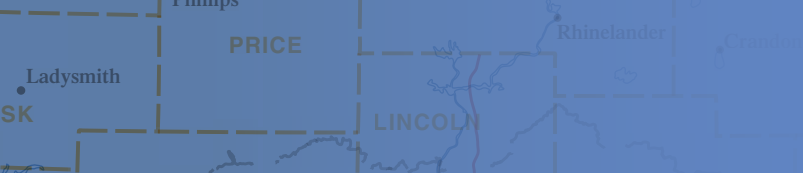
time on the Ice Age National Scenic Trail. They will remember they successfully walked eight miles through summer heat while batting away mosquitoes and ticks. They might not even realize it, but their confidence and resilience will grow through this accomplishment.

They will share the story of their hike with friends and family. By having spent time with others on the Trail they will learn what so many long-distance and short-distance hikers have learned before – most people are good, despite what we may hear, or read. We are stronger as a pack, and while it is liberating to move alone, it also feels good to circle back and be with friends. If we take the time to listen and understand, we will grow closer to those around us.

Hopefully, they will come to enjoy moving slower. Ancient rhythms, still residing at their core, may begin to sound on the drum a little louder than the bustling, rushed, technology-driven noise of the everyday. If they take the time to be immersed in natural surroundings, perhaps an internal clock will find its pace.







What is the point? One thread is consistent, the Ice Age National Scenic Trail. For me, it is about sharing the magnificence of the Trail and what it gives us: access to natural, wild, permanently protected land; a glimpse of a deer or fox; birdsong lilting from a branch overhead; and moments of personal reflection. It is showing that, despite the cliché, we are all connected, and with that connection comes responsibility, to one another, to this land. It is about making stronger people, by gracefully pushing them beyond what they perceive as their limits, and helping them overcome fears. It is about helping Saunterers to slow down, to spend a few moments savoring and absorbing life before plotting the next move. There is more than one way to get to the point, but for over 1,000 kids across the Trail, the point begins to take shape through Saunters.

**Special Note: The 2016 Saunters season was made possible by generous donors including the National Parks Foundation and The North Face Explore Fund.**



*Upper right: Saunterers discover the fine art of balance, complicated by the weight of a pack, while navigating a stream crossing.*

*Center right: Two young women undertake meal preparation at the end of a long day of hiking.*

*Lower right: Readying themselves for a day-long hike, Saunterers cooperatively engage in loading up their packs. Who knew how much water it would take to properly hydrate?*

*Below: A young man prepares to savor the fruits of his labor, and a choice summer ritual, marshmallows on stick, roasted to perfection.*

*Photos by Dawn Kish, [www.dawnkishphotography.com](http://www.dawnkishphotography.com)*

