

Get Wild: With hiking apps, do the pros outweigh the cons?

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Get Wild



A bloom-filled scene is captured in the Peru Creek area of Summit County.

Krista Hughes/Get Wild

Summit County has some of the best opportunities for outdoor recreation in the country. It's what draws visitors to the county year-round. There is a seemingly endless number of trails to explore. But before any of us can go on a hike, we must answer the same question: Where to go? In recent years, smartphone apps have made this question easier to answer. Are physical maps and guidebooks obsolete? After all, we can now simply download a few apps and have all of our hiking options readily available in a matter of minutes without leaving home.

Apps are a great resource to use in the planning stages of your adventure. If you want to go on a hike, an outdoor app can help you make sure you pick one that matches your fitness and ability levels by quickly providing you information about the hike such as distance and elevation gain. These apps can also help you during the activity. An app with GPS can help you navigate your hike and help you determine your exact location.

Unfortunately, these apps also come with downsides. Technology in the backcountry can be unreliable for many reasons — a phone battery could die, an app could stop working once out of cell service, or someone could drop and lose their phone completely. Do these apps give us the confidence to go places we otherwise would not feel comfortable navigating to if we were using only a traditional map and compass?

In the case of navigation, technology in the backcountry should never be a replacement for a traditional map and compass, but

instead be used as a supplementary tool. Smartphone apps have also led to the ability for people to post off-trail hikes and locations for others to easily find. An off-trail hike is exceedingly more complex to navigate than a hike that follows a maintained trail system. Off-trail travel is more likely to get someone into a situation they aren't equipped to handle, which may ultimately require rescue. Off-trail hiking also increases our impact on local wildlife because increased human contact in areas that were previously undisturbed puts greater stress on animals and gives them fewer places to rest and forage for food.

So, should we use hiking apps? The goal of reviewing the pros and cons of using outdoor apps is not to get you to stop using them. Many believe the benefits these apps provide, both before and during an activity, outweigh the negatives that come along with them. Used properly, apps are a great tool. However, apps make it easier than ever before to end up in situations that are above both one's ability and comfort level.

Next time you pick a hike from an app, make sure you've done more research than just looking at pictures others have posted. Best practices include truly understanding the hike you picked: Can you point it out on a physical map? Is it on trail? What's the trail name? How long do you expect to be out? Have you let someone know where you're going, and what to do if you don't timely check back in? Do you have enough food and water if the hike takes longer than expected? Is everyone in your group equipped to complete it safely? These are a few of the questions to ask yourself that will increase your chances of a successful outing, which is what we all want at the end of the day. Let's use technology to improve the experience, but not make the experience depend on it.



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