

## ***Buckskin to Gore-Tex: A Consumer History of Outdoor Recreation***

*Rachel Gross*

No escape to nature is complete without a trip to the store. More than a century of guidebook authors have instructed readers to start shopping and assembling their list of equipment in order to properly and safely get to the wilderness, even as they described outdoor recreation as an activity in tension with consumer culture. *Buckskin to Gore-Tex* explores the material and cultural history of outdoor recreation in the United States from the Civil War to the present to help bring to light how consumers have reconciled “escapes” to nature with the purchases of modern industrial and synthetic goods that support their recreational experiences. The material culture of outdoor recreation is a powerful lens to explore not just evolving conceptions of wilderness but also the normative practices of consumer capitalism. Thinking of wilderness as a consumer experience brings out the ironies of getting back to primitive nature in a modern world. My research shows how Americans’ consumer activities are crucial to understanding the environmental history of the United States, and indeed, the evolution of recreational practices globally.

While the irony of setting foot in outdoor stores to equip for wild nature has not been lost on environmental historians, few have delved deeply into the history of the industry that Americans have come to rely on. Entrepreneurs, companies, the military, and outdoorspeople themselves shaped the world of mass-produced goods that mediate how Americans know nature through leisure. More than a century ago, outdoor outfitter Abercrombie & Fitch referred to its Manhattan headquarters as the place where “the blazed trail crosses the boulevard.” Since that time, the trails that mark human recreation in the wild have crossed the boulevards of commerce, technology, science, and innovation many times. For that reason, while I take readers to national parks and on tourist explorations, I spend just as much time paging through catalogs, browsing inventory on shelves, examining laboratory experiments, and joining military expeditions. I meditate on kiddie packs, copper manikins outfitted with hot plates, and the merits of cotton mesh vs. polypropylene long underwear in order to show how Americans made consuming a central step on their path to knowing the outdoors through leisure.

Every year, Americans from a wide swath of economic and political backgrounds visit outdoor stores en route to the wild. Backpackers from the coast might visit REI or Patagonia, while hunters in the American heartland are more likely to stop in at Cabela’s or Gander Mountain; each group affirms their identity by aligning themselves with the environmental politics espoused by the business they frequent. Ultimately, this book shows how outdoor clothing and equipment became a contradictory and controversial touchstone of authentic experience in American culture. By analyzing how people play, the book contributes to a growing body of scholarship that is grounded in both material

culture and ideas about human identity, landscape, and authenticity. Americans spend billions each year in their effort to know nature. This project explains why and how they shop on their way to the wilderness.