

Discussion Questions for the San Miguel Big Read

An aid for groups discussing the book,
On Trails by Robert Moor

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1. Trails, where do they start? Moor read Bill Bryson's *A Walk in the Woods*, which is the most read book about the Appalachian Trail. He had a dream of hiking the Trail when he was ten years old. Now he can say, "I have fulfilled my dream," because in 2009 he became a thru-hiker. Through this life-expanding experience, Moor wrote an extended metaphor that paths and trails reappear across cultures, languages, and religions. Why is the metaphor of the path so ubiquitous?

2. In the first chapter, and again later in epilogue, Moor attempts to complicate our understanding of Nature. Is Nature a real, independent thing, or is it a human concept that we project upon the world? Is it the map or is it the territory being mapped? (Or is it both?)

3. Moor offers two contrasting views of the wilderness. In one, he suggests that the very ideal of untouched land is a product of urbanization. He says, "Amid the coal-fired fug of civilization, people began to recognize that the unchecked spread of civilization could be toxic, and the wilderness, by contrast, came to represent cleanliness and health." On the other hand, he suggests that humans like their wilderness to be not too wild, equipped with trails and paths and escape routes. The truly uncharted wilderness is, to quote Aldous Huxley, like "the inside of Jonah's whale. Nature is always alien, and inhuman, and occasionally diabolical." Where do you fall on that spectrum of attitudes towards wild places? Would you give up the conveniences of modern life for the freedom of the wild?

4. In the discussion of the eons-old division between plant and animal life, Moor points to research that suggests that it is movement alone that began to differentiate the earliest organism on earth into plants and animals. Does that change your view of evolution?

5. Moor spends a good deal of time in the book discussing animal behavior, especially their trail-making abilities. He cites the pheromones of the ant, and the memory and ability to express grief of the elephant. Virtually all animals, it would seem, have more intelligence (broadly described) than we are taught to acknowledge. Does Moor's book change your view of how we should interact with animals?

6. Moor writes, "The essence of herding is not domination, but dance." When managing groups of people or animals, does a collaborative and cooperative-

rather commanding-relationship really tend to work better? Or is this a naive outlook?

7. "You can be a whole lot happier if it don't (sic) take a lot to make you," Meredith Eberthart comments to Moor in the book. Evaluate that statement. Is happiness even the goal of human existence? What about striving to perfect a talent or ability, or research to create a new drug, or to increase our knowledge about the universe? These are not activities that necessarily make an individual happier, but they seem important nonetheless. What do you think the balance should be between striving and "being?"

8. One of the most common American "tropes" is the concept of the self-made man, but Moor disagrees that this is possible, arguing for the interdependence of all life. He cites "communal infrastructure that undergirds our own eureka moments." In some ways this follows the divide between political conservatives and liberals. Do we live in a society where mutual assistance is necessary for the nation to succeed, or where individuals must actually fight each other to overcome the essential scarcity of goods and services? Buang, a hunter and a gatherer, is one the book's characters. He questions whether modern education will lead future generations into the welfare state.

9. Stories, whether fiction or nonfiction, have excitement and/or tragedy. The earth has its stories. About 480 million years ago out of plate collision the Appalachian Mountains were formed. How did plate tectonics affect the formation of the *International Appalachian Trail*? Why did Moor, after his thru-hike, go on to Newfoundland, Iceland, and Morocco?

10. In the sixth chapter, when Moor travels to Morocco, he describes a peculiar feeling, called "unheimlich" (un-home-like), which is defined as "a peculiar commingling of the familiar and the unfamiliar." What is it about traveling to foreign countries that brings about this feeling?

11. Moor needs guidance in Morocco and a female guide, Asselouf, is hired. What do you think about the treatment of women in Morocco? What do you think about the statement that a Moroccan man made about cultural differences? He stated that long ago we all came from the same place.

12. The traditional education system can be viewed as the path of human intellectual growth. One can think of paths or trails as collective knowledge we humans pass from one generation to the next. These paths are arranged in content areas such as math, history, language, etc. which have been taught in isolation. What if educators shifted the paradigm to provide a conduit through which cross disciplines could be viewed together and communication exchanged and information spread? Isn't this what the *International Appalachian Trail* will accomplish?

13. In the epilogue, Moor refers to the fact that his book has been a search for "the wisdom of trails." Ultimately what is the wisdom of trails and why does it

have bearing on our lives? What are the earth's risks and rewards? In the *NY Times* Moor wrote, "The problem is that the more other-reliant we become, the greater the possibility for widespread calamity. The hermit, alone in his hut, risks starvation, but not famine."