

Appalachian Cultural Awareness and Community Development

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There is no single Appalachian culture and if there were a single word to describe Appalachia or Appalachian culture that word would be diversity.

Perhaps the key question should be: What is Appalachian culture to you as an individual and why does it matter? Understanding that key question is important because no matter what perceptions you have or may form of the region and culture, you can probably find literature to support them. Writings, folklore, myths, media images, music and songs, government reports and political positions, and stories of personal experience and observation concerning the region and its culture are numerous, varied, and often contradictory. Therefore, please understand that there is no single Appalachian culture and if there were a single word to describe Appalachia or Appalachian culture that word would be “diversity.”

There are two main branches of thought about defining Appalachia – geography and culture. The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) specifically defines the area along the spine of the Appalachian Mountains from southern New York to northeastern Mississippi and the northern reaches of Alabama and Georgia as Appalachia. This area includes portions of 13 states, including West Virginia, which is the only state located entirely within the Appalachian region.



Cultural perspective

The cultural perspective of Appalachia relates to values of Appalachian people and the influence those values have on attitudes, behavior, and lifestyle. There is no single Appalachian culture or consensus opinion as to what it means to be Appalachian.

Please take a few moments to register your opinion of some Appalachian cultural values and attitudes on the “Appalachian Heart-O-Meter” scale. Headings on the scale are compiled from the writings of several authors and are a simple tool to encourage

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you to explore your own feelings and thoughts about Appalachian cultural values and attitudes and may serve as a discussion activity for your group.

A rating of 5 on this scale means the value or attitude is the same as “mainstream America.” Less than 5 means the value is less pronounced than “mainstream American values” and greater than 5 means the value is held more strongly or is more pronounced in Appalachia than the rest of America.

Appalachian Heart-O Meter								
More - to - Less								
Individualism								
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Love of place, “home”								
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Strong personal religious beliefs								
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Independence								
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Family ties								
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Desire to lead								
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Desire to get along with others								
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Desire for community change								
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Sense of humor								
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Distrust of “outsiders”								
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

The ARC report “Moving Appalachia Forward: ARC Strategic Plan, 2005-2010” documents much progress and improvement in the socioeconomic indicators in Appalachia over the past 35 years in the areas of poverty, infant mortality, educational attainment, health care facilities, highway construction, water and sewer service, and job creation.

The report further indicates that even with these accomplishments, there are still challenges of economic distress, concentrated areas of high poverty, high unemployment rates, educational disparities, high rates of disease, and population out-migration associated with the region.

Closing thoughts

When things really matter, the heart of the matter is a matter of the heart. It is entirely up to those individuals who hold Appalachia dear in their heart to decide for themselves which values and perceptions are real and which ones are not and to embrace or reject them as they see fit. Similarly, it’s up to members of each community, no matter how they define it, to decide for themselves what assets they have, what challenges they face, and how they will address those challenges.

We can’t change the past, but we can work in the present to improve the future. Opportunity is a moving target and time is critical. As my Dad used to put it, “Time don’t wait on nobody.” Regardless of what community decisions are made or what actions are taken, somebody must always initiate the process and make the effort to bring about positive change in our neighborhoods and communities.

Suggested readings

Dressler, Murial, “I Am Appalachia” (poem).
 Still, James, “Heritage” (poem).

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