

By Xiao Wang

UNIVERSITY PARK, Pa.--- Ben Cramer has come face to face with a bear and lived to tell the tale, but for him, that's just part of the thrill of hiking.

Cramer, 39, of Bradford, Pa., doesn't always encounter wild animals while he's hiking, but for someone who's logged more than 3,000 miles hiking trails all over the United States, he's bound to come across some interesting experiences. Hiking is his crutch -- it helps him disconnect from modern society and concentrate on a deep love with nature.

"I love to be outdoors, to experience nature, to explore places I have never been, and it's a good form of exercise," said Cramer, who usually hikes around 10 miles for four to five hours.

While he's hiking, Cramer refuses to be intimidated. When Cramer came across a bear while hiking in his hometown in 1986, he stood his ground. He and the bear both silently stared at each other for more than 60 seconds, and then the bear left toward another direction without any aggressive action. Cramer was amazed that he did not feel any fear at all. From then on, Cramer felt closer to nature and enjoyed the experience of hiking more.

"You can get close to animals and you're in the real nature, without any interruption from the cities," Cramer said. "Getting close to a majestic animal helps you feel the power of nature."

His creature encounters and rich hiking experiences have made him want to write so that others can learn about wilderness animals and protecting the environment. Over the past few years he's written two books, "Pennsylvania Hiking Trails" and "Guide to the Allegheny Front Trail."

"They'll know how to act when they come across animals, instead of feeling dangerous," Cramer said. "I also want them to know that room is for everyone, we should love the environment and do not throw trash away."

Even though he is busy enough as a university professor, he still keeps his love for hiking in daily life.

"The busy school work does not allow me to go hiking every day," Cramer said. "But I keep going hiking during the weekend every two weeks."

When he was younger, Cramer hiked for pleasure, but that changed 13 years ago when it became a crutch for him, because he wanted to relieve the stresses of everyday life.

“Society pressure makes me pursue nature more and go hiking frequently,” Cramer said. “Hiking helps me clear my mind, relax and get rid of stress.”

Cramer likes hiking in North Central Pennsylvania the most, because there are large forests, lots of hills and not many towns.

“You really feel you’re far away from big cities and really feel like nature when you hike in North Central Pennsylvania,” Cramer said.

However, hiking is not always smooth or all fun and games.

One time, Cramer stumbled on something, fell down and hurt his knees during a hike, when he was eight miles away from his car. After finding a big stick to help support his weight and walking for three hours, he finally made it back to the car.

The clean environment in Pennsylvania is another reason why Cramer loves hiking around this area.

“Some volunteer groups put a lot of effort into building trails and keep them cleaning at certain times,” Cramer said. “They provide us with a nice hiking environment.”

When Cramer has time, he joins the volunteer groups to clean the trails. He knows that the groups are really careful when they clean, so he doesn’t have to worry about litter while walking a long trail.

Cramer has hiked more than 3,000 miles to date, and he said he sets a couple rules for himself so that he finishes long-distance hikes.

“I have a sense of achievement every time I finish these trails,” Cramer said. “In addition, I always park my car at the destination so I cannot give up until I get close to the car, which is a motivation for me to finish the goals I set for myself initially.”

Sometimes Cramer goes hiking with his friends, and his perseverance and passion for hiking made them admire him.

To Stan Kotala, a doctor, Cramer is a hiking guide when they go hiking together.

“Cramer is eager to share his love for the trails and for nature with those whom he’s hiking with,” Kotala said. “He adjusts his pace to suit his fellow hikers and anticipates their needs. He is the ideal hiking guide.”

Gary Thornbloom, the leader of an environmental group, has felt Cramer’s enthusiasm for hiking when they go hiking together.

“Cramer hikes at a fast pace,” Thornbloom said. “He shifts his role from a serious professor to a child who is curious about natural features and wildlife when hiking.”

Cramer has come a long way since he ran into that bear in 1986, and he offers beginning hikers a few pointers.

First of all, he said beginners should start out with short-distance hiking to figure out how much they can do. If they enjoy the short-distance hiking, then practice doing a long one. Secondly, novice hikers should make sure they bring plenty of water and food along with them.

“But most importantly, beginners should bring maps,” he said. “They won’t make you lose your way.”