

Notes From the President



John Graham

Friends of State Parks is pleased to welcome the members and staff of the North Carolina General Assembly back to Raleigh, our capital city, for their 2008 session.

We, the 13 million annual park visitors and legions of conservationists, are most appreciative for their actions with regard to conservation of our natural heritage and the preservation of the cultural treasures and awesome beauty of this "goodliest land" known as North Carolina.

The designations and acquisition of sites such as Mayo River, Haw River, Elk Knob, Chimney Rock, Dismal Swamp, Carvers Creek and Deep River Trail, the Mountain Bogs and the Sandy Run Savannas are monuments to a responsive Legislature and Council of State.

Will the "New Parks for a New Century" blueprint so professionally drawn by the "force of 500" in the Division of Parks and Recreation prove to be the visionary concept that looked ahead to 2028 when our state population will be 12 million souls?

One hundred years ago, President Theodore Roosevelt warned us to preserve and conserve our natural resources, treasures and beauty. He was a teacher by example. Today in our N.C. State Parks we are expanding on what a U.S. President started a century ago.

Climb up to the top of Mt. Jef-

erson State Natural area and find a young ranger, Tom Randolph, surrounded by students K – 6 from Ashe County schools. There he is teaching them how to find their way using a compass while looking at the landscape below, learning about the plant and animal life that thrives in this ecological haven. In 2007, over 200 of these awed young students drew pictures and wrote beautiful poems about their Mt. Jefferson. FSP funded the prizes for the poets and has budgeted continuing support for this program through 2012.

Leap over to Hammocks Beach and find Ranger Sam Bland teaching a Cub Scout Pack about the wonders of Bear Island and all living things that abound in "his" park. No young person can find a better role model and teacher than Ranger Bland. He exemplifies the best and gives his best that we may all have a better future.

These are but two of many shining examples of what is happening in our state parks, teaching the decision makers of tomorrow the importance of conservation and protection of the gifts bestowed on us by Mother Nature. The decisions that these young citizens make will in large part determine the quality of life in the future for all of us.

Our effort in support of "the force of 500" is an opportunity and privilege for FSP to contribute to the sustainability of a clean and green environment and to become a part of the stewardship of our state's natural resources and heritage.

Our state parks division provides a safe, wholesome and learning environment for our youth, unequaled by any other public agency.

How do we attract such outstanding people, so dedicated to making our lives more enjoyable by a walk in the state parks? Do you really want to know? Visit our website NCFSP.org and join the FSP/PARKS family.

John E. Graham
President,
Friends of State Parks



Redouble Our Efforts ...?

Our president's optimism and energy are always evident in the "Notes" he contributes to this newsletter, but perhaps this report from the Nature Conservancy should make us aware of the task that confronts us.

Arlington, VA – February 4, 2008 – New Nature Conservancy-funded research shows that across the U.S. and in other developed nations, people are spending far less time outdoors than ever before. Researchers say this study – the most comprehensive look yet at nature recreation – is a "grim confirmation" of a long-held theory that people, especially children, are spending less time in the great outdoors.

The research builds on earlier studies that showed visits to American national parks were declining, and it illustrates that the problem isn't limited to parks – and isn't just found in the U.S.

"As a scientist and a conservationist, I find these results almost terrifying," said Oliver Pergams, assistant professor of biological sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago and lead author of the study. "We are seeing a fundamental shift away from people's interest in nature, not just in the US but in other countries, too. The consequences of this could be deep and far-ranging for health, for human well-being, and for the future of the planet."

Pergams and fellow researcher Patricia Zaradic, a fellow with the Environmental Leadership Program, have been studying this issue for several years. In 2006, they released a study showing that per capita visits to national parks have been declining for the past two decades.

Zaradic adds that this decline is critical not only for this generation, but for future generations as well. "For the last 20 years we've raised children with less and less interest in nature recreation - we are likely to see the repercussions in conservation and human health for decades to come."

This new study includes data on camping, backpacking, fishing, hiking, hunting, visits to national and state parks and forests. Pergams and Zaradic found comparable, reliable statistics from Japan and, to a lesser extent, Spain.

They found that beginning between 1981 and 1991 there was a decline in per capita nature recreation, dropping at rates ranging from one to 1.3 percent per year, depend-

ing on the activity studied. The typical drop in nature use since then has been between 18 and 25 percent.

Stephanie Meeks, acting president and CEO of The Nature Conservancy, noted, "If we lose our connection to the natural world, we'll lose our appreciation for the food, water, and clean air it provides. And the next generation will feel little compulsion to protect it. We're facing the most serious environmental threats of our lifetime, particularly in light of the challenges posed by climate change. We need the next generation to both value the natural world in which we live and fight to protect it."

Attend Clean Water Lobby Day on June 4 in Raleigh.

This is our opportunity to join the NC Watershed Alliance (a coalition of 20 organizations focused on water issues in NC) and concerned citizens from across the state to speak up to protect and conserve our water resources. Clean Water Lobby Day gives the Friends of State Parks the opportunity to talk to our legislators about the top water issues in 2008: 1) Ensuring strong protections for coastal waters; 2) Limiting negative impacts from development in the mountains; and 3) Conserving our limited water resources. Please join the NC Watershed Alliance on June 4 so that we can show legislators in our river basin that citizens want them to do something now to protect and conserve our water resources. For more information visit: www.ncconservationnetwork.org.

GREAT DISMAL SWAMP STATE PARK

A new jewel added ...

Contributed by George Ramsey

Nestled away in the far northwest corner of one of the smallest counties in North Carolina is our newest State Park. Completely within the confines of Camden County the State Park area is a triangular wedge of the original Dismal Swamp, adjacent to The Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge. Since its purchase from the Nature Conservancy almost 40 years ago it has been a State Natural Area.

Bordered by the Dismal Swamp Canal on the east and the National Wildlife Refuge or private lands on all of the other sides it has been all but inaccessible to the general public. Now a vehicle bridge capable of accommodating vehicles for staff and emergencies has been completed. The dedication ceremonies accepting the area into the State Parks system were held on March 21, 2008.

Now open to the public, this exciting addition to the State Park system has a 300 feet raised board walk leading into the swamp and it is planned to extend it another 2,000 feet. Walking trails are being hacked out by boy scouts and other volunteers. More than 15 miles of hiking and biking trails are opened up with the possibility of opening up another 15 miles or so. In negotiating these trails visitors will be traveling through near pristine habitat of one of the "dreaded" Dismals of the coastal plain.

These acres have been in almost total isolation since the 1950's. Timber lands have recovered from the logging incursions of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Ditching and draining has changed the swamp loving timber which, in places, has morphed into maple, oak and beech with scattered groves of loblolly pine. In other places, expect to find all the plants, animals and critters - from the shrew to the black bear, from the dwarf trillium to the giant bald cypress, from the humming bird to the bald eagle. There remains evidence of man's incursions. There are over 30 miles of ditches which were dug during the timber har-

vesting days, some still in use today as fire suppression access and flood control with water control structures along them. Don't be surprised to run across remains of past sawmilling, grist milling or moonshine activities. One canal which remains to

be investigated was a mighty effort in the early 1800's by the Dismal Swamp Canal Company dug to allow the farmers and merchants of Gates County to get their crops and merchandise to the Norfolk Virginia deep water port. The company in cooperation with Gates County imported

laborers from Germany who, by hand, dug this ditch, over 10 miles long, across the swamp to join with the Dismal Swamp Canal. Confusingly this ditch has been referred to by three names - Cross Canal, White Oak Swamp Canal and Hamburg Ditch.

Plans for the future include Ranger housing, accommodations for campers and recreational vehicles.

The Dismal Swamp will always remain the mysterious source of folklore and oft told stories, but now its will share its natural beauty and recreational opportunities with all our citizens as a North Carolina State Park.



*Dismal Swamp Visitor Center
Photo: Bob Sowa*

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Meetings ...

The board of Friends of State Parks met at Lake Waccamaw State Park on April 26th. The reports presented to the board showed growth in both membership numbers and funds available.

The Junior Ranger program continues to expand with active programs now in five parks, another three expected to launch shortly and several others in various stages of planning. The board voted to commit funding for the next three years. Other programs are proceeding satisfactorily.

The next meeting will be held at Chimney Rock State Park, July 26th. Meeting to commence at 10 am.