

Gov. McCrory, state parks commemorate Mount Mitchell milestone

North Carolina should use the upcoming state parks system centennial celebration as a platform for making the parks system a greater economic and business recruitment asset, Gov. Pat McCrory said in a ceremony March 3 commemorating the birth of North Carolina's first state park.

The Governor's remarks came moments before signing a proclamation recognizing the legislative authorization of Mount Mitchell State Park March 3, 1915 and declaring the first week of March as "North Carolina State Parks Week." The event at William B. Umstead State Park was a precursor to a yearlong centennial celebration planned for 2016.

The state parks system will develop as an asset by efficiently using resources and by incorporating goals and strategies of the state's travel and tourism effort, McCrory said. Decades from now, "People in North Carolina will say, "They were thinking about us way back in 2015."

North Carolina conservation and business leaders joined the Governor and Donald van der Vaart, Secretary of the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources, for the celebration. Jean Spooner, chair of the Umstead Coalition, spoke about the natural and cultural significance of North Carolina's state parks. Alex Bernhardt, chairman of Lenoir-based Bernhardt Furniture, spoke about the value of state parks and how they provide a greater quality of life in North Carolina for businesses and their employees.



North Carolina intends to celebrate the state parks system's centennial throughout 2016 with a series of special events at every state park and a public-private partnership campaign in concert with Friends of State Parks.

North Carolina's Governor Locke Craig and its General Assembly, in session March 3, 1915, launched an effort to purchase property on Mount Mitchell's summit. By the end of 1916, 795 acres had been acquired to create the first state park in the Southeast. Today, the park encompasses 1,996 acres and hosted 280,966 visitors in 2014.

Friends of State Parks launches strategic plan

On the eve of the state parks system's centennial, the nonprofit Friends of State Parks has developed a strategic plan that will help it become a more effective advocate for state parks in North Carolina.

The strategic plan focuses on developing methods of reaching its potential and attaining long-term goals, attendees were told at the group's annual conference in February at the Nature Research Center in Raleigh.

The statewide Friends of State Parks has been actively involved in centennial planning and will lead an effort to gather corporate and citizen support of the year-long celebration in 2016.

Mike Murphy, director of the state parks, said the centennial is a premier opportunity to leverage publicity for support of state parks as well as its friends groups. The opportunity, he said, "gives us a

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way to speak to leadership about the value of parks and the need to fund them.”

In recent years, Friends of State Parks has nurtured its role as an umbrella organization, helping local friends groups organize to support individual parks. It has also increased funding for education programs such as the Junior Rangers and school field trips. In 2014, it hired former president David Pearson as an executive director.

College students, N.C. Coastal Federation launch oyster reef project

It was Carolina Beach State Park on the half shell March 16 for the North Carolina Coastal Federation and a busload of college students.

Those partners took the first steps to build a 600-foot oyster reef on the Cape Fear River side of the park by filling thousands of mesh bags with old oyster shells and marl. The bags will later be carefully placed in the quiet waters as an attractive new home for live oysters.

It's the first such project at Carolina Beach, though the Coastal Federation has been instrumental in building similar reefs at Hammocks Beach and Jockey's Ridge state parks.

Students from Meredith College in Raleigh supplied some serious labor and, in the process, got a lesson on an oyster's value. An oyster reef can slow erosion, and even more importantly, can help clean the water and attract other marine life, creating a healthier shoreline.

To make the best use of valuable oyster shells, limestone marl is used for the reef's bottom layer. The workers separated marl and shells into mesh bags using a system of plastic tubes fitted onto racks. The finished bags were stacked near the shoreline and will be placed into the water on another workday .

Pilot Mountain project protects climbers and cliff faces

Partly in remembrance of a rock climber who died in 2012, volunteers completed a multi-year project to replace aging bolts and anchors on climbing routes at Pilot Mountain State Park.

The effort will help protect both the climbers and the state park's cliff faces that attract them, said William Webster of Chapel Hill, who organized the work. Webster gave credit to the Carolina Climbers Coalition, which supported the work and provided volunteers and to Park Superintendent Matt Windsor.

Webster said it seems counter-intuitive to add hardware to a cliff to protect it, but without the anchors, climbers will simply tie off ropes to handy vegetation such as pitch pines and table mountain pines.

The group of volunteers that initiated the project included Lloyd Ramsey, an area resident who was climbing alone in July 2012 when he fell and died under circumstances unrelated to the anchor project. The Carolina Climbers Coalition was active in cleaning and reopening climbing routes following a fire on the mountain in November 2012.

State park, ranger honored for sustainability projects

Haw River State Park and Amanda Lasley, a ranger at South Mountains State Park, were honored with 2015 Sustainability Awards March 30 from the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources.

The state park in Guilford County recently retired an aging wastewater treatment plant in favor of a subsurface treatment system that uses an old farm field for spray application. The effort has resulted in annual savings of \$30,000 and won a group award for sustainability, accepted by Park Superintendent Kelley King and Maintenance Mechanic Robert Byrd.

At South Mountains, Lasley used recycled materials, including old cedar siding and Plexiglas to fabricate toilet paper dispensers for the park's nine backcountry pit toilets. The ingenious design keeps mice and other small animals from raiding the dispensers for paper, and trimmed park costs for the paper by about 40 percent. Lasley accepted a first place award for "individual small project."

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