

State parks visitation hits record 17.3 million in 2015

Governor Pat McCrory announced that visitation at North Carolina's state parks set a new record in 2015. More than 17.3 million people visited the state's 39 parks, up from 15.6 million the previous year.

"An 11 percent increase proves that nothing compares to the enriching experience of a visit to a North Carolina state park," Governor McCrory said. "North Carolina's natural beauty is an important part of our overall quality of life that is second to none. I commend the men and women of our parks division for creating unique adventures that can turn a visit into a lifetime memory, and sharing our vision of preserving our state parks for future generations."

Among 39 state parks and state recreation areas, 30 reported increases in visitation in 2015. Jordan Lake State Recreation Area in Chatham County reported the highest visitation at 1.6 million visits and was among six state park units logging more than a million visitors. The others were Fort Macon, Jockey's Ridge and William B. Umstead state parks and Falls Lake and Kerr Lake state recreation areas.

In recent years, many state parks have added special events to their calendars to complement system-wide events such as First Day Hikes, National Trails Day and Take a Child Outside Week. Newer state parks such as Carvers Creek in Cumberland County and Gorges State Park in Transylvania County are being discovered by the public.

A new visitor center and improvements in mountain bike trails at Lake Norman State Park likely contributed to a 35 percent increase in visitation there to 742,236. Other parks reporting significant increases in visitation included Gorges State Park (48 percent), Pilot Mountain State Park (35 percent), Grandfather Mountain State Park (30 percent) and Hanging Rock State Park (24 percent).

State parks history presented in new ways

The 100-year history of the state parks system is colorful and engaging. But so much of that history for so long was tucked away in the dusty file drawers, odd bins and cubbyholes of state park offices all across North Carolina.

As the centennial year approached, the State Archives and State Library of North Carolina, along with Clemson University, pitched in to help by gathering much of this historical flotsam and jetsam about state parks into a manageable collection that now can be explored online.

The result is a tapestry of stories and images that reflect the close connection that North Carolinians have with their beloved landscape. The North Carolina Digital Collection presents hundreds of images of the 100-year history in easy-to-find fashion, while the State Library has compiled concise histories of the state parks for its NCpedia project, along with a compelling state parks timeline that puts it all into historical context. All the projects were unveiled online in late January as the 2016 centennial got underway.

To this point, hundreds of images have been compiled and more are still being found and scanned. This effort provided raw material for the library projects. Archivists in the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources used their skills to catalogue and cross-reference more than 400 historical photos.

This is an ongoing project as more images and other materials are found. The State Archives has been

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indexing state parks records and once that is completed, the Archives will add a selection of documents, including correspondence.

Project reduces hydrilla threat to Eno River

A two-year pilot project launched in 2015 to control hydrilla in the Eno River has reduced the amount and growth rate of the non-native, highly invasive weed, with little to no-long term effect on other plant life or river species, according to the Eno River Hydrilla Management Task Force.

Members of the multi-agency task force introduced the herbicide fluridone into a section of the waterway at Eno River State Park, located in Orange and Durham counties, last summer as a part of a two-year pilot project that would determine if herbicide treatment in a flowing river would be as effective as it has been in lakes elsewhere in North Carolina.

Since then, scientists have been monitoring native animal and plant species in the river to make sure there is no significant injury to those non-target organisms caused by the weed management activities.

Hydrilla is a submersed aquatic plant that can create nearly impenetrable mats of stems and leaves on the surface of lakes, rivers and other waterways. An invasive species from Asia, hydrilla impedes recreational use of waterways, crowds out native vegetation and can ultimately harm fish and other aquatic species.

Researchers monitoring the Eno River found that hydrilla density and the length of hydrilla shoots were noticeably reduced in treated areas. Meanwhile, a companion laboratory study indicated the herbicide at the concentrations used had no adverse effects on non-target species, including the most sensitive — freshwater mollusks, including the panhandle pebblesnail, a rare species in North Carolina.

Members of the task force have surveyed the river over the last three years and detected hydrilla at different densities in 25 miles of the river. The most infested area was about 15 miles of river from the N.C. Highway 70 Bridge in Hillsborough to Guess Road in Durham. Task force members are working on ways to continue the treatment in 2016 to ensure that the project will be successful.

Trust fund authority considers priorities

In the last five years, the North Carolina state parks system has grown by 15,326 acres, according to a wide-ranging and long-term report on the system by the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation.

The system, which now has 74 managed units, continues to draw visitors at a faster pace than the state's population growth, Brian Strong, the division's chief of planning and natural resources, told members of the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund Authority at its February meeting at Fort Macon State Park.

Strong reviewed the Systemwide Plan for State Parks, which includes descriptions of recent accomplishments, the state of the system, resource evaluation, trends affecting outdoor recreation and strategic directions for the state parks system. The plan is updated every five years in accordance with the State Parks Act. The systemwide plan is online at www.ncparks.gov.

Building upon the information outlined in the systemwide plan, Deputy Director Carol Tingley described plans and priorities for the state parks, state trails and natural areas added to the system in recent years.

In other business, Division Director Mike Murphy provided authority members updates on the ConnectNC bond initiative, outreach efforts and special events planned as part of the North Carolina State Parks Centennial Celebration and Division of Parks and Recreation activities.

Tim Johnson, head of grants and special studies, shared plans for a survey to gather local government feedback on proposed changes to the trust fund's scoring system for local parks and recreation grant projects and provided a preliminary outline of how the \$3 million included for PARTF projects in the ConnectNC bond initiative would be administered.

According to the bond legislation, eligible projects will include construction of special facilities or adaptation of existing facilities in parks and recreation areas. Project must meet the unique needs of children or veterans with physical and developmental disabilities, and enable them to participate in recreation and sporting activities regardless of their abilities.

The Steward is an e-newsletter of the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation. To learn how to subscribe to the complete version and have news of the North Carolina state parks sent directly to your email inbox, scan the QR code here with a smartphone app or visit www.ncparks.gov, and click "News."

