

# **Master Plan for Gorges State Park**

## **Background**

The 7,092-acre Gorges State Park was dedicated in 1999 following North Carolina's purchase of 10,000 acres from Duke Energy Corp. About 3,000 acres of adjacent land is managed by the NC Wildlife Resources Commission. The park is also bordered by lands of the US Forest Service and South Carolina's Lake Jocassee. The land is principally watershed that drains the Blue Ridge Escarpment.

The park has more than 20.6 miles of rivers and creeks, including five miles of the Toxaway River and 4.5 miles of Bearwallow Creek. There are 15 other named creeks and branches and 14 waterfalls. The elevation rises 2,000 feet in about three miles, and the area receives an average rainfall of more than 80 inches per year that helps support many rare plant communities. About 46 rare plant and animal species have been found in the park.

Visitation in 2002 was 156,185, an increase of more than 50 percent from 101,911 in 2001.

## **Interim Development**

The parks system, recognizing the eagerness of the public to explore the newest state park, chose to build interim facilities while a master plan was being prepared. In 1999, a park office was established on Hwy 64 west in Sapphire and construction began at the park's two access areas, Grassy Ridge to the northwest and Frozen Creek to the northeast, a popular starting point for hikers using the Foothills Trail.

In April, 2001, interim facilities were completed at the end of a 1,000-foot entrance road built at Grassy Ridge. They included a gravel parking lot with 75-car capacity, 15 picnic sites on surrounding footpaths, restroom facilities, a 3/4-mile nature loop trail, a one-mile trail to a park overlook, a 1.5-mile trail to Bearwallow Falls and a 2.7-mile trail to six primitive campsites at the Raymond Fisher Place campsites. Soon afterward, a gravel parking lot was opened at Frozen Creek, which includes picnic sites, restrooms, the Auger Hole Trail, a six-mile multi-purpose trail, and the five-mile Canebrake Trail leading to the Foothills Trail.

The park currently has 24 miles of identified trails, including Auger Hole Trail, which was opened for mountain bike and equestrian use. An overlook

near Upper Bearwallow Falls and six primitive campsites have been built.

During this period, park staff increased to five - a superintendent, two rangers, a maintenance mechanic and an administrative assistant.

Total capital investment at the park thus far has been about \$455,000.

## **The Master Plan Concept**

In any state park, careful planning is crucial to balancing recreational demands with our mission to protect the state's valuable natural resources. Each state park has a master plan. In essence, it's a blueprint for development. It is meant to be a dynamic document that evolves as knowledge develops about a park's natural resources and recreational demands.

## **The Planning Process**

Knowledge of the resource is key to intelligent planning. So, the process begins with inventory - an attempt to document all elements of the land that may have some influence or potential influence, positive or negative, on the master planning process.

In the case of Gorges, the terrain makes it one of the most challenging of state parks. More than half the slopes are at a grade of more than 25 percent. Initial inventories examined topography, soils, site ecology, adjacent land use, archaeology and significant physical and environmental constraints.

In addition, detailed natural resource inventories were conducted for: rare vascular plants; geologic mapping; timber rattlesnakes; small mammals; amphibians; fish community/stream habitat; natural plant communities; fungi; ferns; bats; terrestrial mollusks; natural communities; birds; and the endangered plant species Fraser's loosestrife.

## **The Master Plan Contract**

On March 1, 2001, the parks system contracted with Haden-Stanziale P.A., Planners and Landscape Architects, of Charlotte to create the master plan. The contract price was \$75,000.

As knowledge about the natural resource was being compiled, Haden-

Stanziale created four preliminary concept plans for review and comment by the parks system staff and by the public. Those options were first narrowed to two preliminary plans and then to a single draft master plan. At each step, plans were scrutinized by division staff.

Beyond discussions with the local Park Advisory Committee, three public meetings were held - two in Transylvania County; one in Jackson County - where public comments were gathered. A website also displayed the preliminary plans. Surveys soliciting comments were offered to citizens at the public meetings, to park visitors and through the website. About 50 were returned.

## **Major Components of the Master Plan**

The overriding concept for Gorges State Park is that of a 'wilderness experience' type park with low-impact recreational facilities and with development restricted to the more easily accessible fringe areas, primarily along the western border. The terrain and sensitive nature of the Gorges suggested restrictions on development, as did many of the citizens' survey responses. The principal components of the master plan are:

- A park main entrance (Grassy Creek Access) on NC 281, relocated farther north of the existing entrance at what is now the entrance to the interim maintenance compound, with turn lanes and deceleration lanes provided. The interim access road will be closed to the public and the interim parking/access area will become the maintenance compound. Seasonal barracks will be built at the site of the interim maintenance compound.
- A 7,500-square-foot visitor's center similar in scope to others in the system with an exhibit hall, auditorium, conference room and administrative offices, 3/4 mile from the main entrance.
- Two picnic areas near the visitor's center, each with at least six tables, picnic shelter and restrooms.
- A one-way 2.3-mile loop road from the visitor's center/picnic area leading southeast to camping areas near the western boundary of the park. The 10-foot-wide road will include pullouts and overlook areas.
- Family camping to include 30 tent sites in one loop and 14 RV sites on a second loop, bathhouse, laundry, dump station, community water supply and RV electric hookups. RVs will be limited to 25-foot length

including tow vehicle.

- Group camping to include 13 sites accommodating eight campers per site, restrooms and community water.
- Primitive (backpack) camping expanded from six to 10 sites with pit toilets.
- Three ranger residences.
- Parking for a maximum 494 vehicles.
- Frozen Creek Access to remain at existing site as an entry point for equestrians and backpackers including those using the Foothills Trail. The access will be expanded to include a new gravel parking area (55-vehicle capacity), picnic area with rain shelter and restrooms, six primitive campsites and maintenance/vehicle storage. The existing gravel parking lot will be altered for equestrian use.

## **Estimated Costs**

The cost of capital improvements listed in the master plan, based on current construction costs, is estimated at \$12.02 million. The component costs are:

- Visitor's center, \$3.59 million
- Family camping, \$1.29 million
- Group camping, \$519,100
- Maintenance compound, \$677,850
- Main entrance, \$80,000
- Roadways, \$953,185
- Seasonal barracks, \$392,650
- Trail head parking, \$59,980
- Ranger residences, \$692,350
- Frozen Creek improvements, \$475,000
- Picnic facilities, \$681,750
- Utilities, \$268,500
- Design/engineering/contingencies, \$2.34 million

## **Additional Land/Land Protection Plan**

In each park master plan, parcels of land are identified for potential future acquisition. In most cases, the parcels are contiguous to park boundaries and their acquisition would help in protecting the park's natural resources, aid in park operations and/or provide needed room to develop park facilities. The Land Protection Plan for Gorges identifies 2,549 acres. Acquisition of all lands in the plan would enlarge the park to 9,641 acres. The plan does not address potential state access to the Horsepasture River (currently managed by the U.S. Forest Service and the NC Wildlife Commission). The plan sets the following priorities:

- Priority I: land vital to current and future operations related to control of access and protection of two gorges and waterfalls, 413 acres.
- Priority II: land that contains important natural resources, would buffer waterways or provide better access to existing resources, 716 acres.

Priority III: land in the Lake Jocassee watershed that would provide additional opportunities for development, 1,420 acres.



# Frozen Creek Access

## Gorges State Park

