



Creating Seamless Parks

By Talmadge Butler, Superintendent, Guntersville State Park

Little River Canyon National Preserve

“But, the clerk at West Point National Park told me this card is good at all State Parks!” I heard this comment as I walked through the door of the campground store and right into the middle of a heated discussion between an upset camper and an exasperated clerk. The camper was convinced that the Golden Age Passport he was holding was supposed to get him a discount at the State Park. The clerk, having experienced this misunderstanding many times, knew what the problem was, but could not persuade the camper to understand.

The above scenario has played out many times across Alabama and probably across the country. The Golden Age Passport is issued by the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Bureau of Land Management and is valid in their facilities. However, it is not accepted in Alabama State Parks.

The Golden Age Passport is only one area of confusion about differing policies and operating procedures of State Parks, National Parks, National Forests, Corps of Engineers Parks, TVA Parks, etc. Many people who work in the various parks don't understand the differences, so how could visitors understand them?

In recent years there have been changes in the fee systems at some of the federal facilities. Some fees have been increased and some facilities that had been free now have an admission or user fee. This is a common trend in state park facilities. As tax funding has decreased, the need for user fees has increased.

There are differences in the focus of some facilities, although the differences do not always follow state versus national divisions. State Parks focus on providing recreation experiences, but with emphasis on sustaining the natural resources.

Some federal facilities focus on protecting the resources (National Park Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service), on managing resources (U.S. Forest Service), or on flood control (Tennessee Valley Authority and the Corp of Engineers). The extensive land and water holdings that encompass the areas for their activities also provide some of the nation's finest recreation facilities.

Seamless Parks

Alabama is blessed with an abundance of recreation facilities. Each of the above-named agencies is represented, so it is natural that there is some confusion on the part of visitors. But, in at least one area, there is an effort underway to reduce some of the differences and for some facilities to work together toward common goals.

The concept of "seamless parks" was created in 1999 when Robert Stanton, then director of the National Park Service (NPS), challenged the National Association of State Park Directors (NASPD) and the NPS Regional Directors to further enhance the cooperation and interaction between the organizations. That challenge resulted in a general agreement between the National Association of State Park Directors and the National Park Service. The agreement was first signed in the spring of 2000 and was renewed on March 1, 2002. The purpose of the agreement is for NASPD and NPS to "share common missions and goals and to work together in partnership towards a mutual strategy for a nationwide system of parks."

The National Association of State Park Directors created a special status of NASPD Associate for the National Park Service, who expressed a desire to work with the NASPD in a partnership. Through this agreement, the two organizations agreed to work together towards mutual goals of Information Exchange, Communications, Research, Professional Development, Intergovernmental Personnel Act Opportunities, and Park Management. The NASPD further agreed to provide to the NPS various reports, meeting minutes, copies of research, and invitations to conferences and meetings.

Regional and Local Programs Developed

This agreement set the stage for further progress on the concept of seamless parks, and, on April 30, 2002, the "Communicating the Common Agenda" initiative was drafted. The initiative's purpose was to strengthen the general agreement by developing a common agenda between the Association of Southeastern State Park Directors (ASSPD) and the Southeast Region (SER) of the NPS. The goal of ASSPD and SER is, "through communication, coordination, cooperation, and consultation, to establish a seamless system of parks." The document is the first step toward enhancing the relationship between the SER of NPS and the ASSPD, and achieving their stated goal.

The regional program contains the same common program interests as the national

program, and includes specific program areas of mutual interest. Some of these programs deal with park maintenance, facility management, emergency services, law enforcement, interpretation, resource management, management planning, trails, and public information programs, just to name a few.

An agreement initiated in early 2003 brought the local aspects of seamless parks more into focus. The agreement is between Alabama State Parks, under the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, the Alabama Historical Sites, a division of the Alabama Historical Commission, and the National Park Service Units in Alabama.

The purpose of this agreement, as in the others, is for all park units in Alabama to work together through a program of mutual aid and assistance in the areas of information exchange, communications, management assistance, professional development, and emergency response.

The agreement provides that, except in specific, pre-approved cases, agencies will not bill each other for this assistance. It also provides for limitations on the liability of each party. The agreement will be for a five-year period unless terminated sooner by either agency.

The agreement provides for semiannual updates of key officials, park managers, and information concerning significant changes in parks, sites, and programs. It establishes a policy for the agencies to work together to develop pamphlets, maps, and brochures that draw attention to and provide information about state and national parks and sites within Alabama. Management assistance will be provided among agencies to help identify opportunities for the agencies to work together on projects and programs of mutual interest.

The area of assistance that may provide the most immediate and critical benefit to park visitors is emergency assistance. When lives or property are in danger, a well-planned, coordinated response is critical. It takes all appropriate agencies working together to provide for the safety and well-being of park visitors and property.

Local Cooperation at Work

To see how the seamless park concept can work at the local level, one need only look at the relationship of DeSoto State

DAN BROTHERS




Joe Wheeler State Park Lodge

Park and the Little River Canyon National Preserve in northeast Alabama. From the time the national preserve was conceived in the early 1990s, the two agencies have worked together. Their cooperative efforts provided information for interested persons, personal tours for congressmen and senators, and management assistance in setting up the actual operations of the preserve. Personnel from both agencies were involved in the formulation of draft management plans and in determining the proper staffing for the preserve.

More recently, the agencies have cooperated in law enforcement activities, search and rescue, training exercises, presentation of interpretive programs, and fire suppression. There has been a sharing of ideas and resources, and personnel from both agencies have been involved in the promotion of tourism, resource protection, and other programs of mutual interest and concern.

Conclusion

One important consideration in the development and implementation of this new program of Seamless Parks is the selection and appointment of those who will guide the program through its formative years. Each agency has designated liaisons and coordinators for this purpose. Through their careful guidance and direction, all park units in Alabama should begin to work more closely to insure that our guests experience safe, enjoyable recreation experiences. And, who knows, maybe some day when a visitor presents a Golden Age Passport, there will be no argument and no extensive explanation about whether it is valid. 

For a complete list of Alabama's seamless parks visit our website at outdooralabama.com