Land Letter
THE NATURAL RESOURCES WEEKLY REPORT

PRINTABLE VERSION: Thursday, November 1, 2007

6. PARKS: NPS comes to terms with GPS geocaching *(11/01/2007)*

Arthur O'Donnell, *Land Letter* editor

A new form of outdoor recreation, using devices that tap the Global Positioning System (GPS) to locate hidden or obscure objects in remote areas, has some public land managers and park rangers scratching their heads. The trend – known variously as geocaching, virtual caching, letterboxing or other variations – has blossomed into a worldwide phenomenon practiced by tens of thousands of people.

No one knows for sure exactly how many people are participating in this new sport, but according to one Internet site devoted to the practice of geocaching, there are currently 479,372 active cache sites around the world. In the last week alone, some 42,700 individuals have made nearly 300,000 log entries to describe what they found at a specific location guided by their GPS unit.

There is another variation, called the Degree Confluence Project, which tries to document each of some 16,000 land-based points of intersection of major lines of latitude and longitude.

Frequently these locations are found in national parks or on other public lands, and according to a recent policy review issued by the National Park Service, the rapid growth in popularity of geocaching has the "potential to impact parks in both positive and negative ways."

While many GPS game participants feel their impacts are negligible, NPS is concerned that "these activities have the potential to cause injuries to participants, or lead them into unsafe situations; cause serious adverse impacts to park resources (such as threatened and endangered species, cryptobiotic soils, and paleo- and archaeological resources)" or otherwise violate NPS regulations.

"There are no special regulations to deal with this," said Marcia Keener, a program analyst with NPS's Office of Policy in Washington, D.C. Instead, the Oct. 19 policy memo reviews existing regulations and practices to give park staff some guidance on how to make sure that GPS activities are appropriate to a given park and do not cause unacceptable impacts to park resources.

Often, park managers will need to make case-by-case decisions about whether to allow such activities; but frequently, they won't even know if some caching event is taking place in the park, because players are anonymous and interact via the Internet.

NPS noted distinctions among caching activities:

- Geocaching usually involves hiding or burying in a remote location a physical cache consisting of objects or prizes in a weatherproof container.
- Virtual caching doesn't involve hiding a physical cache, but may lead players to existing points of interest, like cultural or geologic features, survey markers or other objects.
- Letterboxing involves a cache that includes a stamp and inkpad so players can document that they have successfully located the site.

"We are much more in favor of virtual caching because it doesn't have the same kind of impacts," Keener said.

A family enjoys "Earthcaching" -- using a GPS device to locate clues, geologic features or artifacts -- at the Acadia National Park in Maine. Photo courtesy of the National Park Service.

At least one NPS unit has taken on "Earthcaching" as an organized activity. Stuart West, branch manager of remote areas at the Acadia National Park in Maine, is the coordinator for a program that leads players to sites in the park where they can learn about geology and history. At each location, determined by the GPS locator, they can find a clue that helps lead them to the next site. Once the course is completed, players obtain a password they can input at the park's Web site and print out a certificate of completion.

Comments from participants have been uniformly enthusiastic, West said. "They love it."

Acadia prohibits physical caching but encourages the "virtual treasure hunt" as a way to create a more technologically oriented visitor experience that attracts younger people to the outdoors. "We're spearheading a new movement," West said.

While some may find much of the fun evaporates when the previously secret activity becomes organized, West admitted, "We had geocachers help develop the program, so they have a sense of ownership in it."

On the other side of the country, officials at Yosemite National Park are hesitant to embrace these new activities. "We have a resource based concern," said Yosemite spokesman Scott Gediman. "It can involve digging holes and burying things," or other activities that are against park rules, he said.

"We know that people hiking for recreational use are using GPS, and that's fine," he said – sounding somewhat skeptical about the value of other uses of technology in the park. "We've got a GPS driven guide that takes you on a tour of the Lower Falls area using headphones." But Gediman said he prefers hearing the sounds of the falls and natural surroundings than listening to a recording.

"The numbers of people doing this are still pretty small," Gediman added.

That could be changing on a daily basis. Caroline Mica, spokeswoman for the American Recreation Coalition, said her group is beginning to engage parks officials about formalizing GPS activities. Next year the coalition of about 100 outdoors-oriented groups and associations will celebrate Great Outdoors Month, and it is considering adding a GPS component. "It's important that we engage today's youth in getting outdoors," she said.

Click here to read the NPS policy review on GPS activities.