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State Park Ranger Earl Weaver looks out over the waters of Lake James from park.

Photo by Sabian Warren

State park a natural haven at lake

By SABIAN WARREN
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Encroaching development may eventually beat back the forest in most places around Lake James, but at least one spot on the shoreline will always remain natural — Lake James State Park.

Established in 1987, the appealing park on the McDowell County side of the lake is among the newest additions to the state park system and has quickly become one of the most popular destinations in the area for residents wanting to get back to nature.

Camping, fishing, swimming, hiking and picnicking are among the activities available in a serene wooded setting on the edge of the cool, clean waters of Lake James. The 580-acre park has become so popular, in fact, that staff members often have to turn people away during the summer months.

"We'd definitely like to see some more land preserved on the lake,"

said Ranger Earl Weaver, an eight-year employee at the park. "In the summer we really can't accommodate everyone. Once it's full, it's full. We end up having to turn people around."

In June, for example, 54,318 people visited the park, Weaver said. A good July Fourth weekend

can draw up to 20,000.

In a one-year period from May 1997 to May 1998, the site attracted 139,904 people, Weaver said.

The park, one of the smallest in the state system, is most crowded in the warm months, leaving the 80-space parking lot overflowing at times, he said.

Attractions include a sandy beach for sunbathing and swimming, the only public swimming area on the lake, along with a picnic area. The park's office features pub-

lic restrooms and a snack bar.

Other amenities include 20 primitive campsites (\$12 per night), some of them on the water, and a five-mile trail system. The park also operates the nearby Hidden Cove and Canal Bridge access areas through a lease agreement with Duke Energy, and canoes are available for rent during the summer.

A full-time staff of five maintain the park, Weaver said.

Efforts are under way on a local and state level to expand the park,

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but the outcome isn't certain yet. Leaders of the expansion campaign might do well to follow the blueprint developed by supporters of the original park for how to preserve land for public use.

In the mid 1980s, a broad base of support for the park was generated, with endorsements from county commissioners in Burke and McDowell, along with Chamber of Commerce leaders and others. The local legislative delegation also got behind the project, and in 1987 the General Assembly approved funds to establish the park.

Then-N.C. House members Ray Fletcher of Burke County, who is now deceased, and Bob Hunter of McDowell introduced the necessary legislation providing for the purchase of property from Crescent Resources.

"That's one of the things I'm most proud of from my time in the legislature," Hunter, who recently left the legislature to accept an N.C. Court of Appeals judgeship, said of the creation of the park. "There are so many people who don't have a place to go. A lot of people can't afford to belong to a country club. The park is for all the people."

The legislature approved \$1.9 million to purchase the land along