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start - silandara**By Silandara Bartlett**

Staff writer

The 12 days of Christmas may be long past for most of us, but for park rangers setting up office for the new Gorges State Park, every day feels like Christmas.

Park personnel are in the midst of organizing a temporary office in Sapphire, near the park's future entrance, and receive parcels of office equipment almost every day, park superintendent Steve Pagano said. They moved in a couple of weeks ago early in the New Year.

Gorges State Park, North Carolina's newest state park and its first west of Asheville, encompasses almost 7,000 acres of biodiverse forest land. Two major rivers run through the park - Toxaway River and Bear Wallow Creek - and the park borders the western edge of Lake Jocassee.

The park is located just inside Transylvania County, off N.C. 281 between Cashiers and Brevard, and meets the North Carolina/South Carolina state line.

The park is situated in the Jocassee Gorges area, made up of the park itself and 3,000 acres of Duke Power lands. The area is known for its concentration of waterfalls - the greatest in the eastern United States - and for its rare plant species and biodiversity. A portion of the Foothills Trail crosses park lands.

Adjacent to the park are about 3,000 acres of game lands, overseen by the Wildlife Resources Commission.

Gorges State Park has some of the most ecologically important land in the Eastern

Hemisphere, containing rare species such as Oconee bells, green salamanders and Carolina star moss, said Wayne McDevitt, Gov. Jim Hunt's chief of staff at the park opening in September, 1999. Oconee bells, endemic to the Carolinas are nearly all found within 10 miles of Lake Jocassee.

The park is rare not only in some of the plant and animal species it contains, but also in that it is the first state park in many years to be acquired, staffed and planned from scratch. Most state parks take over existing facilities, Pagano said.

The planning process is not a rapid one, however. Since the park was officially brought into existence in September, its boundaries are being marked using prison labor. Prisoners spend one week a month marking boundaries, Pagano said.

A nine-member park advisory committee, formed from a cross-section of Transylvania County citizens, meets monthly. The committee is currently working on interim development for the park, such as parking and restrooms.

Natural and cultural heritage inventories are being conducted in the park by various groups and the results of these will largely effect where permanent facilities are built.

A public planning process will let people participate in long range plans for the park, including facility development and management.

Three of five positions in the park have been filled - those of Pagano, another park ranger, Mike Lambert, and an office manager. An additional

ranger and a maintenance mechanic are being hired.

They expect to remain their temporary office for three to five years while the results from the environmental studies come in and the park's master plan is developed and then put into action, Pagano said.

The office is located next to the Sapphire post office at the intersection of N.C. 64 and 281.

Minimal development is planned for the park - a visitor's center, parking, restrooms and some additional campsites and trails, McDevitt said.

"There's going to be an environmental impact. The object is to minimize the adverse effects of it," Pagano said. Development in the park should have a very small footprint on its 7,090 acres.

For more information on Gorges State Park, call the park office at (828)966-9099, e-mail gorg@citcom.net or visit the North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation website at www.ncparks.net.

Gorges state park rules

Park rules

The park rules will be studied during the planning and development phase of the park and may change in the future.

A complete list of rules is available at the park office and the Transylvania County courthouse.

- **Hiking** - At this time, all traditional trails are open. The ongoing evaluation may open additional trails and close existing trails in sensitive areas in order to protect natural resources.

- **Horses and mountain bikes** - Horses and mountain bikes are currently permitted on the following roads: Chestnut Mountain Road from N.C. 281 southward into the park and Auger Hole Road from Chestnut Mountain Road toward the northeast boundary of the park.

- **ATVs** - Unlicensed off-road vehicles are currently prohibited throughout the state park system. Licensed 4-wheel drive vehicles are permitted on Auger Hole Road for access to WRC gamelands during hunting season.

- **Camping** - Currently backpack camping is permitted at traditional sites along the Foothills Trail.

- **Parking** - There is currently no official parking area. A parking area with restroom facilities will probably be constructed along N.C. 281.

- **Lake access** - Boat access to Lake Jocassee is currently available through Devil's Fork

- The removal of any plant, animal, artifact, rock or mineral is prohibited.

- Hunting and trapping are prohibited in all areas managed by the Division of Parks and Recreation as those areas are wildlife preserves.

- Firearms and fireworks are not permitted.

- Fires are permitted in designated areas by permit only.

- The possession or consumption of alcoholic beverages is prohibited.

- Pets must be on a leash no longer than six feet.

- Swimming is permitted in designated areas only.