

Work starts on new park's interim facilities

By Leeanne Cowen
Staff writer

This is the first of two articles on nearby Gorges State Park, the first state park established in Western North Carolina.

The Gorges State Park in Transylvania County is a unique partnership between the Wildlife Resources Commission and the North Carolina Dept. of Environment and Natural Resources.

These agencies, sharing and managing 10,000 acres of the Jocassee Gorges, 45 miles south of Asheville on the N.C./S.C. border, are responsible for the creation of North Carolina's newest state park, its only park west of Asheville.

The park was purchased last year by the state from Duke Power Co. to be preserved for future generations and ensure continued high-quality standards in the region's primary watershed.

The Division of Parks and Recreation seeks to protect North Carolina's natural diversity, provide and promote outdoor recreation opportunities throughout N.C., and exemplify and encourage good stewardship of N.C.'s natural resources for all citizens and visitors of the area.

Plans have been approved and development will begin immediately on interim park facilities, designed to last three to five years.

Park Supt. Steve Pagano was in Rosman on Wednesday, June

28, to accept the park's first piece of heavy equipment.

"It's a tractor; a front-end loader," said Pagano. "We'll use it to clear roads and maintain our roadways. We can do a lot with a four wheel drive tractor."

Development of parking areas, restroom facilities and camping sites will be the first priority.

The temporary facilities will be completed this fall and are located where the permanent facilities will be built during the next several years.

The Division of Parks and Recreation manages 7,000 acres on the eastern portion of the park, bordering the Baker Line. Here, visitors are welcome to hike, camp, bike, swim or picnic in designated areas.

The Wildlife Commission's gameland covers 3,000 acres to the southwest of the park, bordering the state line to the south. Hunting is permitted in this area only (in season), as well as fishing, camping and hiking.

Trails are being developed throughout both areas with the joint efforts of park coordinators and inmate labor.

"It's a long process to lay a trail out," said Pagano. "You don't go over the edge of a mountain and we have to keep our grade at a certain level, which is hard to do and keep the trail within a walkable distance, especially in here."

One week a month, a crew of

10 minimum-security inmates from Hendersonville helps build new trails.

"It's voluntary labor. They've been clearing roads, digging water bars and whatever we need them to do, which really magnifies our manpower," said Pagano.

In return, the inmates receive about 70 cents a day and work credit toward early release.

"Half of them are city boys," Pagano laughed. "There's really no danger of anyone trying to run because they clump together. It's hard to break them apart and if they can't see each other in these woods, they come back up."

Some activities in Gorges State Park are illegal and could lead to arrest.

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

- Hunting or trapping in areas managed by the Division of Parks and Recreation.

- Fires in any undesignated area.

Pagano stated that most enforced of all the rules is the one prohibiting the possession of firearms and alcohol.

New changes to rules, published in last week's *Wildlife Digest*, governing horseback riding and ATV operations in

the park have severely limited these activities.

"We actually designated trails through the park to the gameland, assuming they would have riders, and then all of sudden they closed to riding most of the gameland," said Pagano.

The new rules also stipulate that the operation of any unlicensed vehicle (ATV or other motor vehicle) is strictly prohibited.

Currently, horses and bikes can be ridden on areas of Chestnut Mountain Road and Auger Hill Road.

Pagano said the top priorities for park rangers are education, safety/resource management and law enforcement.

"A lot of people don't realize that we're now fully staffed and operational," said Pagano.

The interim office, on U.S. 64 in Sapphire, employs two full-time park rangers, an office supervisor, a maintenance mechanic, three seasonal rangers and two voluntary college interns.

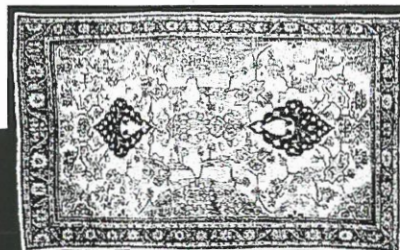
"We'll have paid internships next year for anyone interested," said Pagano. "The Dept. of Labor will fund environmental in-

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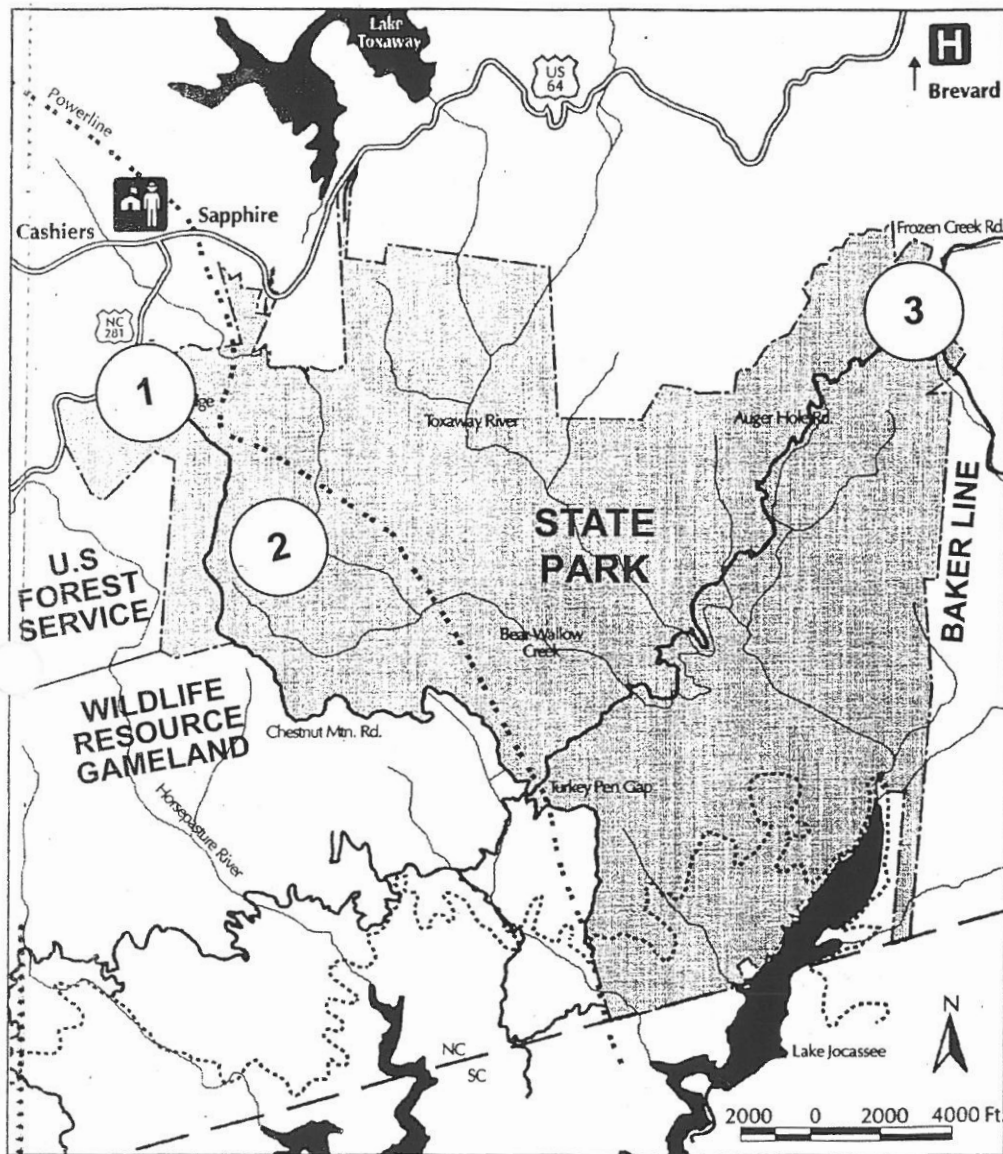
ships, and we're putting through the paperwork this week so next year we can get interns and actually pay them something."

At this time, there are no

parking areas or restroom facilities, but visitors are welcome to enjoy the magnificent waterfalls, crystal-clear rivers, hiking trails, sheer rock walls and unique wildlife and vegetation

in the park.

For park rules, safety guidelines or other information, stop by the office or call (828) 966-9099, or e-mail gorg@citcom.net.



The map indicates general areas that are proposed sites for the interim facilities. The exact location could be altered slightly.

Area 1: Will include:

- A parking lot equipped to hold 125 cars, and 5-10 buses/RVs
- Trail heads
- Restrooms
- Picnic areas
- Access to camping areas

Area 2: This is designated as a primitive, walk-in campground, offering scenic old-fashioned camping experiences.

Area 3: Will include:

- A parking lot equipped for 25 vehicles
- Trail heads

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