



Scott Letchworth, 33, is the new superintendent at Umstead State Park, one of the Triangle's outdoor recreation gems.

STAFF PHOTO BY SHAWN ROCCO

Users weigh in on Umstead's future

Many with a stake have suggestions
for the popular urban park's new superintendent

By JOE MILLER
STAFF WRITER

We run there, we bike there, we walk there, we hike there. We ride horses there, we train for adventure races and we run ultramarathons there that last more than two days and cover 100 miles. We love it so much we sneak in early before the gates officially open and we stay after dark, long after the gates officially close.

Much as we love Umstead State Park, we're always thinking of ways we could love it more. We could love it more if it were open longer, if it had more hiking trails, if it were more welcoming to mountain bikers, if we could paddle a canoe down Crabtree Creek, which runs through the park's center.

Those ifs are part of the challenge facing Scott Letchworth, who took over as Umstead's superintendent last month. He replaced Martha Woods, who retired after 11 years at Umstead's helm.

A 5,579-acre sylvan oasis with more than 34 miles of trail, three lakes and numerous streams, Umstead was conceived in the 1930s as a way to protect a natural resource being depleted by poor farming techniques. It has evolved into one of the nation's best urban parks, an enticing perk for active people mulling a move to the rapidly growing Triangle.

Every year nearly 600,000 people come to Umstead State Park to play.

Letchworth, who is 33, knows well the park's playful attributes. When he was growing up in Cary, his Scout troop made frequent forays into the park. While he didn't grow up dreaming of someday running Umstead, he did know from early on that he wanted to work outdoors. While earning a bachelor's degree in recreation and park management at Appalachian State University in the mid-1990s, he spent his summers as a seasonal worker at Jordan Lake State Recreation Area in Chatham County. After graduating, he hired on as a ranger at Kerr Lake State Recreation Area in 1997, transferred to Falls Lake in 2001 and was named superintendent at Umstead, one of the most popular of North Carolina's 33 state parks, last month. While he loves to play in the woods himself — he fishes, camps and paddles — he also knows his priorities at the park's helm.

"Our principal mission is to protect the natural resource," says Letchworth. "We want the park to be protected 100 years from now as it is today."

"It's very difficult for people to understand that Umstead is a state park, not a city park, not a county park," adds Charlie Peek, spokesman for the state Division of Parks and Recreation. "We have a very different mission."

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UMSTEAD STATE PARK

Where: Officially in Raleigh, bordered to the north by Raleigh/Durham International Airport, Ebenezer Church Road to the east, Trenton Road to the south and Interstate 40 to the west.

Access: The park has two main entrances: Off I-40 at Harrison Avenue on the southwest side of the park; off Glenwood Avenue/U.S. 70 between I-540 and Ebenezer Church Road on the west side of the park.

Hours: The park opens at 8 a.m. and closes November-February at 6 p.m.

What to do: 34 miles of trail, including 23 miles of hiking-only trail and 11 miles of trail open to hiking, biking and horseback riding. There's also fishing on three lakes — Reedy Creek, Sycamore and Big Lake, and canoe rentals at certain times of the year on Big Lake.

Phone: 571-4770.

Web site: www.ncparks.gov/wiwm.

Learn more: blogs.newsofserver.com/joemiller

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The mission is different, yet one that should be compatible with goals of the park's recreational enthusiasts, says Jean Spooner, chairwoman of the Umstead Coalition, a citizens group that supports the park.

"The reason the park is so well loved is because of its natural resources," says Spooner, who has led successful efforts to protect the park from encroaching development. "People are appreciating the park for the same reasons, for its trees, for its trails."

Some in the recreation community are hoping new leadership might lead to immediate change. In the park's hours, for instance: Umstead's posted opening time of 8 a.m. is considered late by those who want to beat the heat in the summer or those who want to run, hike or bike before work. Letchworth cautions against seeing any immediate change.

"One of the misconceptions about the superintendent is that he has exclusive power," says Letchworth. "He has influence; he doesn't operate in a vacuum."

Indeed. Changes in policy often must run the bureaucratic gauntlet, from the district superintendent and natural resources staff to the State Construction Office and Department of Insurance. The last time hours were significantly changed at a park — at Fort Fisher — approval was required at the director's level, says Peek.

Still, Letchworth says he's open to chatting with the park's various user groups and hearing what they have to say. Here's what representatives for major user groups have to say.



Umstead State Park has 23 miles of trail set aside for hikers, but some parts of the park have no trails.

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Runners

Umstead is a lifesaver to runners, says Mike Walsh, president of the N.C. Road Runners Club. Or at least a joint and bone saver.

"We often joke that sidewalks are death," says Walsh. "Concrete is extremely hard, and asphalt is only slightly less so." Ahh, but Umstead's 11-mile bike and bridle trail with its crushed gravel surface: "It saves runners' legs and prevents injuries."

"We have runners who come to Raleigh and search out Umstead," he adds. "They say, 'Oh, my gosh. You are so lucky to have this.'" The trails are also popular with local high school cross-country teams.

So no complaints?

"Parking has become a real issue," says Walsh. "Expansion of hours would be a tremendous benefit, too."

Some runners would like to see more water fountains installed. (There's one on the bike and bridle trail network.)

Letchworth says he'll look into that, though he notes that tap fees — the fee paid to tap into a city water line — can be pricey. He's also uncertain if a water line runs where the runners would like a drink.

Bikers

Mountain bikers may be at the forefront of park users who look at its 5,600 acres and say: Why can't we mountain bike here?

Actually, they can — on the park's 11 miles of bike and bridle

In any event, says Jenkins, they would at least like to see mountain bike events and races in the park.

Letchworth reiterates the park's position on natural resources, but says he'd like to talk to the mountain bikers.

Hikers

Of all the recreational users at

trail. But that's a road-width surface; what the mountain bikers want is singletrack, trail roughly the width of a hiking trail.

Could they double-up with the hikers on the existing 23 miles of hiking trail?

"No," says Joe Lugiano, who heads volunteer trail maintenance at Umstead. "It is easy to see where bikes and horses have used some of the hiking trails as they are more torn up." (Letchworth says over time horses, hikers and mountain bikers all inflict about the same damage on a trail.)

Mountain bikers aren't keen on sharing the hiking trail, either.

"The problem with the existing hiking trail is that it was built before what we know about sustainable trails," says Matt Jenkins with the Triangle Off-Road Cyclists. TORC is a local mountain bike club that maintains and builds trail at several public parks in the area.

Another TORC member, Bob Morris, who has been an active trail builder in the region for 15 years, thinks a separate mountain bike trail paralleling existing trail might be the answer.

"I have been suggesting for years to the park that they allow singletrack trails... within about 50 to 100 feet of the bike and bridle trails," says Morris, who also sits on Umstead's Park Advisory Committee.

Umstead, hikers probably reap the most benefit from the park's natural resources. Look at a trail map, though, and it would seem that trails could penetrate even more of the park.

"There are areas of the park that have no trails," acknowledges trails volunteer Lugiano. "The question is can more trails be maintained by park volunteers." Lugiano says he and a



Some Umstead users want the park to open earlier.

N&O FILE PHOTO

smattering of other volunteers now do trail maintenance — removing debris, clearing water bars, removing trees. Plus, certain volunteer work must be supervised by a park ranger, and there are only seven rangers on staff at Umstead.

Plus, Umstead is full of sensitive areas — from the 50-acre Piedmont Beech Natural Area to the half acre or so tract supporting a rare community of magnolias — so the park must be careful where it directs large numbers of people.

Paddlers

A boat rental concession on Big Lake is open during the summer.

Sometimes.

Of late, Letchworth says they've been having trouble staffing the boat house and thus, canoe rentals have been limited.

Then there's Crabtree Creek. Mention paddling Crabtree to park staff and they alternately laugh and groan. Every once in a while someone tries it, they say, and the rangers end up having to rescue them at some point along Crabtree's 5.3-mile meander through the park.

Curiously, says veteran paddler Paul Ferguson, Crabtree is one of the best small creeks in the area to paddle.

"Crabtree tends to be buffered by water coming out of the lake (Crabtree, a flood-control lake just upstream of the park)," says Ferguson, author of "Paddling Eastern North Carolina," a guide to more than 3,200 miles of paddle trail in central and Eastern North Carolina. "It has the potential for being paddled quite a few more days a year than other creeks its size."

Why isn't it paddled regularly?

Trees that fall across the creek remain across the creek. This summer, the local Carolina Canoe Club attempted to contact the park about clearing trees across Crabtree, but the lines of communication broke down, according to club member Betsey Upchurch.

Letchworth is a paddler and his eyes light up at the prospect of paddling Crabtree.

"I don't know what OSHA has to say about using a chain saw in a stream," says Letchworth, "but I'd be interested in that."

"I'm into paddling. If we can do it, we'd do it."

Adds Ferguson, who has paddled Crabtree through Umstead "at least a half dozen times, most recently in 2004. "If it could be maintained a bit, it could provide an enjoyable paddle."

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