Friends of Congaree Swamp

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Fall 2006

Swartout Named New Superintendent at CNP

Tracy Swartout started at the top and now she's ready to get down to earth.

Congaree National Park's new superintendent comes to the job with an impressive list of environmental and administrative credentials.

She's spent seven years with the National Park Service's headquarters in Washington, D.C., doing business plans for 75 park units around the country. She analyzed their operations and helped develop strategies for increasing revenue and working more efficiently.

"Those 75 parks represent half of the Park Service's acreage, operating budget and visitation," she said.

Swartout, 34, grew up in Columbia, so she "threw my hat in the ring" when former superintendent Martha Bogle moved on to the Blue Ridge Parkway in North Carolina last year.

Her father is an air quality chemist with the state Department of Health and Environmental Control and her mother works for the U.S. Attorney's office. Her husband, Tom, is an environmental engineer.

An only child, her parents set her on an environmental path early.

"My parents took me to every national park, monument and preserve from Key West to Canada," she said. She only regrets that she didn't spend more time at Congaree.

When it came time to go to college, she took the University of South Carolina course book and circled every class she was interested in—from anthropology to zoology. Most of the classes fell in the geology-geography range, she said. She majored in environmental geology with minors in the other “ologies” she was interested in.

Because she was interested in the environment and spent her free time involved in environmental issues, she looked for a way to combine her interests into a career.

The University of Waterloo in Toronto, Ontario, had the combination of management tools and environmental programs she was looking for. She earned a master’s degree there in natural resource management and then went on to spend a year at Duke School of the Environment, studying environmental law and economics.

But then she took a contract job with the National Park Service for the summer, working at Arches and Canyonlands national parks in Utah.

“I fell in love with the Park Service,” she said. “I applied for a full-time job in Washington and they hired me.”

She said the greatest challenge of managing a national park is balancing natural resource management with public land use. Her long-term goal is to increase the visibility of Congaree in South Carolina, the Southeast and the nation.

“I want to see the park recognized for its valuable resources,” she said. “I want to see folks build connections.”

She said if the connections are there, the public turns into stewards and spokespeople.

“We’ve got a big area and a small staff, so we’re going to have to rely on partnerships with the university and other resources,” she said.

She plans to spend the first few months learning, setting priorities, taking care of business and rebuilding the staff.

“I’m lacking in experience and depth,” she said, “but I’ve got breadth.”

And enthusiasm for the job in front of her.

President's Corner

Dr. John Grego

Friends Web Page

With a strong assist from Ed Kujawski, our webmaster, we have been adding some content to our webpage, particularly in the form of journal entries. For those of you with sound-recording equipment or digital cameras, I strongly encourage you to forward the material to me (jrgrego@mindspring.com) to be edited and added to the webpage. Current contributors include Robin Carter (with some interesting sound recordings) and Joe Kegley—I would like to see many more contributions from our regular visitors to the Park.

Annual Meeting

Weather and competing activities suppressed turn-out for the Annual Meeting at Congaree Bluffs Heritage Preserve on October 22. Regardless, we had almost no rain in the afternoon, and the view from the overlook of mist rising from the Park's forest was beautiful. Members who had not been to the preserve recently were impressed at the changes in the physical facilities. Rain or shine, the house and picnic shelter could easily accommodate our annual meeting in future years.

Led by Robin Carter, John Nelson, and John Cely, Friends members scattered in different directions to explore the Preserve, and then reconvened for the business meeting.

LaBruce Alexander, Past President of Friends of Congaree Swamp spoke about the effort to preserve the property and the creation of Congaree Bluffs Heritage Preserve. This advocacy effort, in cooperation with Congaree Land Trust, Nature Conservancy, and SCDNR, represented an early and important success for Friends.

Friends then honored long-time Board members Ann Timberlake and Zoe Sanders Nettles for their service. We also cited Mary Kelly, who has requested to step down from the Treasurer's position and the Board. In addition to her work as Treasurer, Mary has been an enthusiastic participant and volunteer in Friends' activities. Nominees for open positions included current Board members Dick Watkins, Sharon Kelly, and Andy Fiffick, and two new nominees: Kevin Fisher, president of Fisher Communications, and Sally Knowles, recently retired as Director of Water Quality at SC DHEC. The slate passed by acclamation.

Brett Moule, Manager of Congaree Bluffs Heritage Preserve, discussed plans for the property, including control of exotic species (John Cely had found a chinese parasol tree on his hike and brought back a sample) and removal of loblollies in order to plant longleaf pines. He would like to engage teachers in developing Preserve activities.

Tracy Swartout, the new Superintendent of Congaree National Park, was introduced. Once she clears her desk, her top priorities are filling the vacant positions in Information Technology, law enforcement, ecology and maintenance. She would also like to see more community involvement and improved visibility of the Park in the Columbia area, and identified the Highway 601 bridges issue as a top priority.

We then settled down to Ben Moise's roast oysters, and our very own barbeque, roasted corn, butternut squash soup and desserts. Special thanks to our organizers Andy Fiffick, Sharon Kelly and Bob Render.

601 Bridge Project Still Under Appeal

In our last newsletter, we had detailed plans for the upcoming August 10 DHEC Board review of our appeal (joined by Audubon SC and South Carolina Wildlife Federation) of the agency's notice of proposed decision. In their notice, DHEC staff had recommended 1-1 slopes, which would reduce the "footprint" of the embankments, but would obstruct flow just as much as more typical 2-1 slopes. The staff also agreed with SCDOT's mitigation package, which included 122.5 feet of additional bridging, as well as purchase of mitigation credits and land acquisition funds—the estimated cost of the mitigation package (not including the bridging) was $827,000 (though this number fluctuates).

During the meeting, SCDOT's arguments concentrated on the high additional cost of 1-1 slopes (as much as $30 million dollars!), and the poor condition of the existing bridges, particularly the large bridge over the Congaree River. Some DOT photos of the main Congaree River bridge's condition were quite compelling.

The DHEC Board showed a lot of deference to the recommendations of resource agencies (SC DNR, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service); they were concerned that resource agencies' recommendations to restore flow with thousands of feet of additional bridging should not be ignored. In particular, the Board felt that the 1-1 slopes did not actually address the resource agencies' concerns about restoring sheet flow, and suggested that money would be much better spent on additional bridging. Rather than render an immediate decision, the Board asked staff to hold conferences with DOT and other appellants to try to reach a compromise, and then report back to the Board.

The conferences were not particularly productive, and we felt we were losing ground in spite of some interesting proposals we had put forward. DHEC Board issued a notice of final decision that removed the 1-1 slope requirement and requested DHEC staff to consider alternative measures that would reduce the project's ecological impact. Shortly thereafter, DHEC staff recommended 4 additional bridge spans on top of SCDOT's proposed mitigation package—this would result in a total of 612.5 feet of additional bridging, which is well short of the resource agencies' recommendations. Friends of Congaree Swamp, along with Audubon SC and SCWF, requested another final review, while SCDOT appealed the same decision directly to Administrative Law Court. We have filed to intervene in SCDOT's appeal to Administrative Law Court, mostly to allow full participation in SCDOT's appeal, provided it moves forward.

NEPA Appeal

While all this was going on, an additional deadline loomed. On March 13, 2006, a Federal Register notice stated that any NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) appeal of certain Federal Highway Administration actions had to be filed by September 13, 2006.

The Federal Highway Administration had issued a Finding of No Significant Impact after reviewing SCDOT's Environmental Assessment of the 601 project; this was one of the FHWA decisions that triggered the NEPA appeal deadline.

Throughout this process, we had felt that the Environmental Assessment was inadequate, particularly in the lack of coordination with the National Park Service. A successful outcome of a NEPA suit would require a thorough Environmental Impact Statement, which could finally include the National Park Service's plans for Bates Fork in planning the replacement of the 601 bridges. With this in mind, Friends of Congaree Swamp, along with Audubon SC and SCWF, filed a NEPA suit on September 13, 2006.

Summary

All of the appeals and interventions can seem bewildering, but the 601 project will affect the lower section of the Park for the next 50 years.and intervention is worthwhile. A well-designed project could be a tremendous asset for both the Park and the communities in Calhoun and Richland County along Highway 601.

Currently, it is not clear which suits will be pursued and which withdrawn. Interestingly enough, SCDOT's website for the past few months has claimed that the "project is beyond the capability of the Bridge Replacement Program at this time," and that construction would not begin till FY 2009.

"The Southern Swamp Explorer" Coming This Spring

Award-winning author/illustrator Irene Brady plans to publish ***The Southern Swamp Explorer*** in Spring 2007; see www.natureworkspress.com for a preview. Designed primarily as an education text for children, the book will also include a section featuring notable wetlands such as Congaree National Park and Beidler Forest in South Carolina, Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary in Florida, Barataria Preserve in Louisiana, Big Thicket National Preserve in Texas, and Okefenokee Swamp in Georgia/Florida. With the sanction of Park staff, Friends of Congaree Swamp prepared the entry for Congaree National Park. Special thanks to the following members of Friends who provided editing assistance: Robin Carter, John Cely, John Nelson, David Shelley, and Dick Watkins.

Upcoming Field Trips & Events

Congaree Swamp Christmas Bird Count Sunday, December 17, 2005 7:00 AM — After-hours parking lot

Each year since 1900, bird enthusiasts have been conducting Christmas Bird Counts in North America.

A Christmas Bird Count (or CBC) is an all-day effort to find and identify as many wild birds as possible within a 15-mile diameter circle. This effort, which now engages over 50,000 participants annually, is sponsored by the National Audubon Society. Results may be viewed at http://www.Audubon.org/bird/cbc.

We have a CBC for the Congaree Swamp (founded by Robin Carter) that includes most of the national park and adjacent areas, from just north of Gadsden to just north of St. Matthews.

Join us to help out. You do not have to be a birder, just someone who wants to help and is willing to walk a few hours on the park trails. Meet at the after-hours parking lot at 7:00 AM on Sunday, December 18, 2005. You may help out as long as you like. Many participants just help out for a few hours, but some will stick it out all day.

There is a $5.00 participation fee that goes to the National Audubon Society to help cover the costs of processing the data.

If you have any questions please contact:

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Adopt-a-Trail Workday Saturday, February 24, 2007 9:00 AM - around 2:00 PM

Visitation starts to pick up in early February, but the Park doesn't get really busy until March. We like to clean our adopted trails-the Weston Lake Trail and the Oakridge Trail-in late February for our early Spring visitors. We will be clearing the trails of fallen limbs, and intruding branches, vines and cane. Friends will provide refreshments at the Visitor's Center.

We will meet at the Visitor's Center at 9 AM and will finish in the early afternoon. I anticipate separate work groups for the two trails. Work gloves, long pants, light hiking boots, water, and a snack are recommended. If you have loppers, long-handled shears (good for giant cane) or bow saws, bring them along. Friends members and Park staff will provide gear if you do not have any.

If interested please contact:

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Share your newsletter with a friend!

Campsite Improvement

Phase I: Setting the Fences

(c) Photos of Phase I by John Grego

John Torrence, member of the CNP maintenance staff, on the bobcat.

Bob Render (left), John O'Sheal, and Andy Fiffick set posts.

John O'Sheal (left), Andy Fiffick, , Bob Render, John Cely, and Mary Kelly made up the Friends fencing crew.

We recently received a gift from friends of Congaree National Park to complete a service project at the Park. After consultation with Park staff, Friends proposed improving the campground adjacent to the after-hours parking lot.

Clearly, the current campground lacks "curb appeal"-the campsites are poorly delineated and could use more shade. Taking our inspiration from the South Carolina Wildlife Federation's Carolina fence gardens, we organized plantings of native trees and shrubs around split-rail fences. The fences provide some structure while the trees and shrubs grow up, as well as insurance against an unsuccessful planting effort. Careful coordination with park staff ensured that the project would be consistent with Park Service goals.

We completed the first "phase" of the project-the fences-on November 4 with a big assist from NPS employee John Torrence aboard his trusty Bobcat and its 18" auger. Over the following week, we purchased over 50 trees and bushes from Nurseries Caroliniana in North Augusta, transported them to the park, and laid out the plantings. John Torrence drilled some more holes for the trees and bushes, and we spent the morning of November 11 planting, mulching, and watering. We also constructed cages around the trees to prevent deer from rubbing the trunks with their antlers.

Phase II: Planting the Gardens

(c) Photos of Phase II by Carol Kososki

Mark Plowden and Bob Render prepare trees for new garden.

In addition to the fences, the campsite now includes extensive plantings of yellow poplar, willow oak, red buckeye, yellow jessamine, crossvine, coral honeysuckle, arrowwood, beautyberry, sweetspire, and wax myrtle. I would like to thank our committee: Mary Kelly, John Cely, Andy Fiffick, and Carol Kososki; as well as volunteers Bob Render, John O'Sheal, Virginia Winn, Mark Plowden; USC students,Ashley Merchant and Becky Kearns, and an anonymous scoutmaster and boy scout from Florence. And once again thank our donors for their contribution to the Park.

Friends are joined by USC students Ashley Marchant, and Becky Kearns.

John Grego lends a hand preparing the holes.

John O'Sheal, John Cely, and Virginia Winn add mulch to new plantings.

Kingsnake Trial Extension Hike

On September 26, members of Friends met at South Cedar Creek for a long hike into the Park's interior. Though the day was warm, the hike was surprisingly free of the mosquitoes that had been ubiquitous a month earlier. We followed the Kingsnake Trail to a couple highlights available just off the trail; along the way, we had a nice look at an Ovenbird foraging along the trail, a good omen for a day in which we had long looks at other migrating warblers and thrushes. After stopping at a beautiful 270° view of Summer Duck Slough, we walked along a temporarily dry Moccasin Pond to an enormous, buttressed Bald Cypress with knees up to 8' tall. The cypress tree is only a short distance off-trail, but little-visited.

A short while later, we continued walking south—though officially off-trail, we followed an obvious old logging road until we reached Fishhook Slough, and then turned west onto a more obscure road. The road paralleled the slough, and we passed another large cypress along the way. Eventually, we picked up Horseshoe Pond to our south and followed it to Running Gut. After a high log-crossing, we were finally back on a recognizable jeep road. This stretch had been full of feral hogs during scouting trips—we saw two on the day of the hike, including a large boar feeding peacefully along the edge of the trail.

We took a long break in a large clearing at the edge of the Sox-Goff tract, then crossed Frenchman's Gut and inspected an old Persimmon tree with the remnants of a deer stand attached to the trunk—the tree seems to be as large and tall as the former national co-champ along Cedar Creek. From here, we struck off cross-country again;

though it was hard to get lost with two large ponds funneling us toward Oakridge Trail, we very nearly succeeded. Nevertheless, we enjoyed the large beech trees we encountered along the way.

At a rest stop on a large bridge over Running Gut, our attention was diverted by a large cottonmouth coiling and writhing on the water surface. We watched as the snake repeatedly dove to the bottom, apparently foraging for food.

We completed our loop by rejoining the Kingsnake Trail and hiking along Cedar Creek back to the trailhead, with stops for the “walking” maple along Running Gut, the former co-champion Persimmon along Cedar Creek, and a couple mixed warbler flocks that favored the Swamp Chestnut oaks off the Kingsnake Trail.

The trail we traced had been considered by the Park as an extension to the current trail system. It has the advantages of avoiding sensitive creekside habitat, requiring little additional bridging, while adding interesting hiking options to both the Kingsnake Trail and Oakridge Trail.

(c) Photos by Vickie Swank