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OCOEE PADDLERS HELPED BY PARK STAFF

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY ANN RYMER

River users can paddle the Ocoee River knowing that the Hiwassee and Ocoee Rivers State Park staff is looking out for their safety.

According to most whitewater enthusiasts, there are "no bad days on the river because any day in a boat is a good day." While this may sound like the idiom golfers might use on the golf course, many more unexpected situations develop on rivers with rapids. Visitors to the Ocoee River come from all walks of life and have skill levels from beginning rafter to advanced boater.

The river owes its increasing popularity to factors including the rising numbers of people participating in whitewater sports over the last 25 years, the 1996 Summer Olympics promotion of the Ocoee region's whitewater venue on the upper Ocoee River, and scheduled water releases purchased by outfitters.

With the whitewater recreational portion of the Ocoee River located in the Cherokee National Forest in Polk County, a trip down the river provides a grander view of the beautiful gorge. It is the work of the staff of Tennessee State Parks that helps keep the flow smooth in the river as well as along the side of the river.

Recreational use on the Ocoee can be traced to the mid-1970s when the flume built by the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) to divert the water from the riverbed to generate power was shut down for repair. Then this normally dry river had a five-mile stretch of rapids from the Number Two previously

wooden dam to the Number Two powerhouse.

Whitewater enthusiasts appeared and outfitters started rafting companies to take customers down this stretch of the middle Ocoee. At that time, TVA handled permitting for river use on U.S. Forest Service (USFS) land. As of 1983, with the addition of Tennessee State Parks to manage the traffic on the river, a three-way partnership was created on the Ocoee. This partnership of TVA, USFS, and Tennessee State Parks is not only unique but also a great working relationship, according to Jamey Nicholson, park manager for the Hiwassee and Ocoee Rivers State Park.

Nicholson, a 20-year state park veteran, oversees the staff of rangers, clerical employees, and seasonal workers. He has also served as a key player in the competition events on the Ocoee, since whitewater competitions began on this river in the early 1990s.

Race organizers over the years have applauded Nicholson for his eagerness to help and willingness to share his knowledge of the many details that go into successful events. Aside from administrative duties, Nicholson gets to work in the field some as well, and "would do this work forever because no two days are the same" and he enjoys the camaraderie.

This friendship is obvious as trip leaders from outfitting companies greet the rangers at the river put-in for their trips. Park Ranger Bridget Lofgren has worked in the area for two years. She enjoys meeting all types of people, and her eyes light up when she speaks of meeting people from so many countries. As an ambassador for the region, she enjoys autumn the most, since it is a time when there are more tourists out to enjoy the leaves and to ask questions about the Ocoee region.

Lofgren wears many hats over the course of a day on the river. From law enforcement to wilderness first responder, rangers take care of all the details in between. The best part of Lofgren's job is the nice paddling community. "As much competition as there is between these outfitters, these companies are there for each other if something happens and are quick to lend a helping hand."

With 24 companies owning a license to operate commercial rafting on the Ocoee, the result can be a significant number of people on the water. In the early 1980s, an average of 60,000 people per year used the river. There were more users in June 2002 than there were in an entire average year in the 1980s.

An average Saturday in June or September will have approximately 9,000 people rafting or paddling their whitewater canoe or kayak down the Ocoee River. Saturdays in July and August have a limit or "cap" for the number of customers an outfitter can take down the river, and this limit helps to keep the river from being overcrowded.

Surprisingly, there is no correlation between the number of people on the water and the number of accidents: between 40 and 50 accidents are noted on the river per year, but the river isn't as dangerous as the "River Road," the stretch of U.S. Highway 64 through the gorge. According to Nicholson there are many more accidents on the highway, and the hardest part of the ranger's job in this area is accident rescue with the volume of automobile traffic. State park rangers, due to their continual presence in the gorge with scheduled water releases, act as first responders to water or highway accidents.

Park Ranger Lance Crawford has logged 14 years on the Ocoee and also emphasizes the safety of the river.

An important aspect of this safety record is that the outfitting industry helped by developing rules and policies. A spirit of cooperation prevails between the outfitters and the state parks with the outfitter association even donating a new bullhorn for use by the rangers.

Raft guides who serve as the trip leaders report their number of customers to the park personnel and know they may be asked to show copies of their certifications and possibly open their first aid kits and review them with one of the rangers. These guides are adept at handling all types of people and even helping the individual with a case of the jitters. Occasionally, a rafting customer is too anxious to continue his trip, so park staff shuttle this person to the take-out to meet the bus driver for that raft company.

Crawford speaks of the average 300,000 river users as being "a microcosm of society" with all types of people coming for a ride down the river. Some come with no experience and are there for the amusement ride, such as a rafting customer. Others, such as the typical private boater, are quite skilled at maneuvering in whitewater. While the minimum age for commercial trips is 12 years, youngsters close to 10-years-old have been seen paddling their kayaks on this river, most often with adults accompanying them.

Rangers also check private boaters for acceptable types of gear. Inflatable crafts must have three air chambers, according to Lofgren, and be constructed according to certain safety standards in order to withstand the

Class III and Class IV rapids of the Ocoee River.

Oddly enough, one fellow asked if he could ride his inflatable alligator down the river since the alligator legs were separate air chambers! A ranger must be diplomatic yet enforce the law to keep citizens safe. The request for the alligator ride was denied.

State park personnel assist the rangers in the monitoring of safety practices. The seasonal staff, usually college students, learns there are many tasks park personnel perform such as crowd control at the congested take-out area and fee collection as well as other duties. Travis Mull enjoys meeting all kinds of people. He is planning to finish college and apply to be a park ranger. Like the others, he cites meeting many different kinds of people as the best part of the job. Flexibility is a key character trait in a job with state parks. Secretary Karen Lee and Angie King, clerk, not only staff the office, but can be seen working at the upper Ocoee and helping with almost any task.

With 20 days of scheduled water release on the upper Ocoee River (home of the Olympic venue) and 116 days on the middle Ocoee River, the 2003 season will again draw a significant number of people to the region. In addition to the normal heavy traffic on U.S. Highway 64, tourists will pass through hoping to catch a glimpse of whitewater enthusiasts on the water.

One of the bonuses of the Ocoee River is easy access to the water for most of the middle Ocoee. Kayakers Brian Talbert and Dale Perry like coming to the Ocoee because a person can put in at one place and meet a friend with different skill level further down the river. They are glad to have the parking areas and feel that the \$3 per day fee is very reasonable considering the staffing of the area.

This additional highway traffic comes with a price, though, and that is the integrity of the gorge itself. A reduction in truck and car traffic along this recreational Mecca would significantly help the conservation of the river gorge, according to Nicholson.

If the trend continues, the popularity of rafting and boating the area's whitewater rivers will only grow. River visitors can feel comfortable knowing that the outfitters are playing their part with guide training as well as having a good working relationship with the Tennessee State Parks staff.