

RECREATION & PARKS IN SOUTH CAROLINA

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Treasure & Tourism in Your Local Park!

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What hobby could a master arborist, a technology guru and a middle school teacher possibly have in common? And why would they, along with a handful of others, want to hold monthly meetings to discuss it and use it to encourage tourism?

The answers are: 1) geocaching and 2) because they are obsessed.

This group, recently organized under the name YoGO (York County Geocaching Organization), is one of many dedicated citizen volunteer groups that assist with various facets of our services at Rock Hill Parks, Recreation & Tourism. The group began a few years ago as a task force formed to assist our department in developing guidelines for geocaching in city of Rock Hill parks.

First, let's back up a minute and get a quick rundown of the basics for those who may not be familiar with geocaching...

It's pronounced like "geo-caching," and it's still a relatively new adventure game that combines outdoor recreation and

technology to produce a high-tech treasure hunt that people engage in all over the world. Even in our own local parks.

Participants use handheld Global Positioning System receivers (GPSr) to search for cleverly hidden containers, or caches, that contain a logbook and often a variety of small trinkets and trading items. The locations, or GPS coordinates, for the caches are obtained from a growing number of Web sites devoted to the activity, including www.geocaching.com. The GPS coordinates used to locate the caches are given as longitude and latitude.

Currently, there are more than 873,000 caches hidden all over the world, mostly outdoors in public spaces, and they are placed by other geocachers.

Geocachers enjoy the fun of locating the caches, signing the log book, swapping trade items (pins, small toys, etc.), and then replacing the cache container in its hiding place to be found by someone else. To complete the adventure, participants log their finds on an Internet Web site. The cache

containers can be any type of waterproof container — a large plastic storage container, an empty plastic peanut butter jar or a film canister, for example.

Participants in this modern-day scavenger hunt are driven to the sport for a variety of reasons — the challenge and mental stimulation, being outdoors and walking trails, visiting urban spaces where caches may be located, using technology and caching while traveling. Best of all, geocaching can take you off the beaten path to places you've never been before.

Geocaching can be enjoyed by individuals or small groups, but the idea is to use stealth when finally locating the cache and replacing it. You don't want to ruin the fun for another cacher who may be nearby. Participants of all ages enjoy geocaching. It's a great activity for families, because even the youngest child will enjoy finding a small toy in the cache container. But if you take something from the cache, geocache etiquette says that you should leave always something of equal or greater value behind.

Care should be taken to preserve the environment surrounding the cache. Creating a path to the cache or bushwhacking would not only alter the natural environment, but it could also reveal the cache location to others. Besides, most caches are located just off of established trails or in fairly easily accessible locations. Don't be fooled — they can be quite cleverly concealed.

However, this is not a story just about a technology-driven recreational activity. It's a story about a group of people who want to share their "obsession" with others and bring tourists to Rock Hill parks and surrounding attractions.

It started in 2005, when our department saw a newspaper article describing challenges with geocaching in another city. Soon after, we found some caches in our parks — one in an ammo container. After deciding to take a proactive approach, we recruited some local geocachers to form a task force and assist us in developing guidelines and procedures for geocaching activity in city of Rock Hill parks. Our goal was to ensure resource protection and visitor safety while encouraging responsible recreational activity.

The resulting guidelines cover a number of topics, including: proper exterior labeling of caches, no ammunition containers allowed and no dangerous or inappropriate contents allowed. Additionally, all caches placed must be approved by PRT staff prior to publication on Web sites. Guidelines have also been established for the proper placement of caches.

The partnership with the task force began to grow with a few more members and the idea of holding Geocaching 101 educational sessions in our parks to introduce the public to this high-tech activity and to give them a chance to find a cache with a borrowed GPSr and assistance from an experienced cacher. Task force members created PowerPoint slideshows to share their knowledge for about 45 minutes and then took small groups

into the park to hunt for caches for an hour. The groups returned to share their "finds," enjoy some snacks and vie for raffle prizes. The participants enjoyed it just as much as the presenters enjoyed sharing their "obsession." After teaching a few more classes, they renamed them to "Geocaching 101: Welcome to the Obsession."

During the past year, the group really kicked into high gear by organizing under the name YoGO and coordinating many local events and activities including their first Geocaching 201 advanced class, "meet and greet" events, and participation in a local parade — bringing up the rear and picking up trash along the way. They have also set up information tables and offered geocaching activities during several PRT community events and at the regional Carolina Thread Trail Celebration event last November. YoGO has discovered that by holding multiple events in a single day or during a weekend, they are able to attract many out-of-town cachers who are looking for a weekend full of events and are willing to stay overnight to enjoy them.

Their current obsession is promoting tourism to York County through geocaching. Working with our department and with the Rock Hill/York County CVB this past spring, YoGO offered an event called "Geocaching: Passport to Fun" during Rock Hill's annual Come-See-Me festival, which brings in thousands of participants and visitors each year. The Passport event consisted of a 101 introductory class, along with the challenge of filling a passport with code-words from 12 out of 16 caches hidden in city of Rock Hill parks. Those completing the challenge during the 10-day festival received a trackable Come-See-Me geocoin! Collecting coins is a popular activity for geocachers. The passport activity was very successful, and a new coin is already in the works for the 2010 festival event.

YoGO is also working on year-round ways to bring geocache enthusiasts to our area, including creating themed cache trails, such as a

history trail through York County. This involves inventorying current caches, determining the placement of new caches, contacting land-owners to get permission, placing and maintaining the caches and creating a geocoin as the reward for completing the trail.

Technology is still the key to making all of this work. YoGO's activities are promoted through www.geocaching.com and its own Web site, www.yogosc.org, in addition to PRT's Web site and our local CVB's Web site. YoGO group members correspond with each other and make many decisions by using a listserv. (A listserv is an application consisting of a group of e-mail addresses in which the sender sends one e-mail and it goes to everyone. And when any group member replies, it automatically goes to everyone. It's similar to using "reply all" in your e-mail.) And, of course, geocaching wouldn't exist without the GPSr technology.

What continues to amaze me is that these folks are all volunteers. They truly love this activity and have enjoyed the friendships they have made through it — not only with the other YoGO members but also with others they meet at regional, state and national geocache events. In their own words, they are "obsessed," and I have to say that I agree. In future, the group hopes to obtain nonprofit status and apply for grant funding to assist with its efforts.

In Rock Hill, we realize that the treasure in our parks is not just the cleverly hidden caches; it's also a handful of citizens who enjoy the work of sharing their hobby with others and bringing them from near and far to our park facilities. Thanks, YoGO!

To learn more about geocaching, visit a geocaching Web site, such as www.geocaching.com, and look for the "Getting Started" or "Frequently Asked Questions" section. For more information on YoGO, you can visit its Web site at www.yogosc.org. Rock Hill PRT's geocaching guidelines are available at www.rockhillrocks.com.

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