

The Charlotte Observer

May 26, 2008

Signs of neglect

N.C.'s valuable federal public lands are loved and stressed

This Memorial Day weekend, tens of thousands of North Carolinians will flock to the federal public lands in our state, driving the Blue Ridge Parkway, camping at Cape Lookout or scrambling along a trail in the Smoky Mountains.

Tar Heel people have a close affection for the national parks, seashores, wildlife refuges and forests located within the state. Those resources are among the most used in the nation. This holiday weekend will be no exception.

Yet those beautiful, valuable resources are showing strain -- and signs of funding and policy neglect. Visitors this year may find their favorite places lacking -- or just plain in disrepair. It's time for North Carolina's representation in Washington to put a stop to that. The state has a lot to lose if these lands deteriorate.

The list of America's best-used national parks, monuments, historic sites and memorials includes some familiar places. No. 1 is the Blue Ridge Parkway, which runs for the largest number of its miles in North Carolina, and counted 18.9 million visitors in 2006. No. 3 is the Great Smoky Mountains, visited by some 13.4 million people last year.

More people visited the Parkway or the Smokies than the Grand Canyon. More people visited the Parkway or the Smokies than Yosemite or Yellowstone.

There's more: A 2006 report by the Forest Service found North Carolina's 2.9 million acres of national forests are the second most visited in the country, behind only Colorado's.

That popularity translates to cash. A National Park Service report found that the Blue Ridge Parkway was responsible for \$268 million in sales in the state and \$98 million in personal income. The NPS attributes \$598 million in total spending to the Smokies. The Forest Service estimates its recreation visitors spend more than \$7.5 billion in communities near NFS land.

Yet visitors to N.C.'s federal public lands this holiday will likely confront signs of stress: inadequate staffing, limited-hour visitor centers, deferred maintenance. A recent report found that the nation's wildlife refuges received a little over half the money needed to keep them safe and in good repair. The level of staffing, the report said, had left them vulnerable to criminal activity nationwide, including prostitution, torched cars, illegal immigrant camps, methamphetamine labs and pot-growing.

That's a symptom of poor funding and poor federal policy. Those lands belong to the people. When politicians short them, they short us. It's time that stopped. Politicians, take note.