SC state parks see highest visitation in decade

Paris Mountain had 26.4% increase in visitors in 2014

By Karen Chávez
Staff writer

South Carolina state parks were a happening place to be in 2014.

Nearly 800,000 more people visited the state parks last year than did the year before. Visitation was up about 11.5 percent from the 6.9 million visitors in 2013 to 7.7 million last year, according to the state Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism.

Out of 47 parks in the system, parks in the Upstate had some of the highest jumps in visits.

Paris Mountain State Park, five miles north of downtown Greenville, had a 26.4 percent increase in visitors, with 245,439 in 2014, up from 194,073.

Paris Mountain plans to expand with the expected purchase of a 160-acre parcel on its southwest boundary that was announced recently, and it's no surprise the park's visitation has increased so much, park manager Jason Hege said.

> *"Our visitation is phenomenal. It goes up and up every year."*
> **POLL KNOWLAND**
> Park manager

"With Greenville being so close, and the population of Greenville as a destination and as a whole growing leaps and bounds, Paris Mountain adds to the value of living here," Hege said.

"People come down here to work, and they are rediscovering the outdoors at Paris Mountain. I can attribute the increase in visitation to the growing population, as well as the programs we offer, the trail day events, school programs."

Another Upstate gem is Table Rock State Park, which sits in Pickens County northwest of Greenville and southwest of Hendersonville, N.C.

It is a 3,000-acre park perched on the towering mountain that bears its name and continues to serve as a getaway from city life for residents of two states.

Table Rock saw a nearly 8 percent increase in visitors, up to 332,660 last year from 308,132 in 2013.

The park has cabins that were built during the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps, including an old-fashioned swimming hole on one of the park's two lakes; hiking trails, including an access to the 80-mile Foothills Trail; campgrounds and ranger programs.

"Table Rock has been a very traditional park for South Carolina. It's right at the base of the Blue Ridge Mountains and if you want a good outdoor experience, Table Rock is a great place for it," said Poll Knowland, park manager.

"Our visitation is phenomenal. It goes up and up every year. We have hiking, camping and old CCC cabins, campgrounds, nature programs, and once a month on Saturdays we celebrate music heritage that is open to the public. It's a family experience."

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across the state went up last year.

Knowland attributes the increasing visitation to the simultaneous increase in population in the surrounding counties and to a recent marketing campaign by the state tourism department, which also oversees state park management.

Keowee-Toxaway State Park, a small park also in Pickens County, had an even bigger increase. The park with a lake for fishing and boating, picknicking and hiking had a nearly 70 percent increase, from 27,966 visitors to 47,334 in 2014.

Croft State Park, one of the largest of South Carolina's parks in terms of acreage and a few miles south of Spartanburg, saw a slight decrease in visitation last year. The park, which was once an Army base and is now popular with equestrians, dropped 3 percent from 95,855 visitors to 92,939 in 2014.

Phil Gaines, director for South Carolina State Parks, said there are always anomalies when counting visitors and it's hard to pinpoint a reason for the small decline.

"Croft is still one of those undiscovered jewels because of its close proximity to Spartanburg," he said.

SC residents 're-discovering' state's parks

Hunting Island in coastal Beaufort County was the most visited state park, with 1.35 million visitors in 2014. That was a nearly 26 percent increase over 2013, when the coastal park had 1.07 million visitors.

Myrtle Beach was the No. 2 most popular park last year, with 1.28 million visitors in 2014, up 4 percent from the previous 1.22 million people enjoying the sand and sea.

"Those two parks, which are both right on the water, tend to be the most popular and trade off the No. 1 spot each year," said Dawn Dawson-House, a parks spokeswoman.

But the parks in the Upstate near rapidly growing population centers like Greenville and Spartanburg, and closer to the foothills, also remain extremely popular.

"That (7.7 million visitors) total number has been higher in the past," Gaines said. "Visitation numbers is not an exact science."

The parks department counts visitors to park visitor centers and has traffic counters, but it also looks at occupancy rates in lodging and campgrounds, revenue numbers and program attendance numbers.

"When we look at the entirety of numbers, programs, occupancy, admission fees – last year was a very good year for us. Visitation numbers were the best in the past decade. We've honed our formula of how we count visitors," Gaines said.

Revenue for the last fiscal year was up 34 percent over the previous year, he said. Most all of South Carolina's state parks charge admission fees, in addition to other user fees such as cabin rentals and campground stays.

"I don't think there is any one reason, but one thing that has been very successful in South Carolina is a very aggressive marketing campaign with the 'Come out and play' initiative in print ads, social media and on TV," Gaines said.

"One of their themes has been 'Undiscovered South Carolina,' highlighting many of our parks, which are undiscovered treasures."

Devils Fork State Park in Oconee County, near the North Carolina and Georgia borders, saw a decrease of 6 percent last year, dropping from 175,590 visitors to 164,988 in 2014. The park provides the only public access to Lake Jocassee, a 7,500-acre reservoir.

The dip in visits might have been related to lake levels, Gaines said. The area experienced drought conditions last year.

"We focus more on the quality of experience rather than the number of people who come through the gates," Gaines said.