State parks see leap in attendance

BY GAVIN OLIVER
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Why vacation when you can "state-cation"?

That, at least, seems to be the recent mindset of South Carolinians and others, as the number of people who visited South Carolina state parks increased substantially in 2014.

According to the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism, visitation rose to 7.7 million people last year after 6.9 in 2013 — an increase of about 800,000 people.

State-cationing is the term Lake Hartwell State Park manager Robert Dinkins used when describing why state parks got more crowded.

"The increase is probably because of our increased marketing effort the last couple years," Dinkins said, "and people getting outdoors more, lower gas prices and people doing what we like to call our 'state-cations,' where people are starting to stay closer to home instead of taking vacations out of state or long trips.

"People are staying closer to home and staying in South Carolina."

The rising number of visitors coincided with a boost in revenue to the tune of $4 million in 2014, according to CarolinaLive.com, which is the latest portion of the $24 million boost over the last four years.

Dinkins said his park is among those that have benefited financially.

"Visitation is up, and revenue is showing for it," he said.

Among the Upstate leaders in attendance a year ago was Pickens' Table Rock State Park, which saw 24,500 more visitors a year ago after 308,132 walked



For those who didn't feel up to hiking the mountains, a stroll through Oconee State Park in the fall offers great views of changing foliage.



FILE PHOTOS

South Carolina's state parks saw a big jump in attendance — and revenue — in 2014. The Upstate offers plenty of outdoor opportunities from a family camping trip in the new cabins at Hartwell State Park, above, to boating or a quick dip in Lake Jocassee at Devil's Fork State Park in Salem.

its land in 2013.

Named after one of South Carolina's more mammoth mountains, Table Rock is a 3,000-acre park where guests can swim or hike to other trail-connected state parks, while those enjoying extended time there can stay in the park's cabins.

Many state parks join Table Rock in offering a variety of enticing activities, and a marketing push has spread word about the attractions through billboards, TV ads, publicity in South Carolina vacation guides and magazines produced by the Department of Natural Resources.

"State parks are still the best value around, as far as attractions go," said Kevin Evans, park manager of Devil's Fork State Park, "and there has also been a large push on marketing and tourism for the undiscovered South Carolina, which is an initiative trying to get folks to the more rural areas in South Carolina."

Devil's Fork State Park, located in Salem, is the only public access point to the surrounding Lake Jocassee and houses 20 villas for people when they're not taking advantage of the lucrative trout-fishing spots.



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Devil's Fork was one park that experienced a lessened visitation rate, though Evans expects an elevated number now that Lake Jocassee has recovered from the drought.

"Currently, the lake is at, or near, full pond," Evans said. "Again, for this time of year, it has helped as far as folks coming out and fishing. As far as last year goes, the low water did have some effect on it, but also the rainy weekends we had affected it as well."

Last but not least among the area's closest parks is Oconee State Park, known for its canoeing opportunities, pastime square dances and Fourth of July and other holiday festivities.

All in all, people trek to state parks for a simple reason.

"Our natural and cultural resources that we've been entrusted to be stewards of, people do cherish those, and that's one of the things that drives them to us," Evans said.

"Being able to come out and interact and reconnect with those resources that makes us uniquely South Carolinians are valuable to a lot of folks, and that's one of the reasons that they like to come out."