State parks thriving despite weak economy

BY JESSICA SIBLEY
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SALEM — Visiting state parks has become a popular alternative to pricey family vacations.

Phil Gaines, director of the South Carolina Parks, Recreation and Tourism (SCPRT) department, said that 2010 is already shaping up to be a record year.

"It's funny, because you would think the economy would have hit us hard," he said. "And happily, it's the opposite."

Both visitation numbers and revenue totals are up from the previous five years, he added, stating that the 47 parks in the Palmetto State are all seeing improved figures, which makes the upkeep of land a bit easier.

"It takes about $25 to $28 million each year to run the parks," he said. "We generate 80 percent of that money from visitors and activity seekers, so that's why it's so important for people to come out and enjoy the areas. That's why they are here."

Gaines said there are a couple of main reasons for the improvement.

"First, it's been such a long, cold, wet South Carolina winter," he said. "People have cabin fever and want to explore and hang outside. Secondly, especially around the lakes, the reversal of the drought has been huge for us. A couple of years ago, Hartwell State Park was in trouble because the water was so low. Now, most Upstate lakes are full and so are the campgrounds around them."

The SCPRT also gives taxpayers an option on their tax forms to "check off" for state parks.

"Basically, at that point, they can donate anything from a dollar or higher," he said. "That money goes toward legacy projects."

Legacy projects are permanent projects instead of one-time changes or fixes, he added. The first legacy project will be in Oconee County at Table Rock State Park on SC Highway 11.

"It should be open in about two weeks, but we've built an observation deck called the Carrot Creek Overlook at a very well traveled waterfall," he said. "It's going to be a great iconic structure, but it also aims to preserve the resources as there have been issues with erosion."

The project cost $45,000.

"Everything from hiking to water sports to camping — it's an inexpensive way to enjoy the outdoors," he added. "We stay open year-round and are just so lucky to have such diverse resources at our parks."

The South Carolina State Parks employ about 275 full-time employees.

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WEDNESDAY, APRIL 7, 2010

Tim Smith and the rest of the Smith, Neil and Talley families enjoy brunch while camping at a park. South Carolina state park officials say visitor numbers are higher this year and are expected to continue soaring.

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