



Campers visiting Lake Keowee at South Cove County Park. They have their satellite dish, free Wi-Fi and nearby accommodations for camping close to home. The 86-site campground, less than 2 miles from Seneca, has recently been chosen the No. 1 campground in the state by bestthingscc.com.

PHOTOS BY KEN RUINARD/INDEPENDENT MAIL

South Cove no longer is a well-kept secret

4/15/17

Island campground a hot tourist attraction

ABE HARDESTY
ABE.HARDESTY@INDEPENDENTMAIL.COM

- SENECA - On a cool, wind-swept afternoon on the South Cove County Park, Steve Schutt's enthusiasm was as easy to spot as Lake Keowee's deep blue sparkle.

Schutt stood at newly created Campsite 85, marveled at the post-card view, and was reminded that Oconee's name, in its Native American origin, means "Land Beside the Water."

"It's my favorite spot. You can see Whiteside Mountain in North Carolina, and you have a

great view of the lake," said Schutt, a Charleston native and Clemson University forestry graduate who became South Cove Park superintendent four years ago.

"God put it here," Schutt said. "He gets credit for all of this."

The staff at South Cove, and funds from the Oconee County council, have helped. One of two Oconee County parks that hug Lake Keowee's shoreline, the island campground has emerged as an increasingly popular tourist attraction in

See PARK, Page 6A



Stephen Schutt, left, South Cove County Park superintendent, talks with Phil Shirley, the director of Oconee County Parks, Recreation and Tourism.

Park

Continued from Page 3A

recent years.

The 86-site campground, less than 2 miles from Seneca, has recently been chosen the No. 1 campground in the state by bestthingssc.com.

Well before that, the campground earned a five-star rating from an AllStays Camping & RV website and app, and a 4.5 (of possible 5) stars from the TripAdvisor website. That followed National Geographic, which named the Jocassee Gorges region of Oconee County, which includes Lake Keowee, as a "Destination of a Lifetime."

"Any time you get an outsider's approval, it helps you to know you're doing something right," said Phil Shirley, Oconee County director of Parks, Recreation and Tourism.

Shirley gets the same message from the reservation numbers at the campground. While the park has long been popular among county residents, including many who stroll as the sun rises above the lake eastern side of the lake, the campground has in recent years gained the attention of campers in the Upstate, north Georgia, and western North Carolina.

"In recent years, our campground numbers have been skyrocketing," Shirley said. "We're seeing double-digit increases in the last four years, and in the first quarter (of 2017) we had another double-digit increase."

The campground has 2,900 more reservations in 2016 than the year before, raising revenue by 32 percent. That came after 2015 revenues were 19 percent higher than the previous year.

"I'm not sure where the ceiling is. I think there are still campers who don't realize we're here," said Shirley, who said a goal of 100-percent sustainability — a point where campground revenue pays the total expenses of the park — is within reach. The campground covered 70 percent of South

Cove expenses in 2016.

With that goal in mind, extensive renovations were made over the winter. Campersnow are greeted by upgraded electric and plumbing lines, paved roads, more retaining walls, the addition of Wi-Fi, and landscape improvements at 40 campsites.

The changes are part of a county effort to showcase resources that for many years had only been known by locals.

"Our campground is an asset," Shirley said. "You have to look at it in view of what we can offer camping customers as well as the local residents. ... I'd venture to say that more than 50 percent of our campers are not from Oconee County."

The changes were also a response, Shirley said, to changes in the camping culture.

"Camping today is a lot different than when I was a kid, and people camped in tents or pop-ups," Shirley said. "Now they come in \$100,000 to \$150,000 rigs. We had to get our infrastructure up to new standards."

Following the recommendations of the Allstays app, Atlanta resident Jonathan Bartley and his wife checked in Tuesday for their first visit.

P.J. Dickerson and wife Anne have been camping at South Cove since the park opened in the 1960s, often bringing children and grandchildren. The park is a short drive from their Westminster home, but Dick-

erson loves coming to the lake to fish for its bass.

"I just like being here," said Anne Dickerson. "It's near home, but it gets us away from the business of home."

Half of the campsites are on the water; all offer views of the lake, which is owned and managed by Duke Energy.

The popularity of the campground that reaches into an 18,500-acre lake has soared, Shutt believes, as family incomes have fallen.

"It seemed to start during the recession. A lot of people were camping because it's less expensive. We're seeing way more tent campers than we used to," said Schutt of the campground, which rarely filled a decade ago. "And I've talked to a lot of people who decided to vacation closer to home."

Shirley said future improvements are planned at High Falls, another county park/campground on Lake Keowee, and Chau Ram, on the Chattooga River. The three parks offer a combined 216 campsites.

For Virginia Penland of Asheville, who brought five kayak-loving children to the lake last week for a spring break vacation, the improvements and increased attention foster mixed feelings.

"We love it here, but I don't know if I should say that," she said. "I don't want a lot of people to find out about this."

Follow Abe Hardesty on Twitter @abe_hardesty



Stephen Schutt, park superintendent, walks out of the park office, which was built in 2016 for \$275,000 and is one of many improvements that help make the campsite popular.



Scarlet Kean, left, and Sully Kean, both of Loganville, Ga., play on new campground equipment at South Cove County Park in Seneca on Tuesday.

PHOTOS BY KEN RUINARD/INDEPENDENT MAIL