Protecting the Landscape

During the 1950s much of the Cumberland Plateau was stripped of its marketable trees and easily accessible coal. Sediments from the denuded land and ash from mines filled the streams. Although loggers and miners are still active on the plateau, within Big South Fork both vegetation now blankets the ridges and covers sites that once were homesteads, logging camps, and mining communities.

Today young trees cloth most of the logged-over lands, and environmental controls are reducing the impact that mining had on rivers and streams. New growth hides mine entrances, enrenches upon coal spoil, and transforms old fields into forests. Many of the old roads that crisscross the gorge are fading into the landscape and no longer passable by vehicles. It was often hard for those who directly depended on the area’s natural resources for their livelihood, and cash income was usually very limited. The U.S. Congress was aware of the needs of the area and decided to set aside a part of the Cumberland Plateau to provide new economic opportunities for the region through recreation. The legislation also provided for the protection, conservation, and interpretation of the natural and cultural resources and maintenance of the river as a free-flowing stream. To accomplish this task, two federal agencies have worked together in a partnership to create and manage the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, with its expertise in managing river basins, was charged with land acquisition, planning, and facilities. Now completed, these lands and facilities are operated and maintained by the National Park Service for the benefit and use of the public.

Big South Fork is set aside so that people can actively enjoy this rugned scenic area, where opportunities abound for fishing, whitewater canoeing, rafting, kayaking, hiking, bicycling, hunting, and horseback riding. The stuff of the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area welcomes you to the beautiful Cumberland Plateau.

Adventure on the River

The Big South Fork of the Cumberland River and its tributaries, North White Oak Creek, Clear Fork, and the New River, turn angler, canoeist, and paddler. They are excellent for a variety of whitewater paddling experiences. Many segments are ideal for beginners, although some sections should be attempted only by paddlers using appropriate equipment. Some sections in the park can be floated for a day or longer, while others have enough water for boating only during seasons with plentiful rainfall. Many rivers can turn a placid river into a torrent not to be entered by anyone.

Floating the streams of the Big South Fork will give you a leisurely time and ample time to appreciate the many features of previous agricultural, mining, and logging practices. Scenic sections are limited access, sparse development, and a quality of solitude. At no time is there more apparent than when floating the streams or camping on a riverside that the sun sinks behind the gorge rim. You realize that you are in another world and begin to pace your movements to its rhythms and moods. When the streams flow slow and smooth, you examine the banks and cliffs. As with most rivers you can see much more detail. Where the stream speed up and you are dragging between boulders and over ledges—you become one with your paddle. Rapids that you thought would take seconds seem to take minutes as you lunge and throw your way through.

When your adventure ends abruptly, and the pace again changes. Floating can be a dangerous sport in certain stretches of the stream in the park and at times of rising waters. Follow the U.S. Coast Guard’s rules of safety. Always wear a personal flotation device (PFD) when paddling. When canoeing have at least three canoes in your party. Kayakers and canoeists paddling Class II or more difficult water should wear helmets. Select a stream that matches your experience and abilities with the challenge you are looking for. To select a stream that is right for you, ask park staff, read published guides, or talk to commercial operators. For information on commercial operators, see the park (see General Information below).

Fishing is good throughout the Big South Fork system; smallmouth bass, rock bass, and brown bass are in the streams. A Kentucky or Tennessee permit is required.

Hiking and Camping

Established recreation areas at Allard Ford, Boggy Creek, and Pocahontas Rapid Park and Forest. Blue Ridge and Clear Fork offer backpacking, hunting, camping, electricity, restrooms, and showers. Bandy Creek has a swimming pool. For reservations call 800-365-CAMP (800-365-2267).

Backcountry lodging, accessible only by trail, is available at the Chattooga Lodge. Reservations required. Contact Wilderness Lodging, 300 Apple Valley Road, Sevierville, TN 37865, 865-429-1706.

When hiking you may discover abandoned shanties, abandoned buildings, or signs that this area once was not isolated. Trails lead to special scenic overlooks and cliffs. Be sure to fully watch your footing at these overlooks. If you plan to hike or camp in the backcountry, inform the Bandy Creek Visitor Center in Stearns, Tenn., 15 miles west of U.S. 116.

Boating is a popular activity on the Big South Fork. To boaters making a portage, or otherINGERING hate. When boating be especially alert. Noises you hear in the woods may be hikers, deer, or other wildlife. Always check before you launch.

Horseback Riding

Established horse camps at Station Camp and Bandy Creek, offer modern sites with water, electricity, restrooms, and stalls for 12 horses. For information contact the park, ask at a visitor center, or check website.

General Information

Visitor Centers

The park has two visitor centers: Bandy Creek Visitor Center, 300 Apple Valley Road, Stearns, Tenn., 15 miles west of U.S. 116. The Bandy Creek Visitor Center is open from March through October, 8 A.M. to 5 P.M.

Getting to the Park

The park is just 120 miles southeast of Lexington, Ky., 105 miles west of Nashville, Tenn., 25 miles north of Middlesboro, Ky., 45 miles south of Muscle Shoals, Ala., and 85 miles west of Chattanooga, Tenn.

From Nashville, take I-40 east to Lebanon, Tenn., and go south on U.S. 116 for 12 miles to Stearns, Tenn. Turn west on Tenn. 347 for 1 mile to the park entrance. The visitor center is on the right.

From Muscle Shoals, take U.S. 78 east to Scottsboro, Ala. From Scottsboro, take Ky. 67 south for 7.5 miles to the park entrance. The visitor center is on the left.

From Chattanooga, take I-75 north to Cleveland, Tenn. From Cleveland, take Tenn. 192 east to Hwy. 421 south to Hwy. 64 west. From Hwy. 64 west, proceed south on Hwy. 116 to the park entrance. The park has a northern entrance at Hwy. 116.

For more information, contact the park, ask at a visitor center, or check website.

More Information

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