

MOUNTAINS

Great American Outdoors Act will be a game changer

Your Turn
 Frances Figart
 Guest columnist

On June 17, the Senate voted overwhelmingly (73-25) to pass the Great American Outdoors Act, and now senators and their conservation partners are calling on the House to pass the Senate's bill as soon as possible. House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer has stated that he plans to bring the bill up in the last two weeks of July.

What does this mean for America and for public – and even some private – lands in Western North Carolina and East Tennessee in particular?

“The Great American Outdoors Act is historic legislation that would significantly reduce the National Park Service maintenance backlog,” said Jeff Hunter, Senior Program Manager for the National Parks Conservation Association. “In addition, the bill permanently reauthorizes and fully funds the Land and Water Conservation Fund at \$900 million annually. That is huge! If Congress passes this bill into law, it will be a victory for everyone who loves parks.”

The National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) works to protect and enhance America's national parks for present and future generations. For years, the organization has been working to obtain much-needed funding to fix national parks' trails, service roads, and other critical park infrastructure. Locally, NPCA works with the land trust community to secure protection for lands adjacent to national parks. This includes obtaining wildlife corridors and other important conservation lands from willing sellers. The Land and Water Conservation Fund is key to making this possible.

Part of the reason the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) has come this far is because of activism from organizations like NPCA and, another big acronym in the park world, PLA, the Public Lands Alliance. PLA connects, strengthens, and represents the nonprofit partners of America's public lands. These nonprofit organizations build and maintain trails, publish and sell educational products, conduct informative and interpretive tours, teach



The Sugarlands Visitor Center was built in the Mission 66 era at a time when park visitation was between five and six million people. COURTESY OF VALERIE POLK

environmental science to youth, manage volunteers, fundraise, and much more. Without them, parks couldn't thrive.

“Every one of these partners need safe, accessible facilities to create and deliver these programs to visitors,” said Dan Puskar, President and CEO of the Public Lands Alliance.

“Every one of these partners cares about reducing the number of in-holdings in their national parks and delivering outdoor opportunities to people across the nation. The GAOA is therefore perfectly aligned with the operations and aspirations of nonprofit public lands partners.”

To understand the role of nonprofit park partners, take a look at Great Smoky Mountains National Park. It is supported by a strong group of partners that includes Great Smoky Mountains Association, Friends of the Smokies, Discover Life in America and the Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont. All of these partners contribute greatly to the park's operations and stand to also benefit from the GAOA.

“The Great American Outdoors Act is a bold response to the very long-term problem of deferred maintenance,” said Laurel Rematore, CEO of Great Smoky Mountains Association, which runs the bookstores in Smokies visitor centers.

“Our park's backlog of maintenance projects currently exceeds \$200 million, which is among the largest of the backlogs in the 419-unit National Park System.”

Cassius Cash, Superintendent of Great Smoky Mountains National Park, says, “While our staff takes great pride in doing the best with what we have to take care of all the historic structures in the park and the infrastructure of roads, trails, and facilities that enable visitors to experience the Smokies, we simply do not have enough staff and funding to maintain it all in good condition. This is especially true in these times of record numbers of park visitors using roads and facilities that were never designed to support so many people.”

Rematore said the challenge for crown jewel parks like the Smokies will be for the National Park Service to put these funds to work quickly and to show measurable positive impacts to Congress and the American people.

“The National Park Service must apply these funds within its framework of planning, design, environmental and historic preservation compliance, contracting, and projects oversight, while continuing to provide annual operational services to this park's 12.5 million visitors,” she said. “We expect there will be intense pressure on the Smokies staff to

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Laurel Rematore
 CEO of Great Smoky Mountains Association

lead the National Park System in retiring its maintenance backlog within the next decade.”

The Smokies aren't the only park in the area facing mounting costs. Historic buildings, campgrounds, trails, and water systems along the Blue Ridge Parkway are also in disrepair. In fiscal year 2018, the Blue Ridge Parkway's backlog exceeded \$500 million, but the park received only \$15-20 million per year for maintenance work.

PLA's Puskar points out that, with the passage of the GAOA, “people in East Tennessee and Western North Carolina who love the Pisgah and Cherokee National Forests can celebrate because there will be deferred maintenance funds available to the U.S. Forest Service as well.” As can cities like Asheville and Knoxville, and every other town in between, that could apply for Land and Water Conservation Fund support to expand a ball field or create a new city park.

NPCA's Hunter emphasized that these funds are critically needed. “Without passage of the GAOA, the visitor experience will continue to be diminished because of aging infrastructure and substandard facilities,” he said. “The GAOA will bring our national parks into the 21st century while creating jobs and supporting gateway communities that rely on park visitors.”

The bill just passed the Senate and is headed for the House for a vote. If you're a hiker, a cyclist, a birder, a wildlife watcher, or like to fish, now is the time to speak up for our parks. Please contact your Representative and tell them to take a stand for the parks in your backyard, and vote “yea” for the Great American Outdoors Act.

Frances Figart is the editor of Smokies Life magazine and the Creative Services Director for the 34,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Reach her at frances@gsmassoc.org.

BRIEFS

More options where to carry handgun OK'd by NC legislature

RALEIGH – More people in North Carolina could carry their concealed weapons while working and while attending church in a measure given final legislative approval late Thursday.

The House and Senate voted for the compromise bill, sending it to Gov. Roy Cooper's desk.

The bill would allow people with concealed permits to carry their handgun at a religious place of worship that is also the location of a private school. A permit holder could only carry the gun outside of the school's operating hours.

Two more categories of workers also would be allowed to wear their concealed weapons in some situations. They include emergency medical technicians who work with SWAT teams. Bill manager Sen. Danny Britt of Robeson County also mentioned the case of an administrative assistant who works the front desk of a police department alone and gets permission from the police chief to carry.

Hackers disrupt online college meeting with racist language

WINSTON-SALEM – Hackers used racist language and anti-Semitic images to disrupt an online meeting of Wake Forest University employees, the school's president said.

In a message posted to the school's website, Nathan Hatch said about 500 Wake Forest staff members were on a Zoom call on Wednesday when unidentified hackers disrupted it, the Winston-Salem Journal reported Thursday.

The university's information technology staff is trying to track down the origin of the attack, Hatch said, adding that it appears that the hackers gained access to the meeting from a link posted publicly online that also contained the meeting's password.

“This was a traumatizing experience for many on the call, especially our Black colleagues, and it reinforces that we all have a role to play in protecting each other and our community from those who would seek to force their hatred upon us,” Hatch wrote.

North Carolina wildlife officials investigate shooting of bear

WASHINGTON – Wildlife officials in North Carolina are investigating the shooting of a black bear that had been seen sleeping in the community of Washington.

The bear, estimated to weigh between 250 pounds to 300 pounds, was shot Thursday, WRAL-TV reported Friday. Wildlife officers and police officers had been keeping an eye on the animal throughout the afternoon.

Wildlife officers were notified of the shooting around 5 p.m. They found the bear dead when they arrived at the scene.

The station reported that six 9 mm bullet casings were recovered from the scene. North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission Officer Ryan Biggerstaff said people in the community have not cooperated with the investigation. The state agency has offered a \$1,000 reward for information that leads to an arrest. The person responsible could face misdemeanor charges and thousands of dollars in fines.

North Carolina man charged with fatally shooting 7-year-old

FOREST CITY – A North Carolina man fatally shot a 7-year-old girl three hours after he had been released from jail on separate gun charges, police said.

Shaquille Francis, 26, was initially charged with assault with a deadly weapon after the shooting of Aaliyah Norris as she rode in a car on Tuesday in Forest City. Authorities upgraded the charge to murder after Aaliyah died Thursday, news outlets reported.

Forest City Police Chief Chris LeRoy said Aaliyah was killed during an “exchange of gunfire between cars,” but investigators do not believe she was the intended target.

Three hours before the shooting, Francis had been released from jail on a charge of assault by pointing a gun, WLOS-TV quoted LeRoy as saying.

Francis remained in jail on a \$10 million bond, news outlets reported. It was unclear whether he had an attorney who could comment on his behalf.

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