

**Elk Knob State Park Asset Development**

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## **PROJECT FOCUS**

Appalachian State University will collaborate with Elk Knob State Park to develop culturally based programming and other park assets that promote local heritage tourism in the communities of Meat Camp, Pottertown, and Sutherland, NC.

## **PROJECT DETAILS (Course number, name and instructor)**

AS 5500, Creative Placemaking in Appalachia, Tom Hansell

## **COMMUNITY PARTNER**

Elk Knob State Park

## **NEED**

The communities of Meat Camp, Pottertown, and Sutherland straddle the border of Watauga and Ashe counties in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Western North Carolina. These rural communities are separated from their respective county seat towns and are slowly losing population. Local residents view Elk Knob State Park as an asset to bring new residents and tourists into the area, but many are worried that unplanned tourism development will threaten the unique character of these mountain communities. For 2015 – 2016, the Center for Appalachian Studies will train students and coordinate with park staff to (1) establish a sustainable framework for a monthly ‘music jam’ event to attract visitors to the park; (2) coordinate art installations for selected park trails as a means to add value to existing park assets; (3) identify and coordinate human and logistical assets for event planning related to the 2016 centennial celebrations of the North Carolina park system.

Broadly, the project’s development goals are to create programming and other assets that honor the natural and cultural heritage of the area, bring new visitors to the park, enhance the experience for repeat visitors, and build assets that support sustainable development in Western North Carolina. These goals are consistent with local development needs and the long-term work of the Center in this region of western North Carolina. The Elk Knob State Park was created in 2003, with the support of local residents who were concerned about gated communities, ski slopes, and other threats to local character. The Elk Knob Community Heritage Organization (EKCHO) was founded in 2008 by community members to promote the natural and cultural heritage of the communities surrounding Elk Knob State Park. In 2015 Appalachian State University’s Center for Appalachian Studies worked with EKCHO to develop a five-year public art plan for the EKCHO area that begins to address these critical community issues. The art plan includes projects designed in consultation with staff at Elk Knob State Park. Park staff have identified a need to establish a unique identity for Elk Knob State Park, and believe that developing cultural assets is an important element of the park’s long term plan.

## **PLANNED MEETINGS WITH THE COMMUNITY PARTNER**

- June, 2015 - Site visit with Elk Knob State Park staff to discuss coordinating local community development planning with park activities, including funding initiatives
- August 27, 2015 - Students meet with Park Staff to plan events.
- September 13, 2015 - Students work at Elk Knob Community Day
- September 22, 2015 – Students meet with Park staff and EKCHO board
- September 28, 2015 - Students present public event at Elk Knob State Park
- October 18, 2015 – Students present public event at Elk Knob State Park
- November 10, 2015 – Students report on their work to Elk Knob State Park staff
- January 1, 2016 – unveiling of community art on Beech Tree Trail in conjunction with centennial of North Carolina State Parks

## **OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT**

Elk Knob State Park asset development project builds on the successful planning work completed by the 2014-2015 Appalachian Teaching Project class, which updated the 5 year public art plan for the Elk Knob State Park and surrounding communities. As a result of that plan, the Elk Knob State Park was identified as our primary partner for 2015-2016, and students will work on implementing sections of the art plan in the park.

Specific work for the fall and winter of 2015 includes:

1. Developing a pilot performance series in the Elk Knob State Park amphitheater. To accomplish this, students will spend research local music, storytelling and other performance traditions, develop a catalogue of performers available for the park, and make recommendations about how to sustain the performance series beyond the project period.
2. Producing site-specific art to help interpret local flora and fauna on the Beech Tree Trail in Elk Knob State Park. Students will research local species, co-ordinate the creation of works of art along the trail, and help develop a plan to use art to enhance the natural assets of the park. This work will be opened to the public on January 1, 2016
3. Creating a plan for an October 2016 event celebrating the centennial of the North Carolina State Park System.

Students will present their work to the public at Elk Knob State Park, to local non-profits such as the Elk Knob Community Heritage Organization, to the Appalachian Teaching Project at the annual conference, and to the annual conference of the Appalachian Studies Association.

## **GOALS AND OBJECTIVES**

The 2015-16 project is consistent with the goals and objectives of the Appalachian Regional Commission to develop the socioeconomic assets of rural Appalachian communities.

### **ARC Goals:**

- *Strengthen the capacity of Appalachian people to compete in the global economy.* Developing assets of Elk Knob State Park will add value to the local tourism economy, which is strengthened by the proximity of Elk Knob to the larger tourism economies of Ashe and Watauga Counties, NC.
- *Develop and improve the region's infrastructure.* The state park system is an important part of the region's built capital. Programming and asset development will accentuate and identify additional value in the communities surrounding the Elk Knob State park.

### **Project Specific Goals/Objectives:**

- Students will research local cultural traditions, with a focus on traditional music.
- Students will create a living document that allows park staff and other programmers to easily access local tradition bearers.
- Students will assist in the production of two events in Elk Knob State Park.
- Students will research local ecology and coordinate art work that deepens visitors experience of the local ecosystem.
- Students will collaborate with park staff to plan an event that relies on local heritage to celebrate the centennial of the North Carolina State Park system.
- Students will work with park staff and community members in meaningful, responsive ways, including learning about the community through historic site research.
- Students will build capacity in sustainable community development and help develop community capacity for autonomous action.

## **OUTCOMES**

### **Project Outcomes:**

- Development of a new cultural programming series at Elk Knob State Park
- Planning for future events at the state park that support sustainable development in the Appalachian region
- Increased cooperation and enhanced partnerships between ASU, The Elk Knob State Park, the Elk Knob Community Heritage Council, and the Appalachian Regional Commission
- Enhancement of student and community awareness of rural development work, including the role of federal agencies like the ARC
- Presentation of student work at the ATP Conference in Washington, D.C. December 4 and 5, 2015
- Presentation of student work on local television (Cable Channel 21 in Watauga County, NC) and/or local radio (WASU 90.5 FM in Boone, NC)
- Presentation at Appalachian Studies Association Conference in Shepardstown, WV, March 25-27, 2016
- Creation of a poster and other presentation assets for the conference in Washington, D.C. as well as multiple, community-based meetings
- Identification of actionable steps of collaboration between ASU and Elk Knob State Park, including the itemization of potential student internship and training opportunities
- Development of leadership and civic capacity among the students engaged in the project