

**“Rocky Fork State Park: Linking Natural and Economic resources through Oral Histories and Community Engagement”**

**East Tennessee State University  
Dr. Brian Noland  
President  
PO Box 70300  
Johnson City, TN 37614  
423-439-1000**

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**Dr. Rebecca Adkins Fletcher  
Assistant Professor of Appalachian Studies  
East Tennessee State University  
PO Box 70556  
Johnson City, TN 37614  
423-439-7994  
fletcherra1@etsu.edu**

## **PROJECT FOCUS**

East Tennessee State University (ETSU) students will collaborate with Rocky Fork State Park (RFSP) in Unicoi County, Tennessee to document oral histories of land uses and local cultural importance of the Park and adjacent land area. Working with the RFSP park rangers and members of the Friends of Rocky Fork State Park, students will assist in identifying strategies for further developing Rocky Fork State Park as a sustainable economic and cultural asset that is part of community efforts to honor local culture and broaden economic diversification.

## **PROJECT DETAILS**

### **Course**

APST 5690 Documenting Community Traditions; Rebecca Adkins Fletcher, Instructor

### **Community Partners**

Rocky Fork State Park and Rocky Fork Park Rangers Jesse Germeraad and Tim Pharis.

Friends of Rocky Fork State Park, Marie Rice, President

### **Need**

Situated in Southern Appalachia, Rocky Fork State Park (Unicoi County) became Tennessee's newest State Park in October 2012. The Park includes 2,037 acres of wilderness and is adjacent to the Cherokee National Forest. Rocky Fork has many important features that make it an important natural and cultural asset to the community.

As an Appalachian Cove Forest, Rocky Fork State Park represents one of the most biologically diverse biomes on Earth. The forest is home to abundant plant life, including mixed hardwood and hemlock trees, wildflowers, and mosses. It is also home to a variety of birds, including the Peregrine falcon, numerous salamander species, brook trout, and is part of the Unicoi Bear Reserve.

The wilderness area was an important cultural mainstay in the community long before it became a State Park. For example, serving as an economic resource, the entirety of the Park's forest was previously logged, and parts of the Park area were logged as recently as the early 2000s. Indeed, the old logging roads were repurposed into nearly twenty miles of hiking trails today. The forest area has served as a culturally important site in other ways. For example, many local residents have long used the area for recreation activities, including hiking, fishing, and hunting. Indeed, this historic and current community utilization of the forest provided important local support for the transition of the Rocky Fork area into a State Park.

Currently, Rocky Fork does not include any buildings and is in the planning stages for infrastructure (e.g. ranger station and visitor center) as well as improved hiking and biking trails.

Last year (2017-2018), ETSU's ATP course collaborated with Rocky Fork State Park to collect oral histories of land use in the Rocky Fork area and investigate ecotourism at RFSP as one piece of Unicoi County's economic development. In particular, the students developed five recommendations for the Rocky Fork State Park and community. There are:

- 1) The importance of local participation in development at Rocky Fork
- 2) Continued understanding of Rocky Fork as an economic and cultural asset for Unicoi County
- 3) Rocky Fork programming and development should include education focused on local culture and biodiversity
- 4) Continued expansion, conservation, and support of Rocky Fork
- 5) Community support is key to the success of Rocky Fork State Park

This proposal for 2018-2019 builds upon last year's findings and seeks to expand the RFSP project into a multi-year study. This proposed ATP project with Rocky Fork State Park aims to build upon the recommendations from the 2017-2018 project by continuing the collection of oral histories about land use and local importance of the Rocky Fork area and in assisting the park rangers with the development of educational programming according to their needs. This will be determined in collaboration between the students and the park rangers.

Over the years, ETSU's ATP program has developed a working relationship with several community partners in the Erwin / Unicoi County community, allowing for students and community partners to identify problems and work toward tangible ways to effect change. In addition, the partnership between the Rocky Fork State Park and ETSU's Department of Appalachian Studies that resulted in two Annual Upper East Tennessee Fiddlers Conventions in Flag Pond, TN, with the second installment held on April 28, 2018. This proposed collaboration with Rocky Fork State Park will draw upon this collaborative continuity in terms of community engagement to continue to assist in efforts toward long-term and sustainable development. In particular, this proposed project offers the following opportunities to document local history, heritage, and engage in progressive sustainable economic development initiatives:

- 1) Collaboration with Rocky Fork State Park will explore historic and current land use of the forest area that now includes the Rocky Fork State Park through oral history collection. In particular, this will include oral histories collected from locals who grew up in the area and used Rocky Fork for a multitude of purposes, including recreation, as well as those who were affiliated with the logging industry. Oral histories will better understand current and changing community concerns

regarding environmental and economic sustainability and land use in and surrounding the Park.

2) Because of the Rocky Fork State Park's two-mile proximity to the Appalachian Trail, development and promotion of Rocky Fork to day and thru-hikers provides an important opportunity for economic development around a natural resource asset. This directly ties in with the community's long-standing Ramp Festival and newly organized Great Outdoors Festival, bringing attention to the economic potential of the community's proximity to the Appalachian Trail, the local cultural importance of outdoor recreation activities and resources, and continuing debates over land use in terms of economic development.

3) This project serves the community partners in their goals of advancing the vision for Rocky Fork State Park as a site for sustainable long-term recreation. In particular, the oral history narratives regarding historic perspectives on land use and current ways community members engage with Rocky Fork will provide vital information for developing park infrastructure and activities that reflects community heritage and supports current community recreation interests. Hence, by documenting past and present community land use values, the oral histories will assist the community partners and the broader community in understanding the historic and continued importance of Rocky Fork in terms of economic and recreational value. Additionally, the oral history narratives will foster continued community interest and participation in Rocky Fork's development as an aspect of broader economic sustainability within the community. As much of Rocky Fork's infrastructure is in the development phase, assisting the community partners with oral history collection will ensure the planning and development of Rocky Fork as a sustainable outdoor recreation area remains conducive to the needs of the community. This is vital to the success of Rocky Fork as a long-term recreation and ecotourism destination. Additionally, documenting oral histories will assist the park rangers in creating appropriate educational programming for schoolchildren and community residents that reflects the importance of the park's biodiversity and natural assets and respects the community's deep attachment to the area for recreation.

Owing to the importance of Rocky Fork State Park's history and potential role in sustainable economic development for this community, this project is worthy of development into a multi-year collaborative venture. The importance of the oral history collection is important for the park rangers and will help them create focused programming and park development that will positively engage the local community and ensure future development of Rocky Fork includes community involvement and reflects historical and future community needs. Subsequent years (2019-2020) hold promise for continued assistance in infrastructure and activity development with a focus on Rocky's Fork's potential in attracting thru-hikers from the Appalachian Trail. For example, some supportive community infrastructure is already in place to support thru-hikers, including two hostels that cater to hikers. Oral history narratives among thru-hikers, local outdoor enthusiasts, and within the broader community to explore local attitudes about

recreational uses and the potential of economic development of Rocky Fork as an ecotourism destination for Appalachian Trail thru-hikers and nearby raft would further benefit development planning for Rocky Fork and community economic development efforts.

### **Overview of the project, including its central focus**

The central focus of the project is to work with the community to document and preserve significant aspects of its cultural heritage and natural history assets. In so doing, ATP students will work with community partners and assist in identifying strategies for further developing Rocky Fork State Park as an economic and cultural asset in keeping with ecotourism that is part of community efforts to honor local culture and broaden economic diversification. ATP students will draw from previous the previous year's ATP research findings and collaboratively seek ways to address current needs of Rocky Fork and the transitioning local economy.

Students will learn the principles of ethnographic fieldwork, conduct archival research, go into the field to study the community through participant-observation and to collect oral histories, and learn the skills of collaborative research and community partnerships. Following collection of the oral history narratives, students will transcribe the narratives for deposit into the ETSU Archives of Appalachia and will present their research in several venues.

### **Number and description of planned meetings with the community partner**

1) Confirmation of the RFSP rangers and Marie Rice, President of Friends of Rocky Fork State Park took place on March 12, 2018 at a Friends of Rocky Fork meeting. At this meeting, the 2017 ATP students presented their project to the group members and the park rangers. The rangers agreed to be our ATP community partner next year, and Marie Rice offered for the Friends of Rocky Fork to assist in locating interview participants and provide a place for the interviews to occur. Further communication with the community partners will take place during summer 2018.

2) Early in the course, students and community partners will have an initial orientation meeting. This may include the community partners visiting the classroom to introduce Rocky Fork State Park's important features to students and to brainstorm possible activities and projects that play to the strengths of this student group and will assist the Park's development and community outreach.

3) ATP students will visit Rocky Fork State Park in the first few weeks of the course. This initial site visit will enable them to experience the Park first-hand and allow students to better understand the needs described by the Park rangers.

4) Students will then make at least two or three visits to the community to conduct oral history interviews, conduct participant-observation at the Park and in the community, and continue dialogue with community partners as they conduct the interviews and complete their assessments of their community visits.

5) At the end of the semester, students will meet with community partners to present their report and to share the poster and presentation from the ATP conference.

## **Goals/Objectives**

ETSU's Documenting Community Traditions course is meant to enable students to grapple with the question, "How do we build community capacity in order to shape a positive future for Appalachia?" In doing this, the course is designed to primarily support Goals Four and Five from the ARC Strategic Plan: (1) By working with the community to document oral history and develop strategies for using that history to promote cultural heritage tourism the project directly supports Goal Four, which is to "strengthen Appalachia's community and economic development potential by leveraging the Region's natural and cultural heritage assets." (2) By engaging students in a community-based ethnographic learning experience, the project is designed to support Goal Five, which is to "build the capacity and skills of current and next-generation leaders and organizations to innovate, collaborate, and advance community and economic development."

In support of these strategic goals, the proposed course has several primary goals:

- To help students develop leadership skills and awareness of community assets that can foster sustainability.
- To engage students as active learners and participants in community projects.
- To engage students in active research to assist communities in creative approaches to sustainability through asset development.
- To equip students with the tools to conduct additional ethnographic field research, focusing on oral history.

A number of student-centered learning activities will support the course goals above. These objectives also help to fulfill the course guidelines and project goals of the ATP Scope of Work. In this course, students will:

- Complete archival and other research to survey community history and demographic data, focusing on the issues of land use and ecotourism.
- Conduct oral history interviews (approximately 2 interviews per student, anticipating 8-10 total interviews) and compile results.
- Transcribe oral history interviews for deposit into the ETSU archives.
- Actively engage with a community partner.
- Create a poster for presentation at the Washington, D.C. conference.
- Present their research at the ATP conference in Washington, D.C., on November 30-December 1, 2018.
- Present their research to the community partners.
- Present a poster session, panel discussion, or formal session at the Appalachian Studies Association's Annual Conference in March 2019.

## PROJECT IMPACT

As a result of this collaborative project, we hope to address the question “What changes do you hope will occur in the community as a result of this project?” in the following ways:

- (1) Increased awareness of natural and cultural resources as a means of sustainable economic diversification that is respectful of cultural heritage and global economic transformation.
- (2) Enhanced cooperation and unity among diverse community members, groups, and organizations in the celebration of cultural heritage and natural resource assets.
- (3) Further development of creative strategies to use this aspect of the community’s history to promote ecotourism. In keeping with the primary needs of the park rangers for oral history material, this project will prioritize oral history collection and analysis to meet the primary needs of the community partners. In particular, DCT students will analyze oral histories for material that helps tell the cultural and historic importance of RFSP. Students will write vignettes about specific people, activities, or stories from the interviews that will then be used to assist the park rangers and Friends of RFSP promote the park. I anticipate the vignettes will be used in informational displays, such as the creation of a storyboard, for the planned visitor’s center or to create scripts for the park rangers for new cultural interpretation events for the public on one of the Rocky Fork State Park’s Saturday activity days. These vignettes may also assist in public relations efforts to promote RFSP to hikers and local residents.