

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

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FINAL REPORT NARRATIVE

Title of Project: "Rocky Fork State Park: Linking Natural and Economic resources through Oral Histories and Community Engagement"

Grant Period: January 1, 2017-June 30, 2018

Grantee Name: East Tennessee State University

Project Director: Rebecca Adkins Fletcher

DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT

East Tennessee State University (ETSU) students collaborated with Rocky Fork State Park 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 park rangers, students completed oral history interviews and began identifying themes regarding historical land use and cultural importance as well as 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 ACTIVITIES

The project completed its objectives through the following active-learning and community engagement activities:

- Students spent time in class learning the basic principles of ethnographic field research, participant-observation, field note writing, oral history interviewing and transcription, ecotourism, and economic development in the region.
- On September 14, 2017 students visited the Rocky Fork State Park in Unicoi County, TN and experienced a guided tour by park Ranger, Jesse Germeraad
- On September 21, 2017 students visited the Archives of Appalachia, part of the Center for Appalachian Studies and Services. Students were introduced to the Carolina, Clinchfield, and Ohio Railway Records Collection.
- On October 7th, students attended the Erwin Apple Festival to conduct participant-observation regarding local culture and tourism. They used this experience to recruit participants for interviews as well as ask vendors about tourism in the area.
- Between September 28th and November 2nd each student completed 1-2 oral history interviews (total of seven interviews completed) with a community research participant, completed the transcript of this interview, and (to enhance transcription accuracy) edited a student colleague's transcript.

- On October 5th, Dr. Lance Kinney (Associate Professor, University of Alabama) visited the class as a guest lecturer. He discussed a riverfront tourism re-development project in his hometown of Phenix City, AL/Columbus, GA that offered points of comparison with Unicoi County. Dr. Kinney also showed a one-hour documentary about this riverfront redevelopment, "Chattahoochee Unplugged," that details the history of the project and included social and historical elements. The class discussed the film and made comparisons between the Chattahoochee and Unicoi County economic development projects.
- Students individually wrote conference abstracts for a poster submission to the Appalachian Studies Association (ASA) conference. They worked together to edit their individual abstracts into a collective, single abstract that was submitted (and later accepted) to the ASA conference.
- October 23, 2017, students met with RFSP ranger Tim Pharis (a graduate of the Department of Appalachian Studies Master's Program) to discuss the project. In particular they asked questions about the creation of the park, the community's response to the park, and received suggestions for key interview participants.
- October 23, 2017, following the meeting with Tim Pharis, students attended a Unicoi County County Commission meeting to witness first-hand the process of local politics and gain understanding of current economic development issues in the community.
- Students wrote their own presentation "scripts" to discuss themes from the research. They also created accompanying power point slides and engaged in collaborative editing toward final versions of the presentation for the conference presentation in D.C.
- November 6th, students attended a meeting of the Friends of Rocky Fork State Park (<http://www.rockyforkfriends.org/>), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that supports the Park. This allowed the students to meet some of the most supportive and active community members, gather information about current events and issues regarding RFSP, and to recruit potential interview participants.
- December 1-2, 2017, students presented their research and activities at the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) annual Appalachian Teaching Project conference in Washington, D.C.
- March 12th, 2018 the students presented their research to the Friends of Rocky Fork State Park group at their monthly meeting at the Flag Pond Community Center.
- April 5-8, 2018, the students in the ATP course attended the Appalachian Studies Association annual conference in Cincinnati, OH and presented their research poster.
- The ASA conference poster was displayed at the 2nd Annual Upper East Tennessee Fiddlers Convention in Flag Pond, TN, on April 27-28, 2018. This Convention is sponsored by the Department of Appalachian Studies and the Friends of Rocky Fork State Park.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

The Documenting Community Traditions course asks students to address the question, "How do we build community capacity in order to shape a positive future for Appalachia?" In so doing, the 2017-2018 ETSU project's main goal for 2017 was the collection of oral history narratives that focus on past and present land use values that can inform future development of Rocky Fork State Park as part of Unicoi County's economic development. These narratives will assist the rangers in pertinent, culturally appropriate and historically accurate programming regarding land use and importance of RFSP in school visits, storytelling events in the park, educational hikes, and community talks. In addition to the interview sessions, the students also participated in five trips into the community to attend events and meet with park rangers.

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 ecotourism 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 course met the following primary goals:

- 1) Students developed leadership skills and awareness of community assets that can foster sustainability.
- 2) Students were active learners and participants in community projects.
- 3) Students participated in active research to assist communities in creative approaches to sustainability through asset development.
- 4) Students learned tools to conduct additional ethnographic field research, focusing on oral history.

The project met the required goals and objectives specified by the ATP. Students learned valuable research, leadership, and community engagement skills that will be essential to them as help develop sustainable communities in the future.

PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED

The project met all of required goals, with one minor deviation from the original proposal. Initially we had proposed a more tangible product, in addition to the oral histories, would be created through collaboration between the students and park rangers. However, in a meeting with Tim Pharis (October 23) to discuss the possibilities and to listen to the rangers' needs, it was clear that the priorities for the rangers were oral history material that they can use for other park programming. Because the rangers are limited in terms of promotional materials due to the Park Service restrictions, ideas the students had for "get the word out" materials were not feasible. In addition, Pharis stated that, since the park is in its early stages of development, it is near capacity with what it can handle in terms of

visitors due to staff and infrastructural limitations, so efforts to increase volume at the park would create additional problems at this time. The students respected the needs of the community partners and focused on oral history collection.

We encountered an interesting problem in contacting potential interviewees. Although Tim Pharis gave the students several names of potential "old-timer" interviewees, it was difficult to reach them by phone. The class finally realized that three of the four students had out of state phone numbers, so residents may have avoided answering these calls, assuming they were sales calls. Students began calling from local campus numbers and scheduled interviews. Students were also active in recruiting participants on their own, including recruiting from the Apple Festival and other individuals met during visits into the community. However, the participants the students recruited on their own were not the rangers' most desired participants (e.g. loggers), so the 2018 DCT interviews will seek to recruit this most valued population for the rangers.

Due to this being the first year of the multi-year project, this year laid the groundwork for community engagement in RFSP. By making contacts with the Friends of Rocky Fork State Park group, this should allow for more efficient scheduling of interview participants and time to develop a storyboard or scripts for cultural interpretation programming.

The major challenge of the project, as in previous years, was the fast pace necessary to complete all components, such as: site visits, meeting with community partners, oral histories, data analysis, poster production, and coordinating the final community presentation.

PROGRAM CONTINUATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

The prospects for continuation and sustainability of an ATP project in this community are excellent. ETSU's DCT course and Appalachian Studies faculty have spent the past decade building relationships across various sectors of this community. While this year (2017) saw the development of a new project with RFSP, it drew upon many relationships developed over these many years.

This year, the current project with RFSP laid the groundwork for community involvement centered around this park and has created a network upon which 2018 ATP students can quickly gather interviews and work toward a more tangible product (storyboard or scripts for cultural interpretation) that will serve the rangers and the Friends of Rocky Fork as they seek continued community engagement with the park's development in line with community values and needs.

The prospects for continuation and sustainability of ATP at ETSU are also excellent. With the support of the Center for Appalachian Studies and Services, the Appalachian Studies faculty, and other university and community partners, ETSU is well situated and excited to continue the Appalachian Teaching Project.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The main finding of this research project is that the community recommendations and concerns, as expressed in oral history narratives, largely align with the tenets of ecotourism as described by Al Fritsch and Kristin Johannsen in *Ecotourism in Appalachia: Marketing the Mountains* (University Press of Kentucky, 2004). This is best reflected in the “not Gatlinburg” refrain residents used to describe what they did not want the Rocky Fork area to become in terms of economic development.

Following this, the ATP students offer the following recommendations for the future of this community’s engagement with Rocky Fork State Park:

- Continued and strengthened local participation in wilderness conservation and Rocky Fork State Park development and decision-making
- Increased community voice in further situating Rocky Fork as one aspect of Unicoi County’s broader development plan for ecotourism and cultural heritage tourism
- Continued and strengthened education programs focused on local culture and biodiversity
- Continued expansion, conversation, and support of Rocky Fork through community collaboration and the Friends of Rocky Fork State Park Group
- Continued community support through informed cultural interpretation of the Rocky Fork area

ETSU submitted a proposal for 2018 to allow the DCT class, through the Appalachian Teaching Project, to continue the work of this project. Indeed, the continuation of oral history narrative collection will support the completion of these recommendations.

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

- (1) Assisting in 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) Encouraging cooperation and unity among diverse community members, groups, and organizations in the celebration of cultural heritage and natural resource assets.
- (3) Continuing to engage with the community by continuing this project’s goal of collecting oral history narratives that will assist further development of creative strategies that exhibit the community’s history in the promotion of ecotourism as a vital part of community development.

ATTACHMENTS

- 1) DCT students with RFSP Rangers at Rocky Fork State Park (2017)
- 2) DCT at Friends of Rocky Fork State Park (2017)
- 3) DCT in Washington D.C., ATP conference (December 2017)
- 4) DCT at Appalachian Studies Conference, (April 2018)
- 5) DCT at Appalachian Studies Conference, (April 2018b)