



Be On Guard in the Great Outdoors

By George McDaniel
ANP NEWS

Sunday, January 1, was not only the first day of the new year, it was also the occasion of the latest "First Day Hikes," the latest installment in a hiking program sponsored by America's national and state parks along with the American Hiking Society. My local North Carolina state park, the William B. Umstead SP, sponsored a hike along one of my favorite trails in the park, the Potts Branch Trail.

America is a land of hikers and backpackers. US government statistics estimate that more than 40 million Americans have hiked or backpacked in the past 12 months. The most recent estimates of total trail mileage on federal lands top 193,000, while hiking trails in the more than 10,000 state park units cover more than 42,000 miles. The United States has many of the longest hiking trails in the world, including the Eastern Continental Trail (which incorporates the entire Appalachian Trail) at 5,400 miles, the American Discovery Trail (6,800 miles), and the Great Western Loop (6,875 miles). Regardless of where you live, in the country or in a major urban area, the chances are that a wealth of hiking possibilities are just outside your door.



Hiking—if defined as traveling by foot through woods or other roadless areas—has existed in America for as long as humans. Trails themselves, curiously enough, have been around even longer. Consider, for example, the Natchez Trace Trail, which follows sporadically the 444-mile Natchez Trace Parkway in Tennessee, Alabama, and Mississippi. Both the trail and the parkway are part of the famous Natchez Trace, an ancient pathway created initially in pre-human times by animals migrating along a geologic ridge line between the Mississippi River and the salt licks of what is now middle Tennessee. Later, Indians such as the Mississippi Mound Builders traveled the Trace beginning around 800 BC. Today, the Natchez Trace Trail makes it possible for anyone to re-create part of those journeys.



Our country's many state parks provide readily available healthful and inexpensive hiking and other outdoor activities to almost all citizens. Take, for example, the Umstead State Park, I mentioned above. Covering 5,599 acres, it abuts the city limits of Raleigh, a capital city of more than a half million residents and the 40th largest city in America. Yet Umstead SP hosts 22 miles of hiking, bridle, and bicycling trails, and there are areas in its interior that seem as remote as the Yukon. Scarcely five miles from my home, it has afforded me many days exploring its creeks, hills, and lakes. My local running group sponsors regular training runs along its bridle and hiking trails, while the Umstead Marathon and the Umstead 100-miler challenge even the fittest athletes every spring.

While hiking opportunities abound in the US, not all is as it should be. Many of our parks, especially those along and near our southwestern border with Mexico, are threatened by large numbers of illegal aliens using them as pathways into the heartland. The Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in Arizona, for example, has in recent years seen massive littering, erosion, and destruction of animal habitat caused by illegals, many of whom are armed and are carrying drugs. It is estimated that in Arizona as a whole, up to 200 tons of waste are dumped on the state by illegal immigrants each year. Trash in the form of dirty diapers, non-biodegradable plastic, and even human waste and abandoned vehicles litter large stretches of our parks and surrounding desert. If something is not done to impede the plundering and abuse of our land by illegal entrants, we may one day lose a large portion of an invaluable heritage. Enjoy the trails, enjoy the land and remember that we must protect it as we hold it in trust for the next generation.



Litter on Immigration route in Arizona, Photo credit Tuscon Weekly

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