

*It started on Maryland's Eastern Shore in 2008
and now has come to Western Maryland's*

GARRETT COUNTY and DEEP CREEK LAKE



MARYLAND PARK QUEST 2009



Above: All 37 teams competing in the 2008 Park Quest Finale pose for a group picture. **Right:** A member of the Mighty Four, winners of Park Quest 2008, shows off their team's enthusiasm for Park Quest.

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Eastern Shore photos courtesy:
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IN MAY OF 2008, the Maryland Park Service (MPS), an agency in the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR), unveiled a new family-oriented program entitled Park Quest East. The program encouraged families to take to the outdoors and challenge themselves in exploring outdoor recreational activities in Maryland State Parks. When the program concluded two months later, almost 160 families had registered and the Park Quest program was being hailed as one of DNR's most successful programs in years.

Park Quest was the vision of John Ohler, Manager of Tuckahoe State Park, and Gary Adelhardt, Manager of Pocomoke River State Park. Both veteran Rangers (and fathers), they had grown increasingly concerned with the lack of connection today's children have with the outdoors. From computer and video games, to scheduling conflicts, to an urbanizing society, to an elevated and often unfounded fear of the outdoors; kids have been losing touch with the natural world. The days when young people left home in the morning to spend the day exploring the wilds beyond their backyard fence have been replaced by X-Box marathons

and 6 a.m. soccer practices. We now risk raising a generation of children who have little or no appreciation for the significance of their natural resources or the issues that threaten them. This phenomenon has become a concern of many leaders in the field of natural resource management.

Journalist and author Richard Louv finally brought this issue to the public consciousness in his 2005 book "Last Child in the Woods," an essay on the growing need to reconnect children and nature and to battle what he coined "nature deficit disorder." As a result, a national movement has taken hold. The federal No Child Left Inside Act has created grant opportunities for environmental education programs and promotes environmental literacy in public schools throughout the nation. Here in Maryland, the Partnership for Children in Nature was established by Governor Martin O'Malley's Executive Order to strengthen children's connection with the natural world and enhance their knowledge about environmental issues.



Ranger Jessica Conley shows the Fearless Foxes and the Wandering Wootens a box turtle during the Quest at Martinak.

Rangers Ohler and Adelhardt had an idea that would get people, young and old, back outside to experience their natural resources in a non-threatening, family-oriented manner. The program, set in Maryland's Eastern Shore's state parks, offered families opportunities to hike, canoe, and explore the area's woodlands, waterways and public lands at their own pace and individual comfort level. Entitled Park Quest East, each park offered an activity, or "Quest," unique to its area and participating families were issued a special Park Quest Passport that was stamped upon completion of each activity. As an incentive, families that completed activities at each of the parks were eligible for a grand finale event, complete with games, competitions and prize drawings. The only requirement of the Park Quest program was that each team must include at least one member under 16 years of age and one adult.

The idea came to fruition when Park Quest kicked off on May 24, 2008. Registration for the program was simple, with families simply going online to the DNR website to register. A package of information, including their Passport, was then mailed out to them. Encouraged to adopt a flashy, fun moniker, teams were then free to begin their Quest at their leisure. The Quest continued for 8 weeks and families completed their activities in any order, participating in as many on any single day as was convenient. Finally, and perhaps most important, there was no charge for entry into the Park Quest program.

As part of the finale event, teams participated in a park recognition photo game, a casting competition, a poker-based Ranger Round-Up, a timed tent assembly and a nature matching quest. Four grand-prize packages, each based on a different outdoor recreation theme (fishing, biking, boating and camping) were awarded to the winners, and every team walked away with a DNR bag full of goodies and souvenirs of the experience.

"It was a wonderful event and without a doubt we will be participating next year," said Maureen Greenlees,

a member of the Mighty Four Team from Salisbury. The team took first place in the day's competitions and walked away with four bicycles, helmets and bike racks.

The much-acclaimed Park Quest returns in 2009, this time expanding from the Eastern Shore into Southern, Central and Western Maryland. Fourteen parks from around the state are slated to take part, with five of them scheduled to be in the Western region. History will be the central theme at Gambrill and Washington Monument State Parks in Frederick County. Teams visiting Gambrill will explore the legacy of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), while those teams taking the Quest at Washington Monument will have fun learning more about the Father of Our Country.

A biking adventure awaits Quest teams along the Western Maryland Rail Trail in Washington County. If technology is your thing, a fun and challenging GPS activity, called geocaching, will be the focus at Deep Creek Lake State Park in Garrett County. Participants find treasures, called "caches", using the hand-held GPS (Global Positioning System) unit to plot map coordinates. Participants new to geocaching can attend one of our training programs with a naturalist and then set out on your own to complete our cache puzzle. If you are an experienced cacher the quest puzzle sheet may be picked up at the Discovery Center along with GPS units if you do not have your own. Either way this is an interesting way to see Deep Creek Lake State Park that is fun for the entire family.

Finally, no Western Maryland experience would be complete without a visit to the wild and scenic waterfalls at Swallow Falls State Park, also in Garrett County. The Quest will take you along the trail between the falls, and along the way, you will need to look for clues to answer questions as part of your Quest. The answers will also help participants learn more about the unique ecological aspects of the park, as well as some of the history of the area that made the park the special attraction that it is. Once the Quest is completed, participants will need to take their answers to the park office to have them verified by the park staff. If all are correct, they will receive a stamp stating that all requirements were met for that Quest.

Elsewhere across Maryland, this year's Park Quest activities will include visiting a lighthouse, canoeing/kayaking, disc golf, hiking, birding, and much more. Participating teams must complete at least eight of the Quests to be eligible for the grand finale, which will be held at Tuckahoe State Park on August 8, 2009. Rules and conditions for participating in the Quest will be similar to last year's.

Starting in April, interested participants can learn more and register for Park Quest online at www.dnr.state.md.us/publiclands/parkquest/ or by contacting the Maryland Park Service at 410-260-8156 between the hours of 9 a.m. and 4 p.m., Monday through Friday. Park Quest will be limited to the first 300 teams that register. The Quest officially begins on May 9 and ends on July 26. As they were last year, Park Quest teams will be asked to document their experiences on the Park Quest website (with the goal for the team to visit at least 8 of 14 designated Maryland State Parks across the state and complete the Quest challenge in that park). In addition, DNR, in partnership with Maryland Public Television (MPT), will be offering teams the opportunity to record video of their Quests.

Ultimately, the success of Park Quest depends on the commitment of Marylander families to get outside and get back in touch with the natural environment. When established at a young age, a respect for and an appreciation of the natural world generally continues for life, and is reflected in the care and attention provided for the stewardship of our flora, fauna and native landscapes. This, in turn, is often passed down and nurtured in successive generations and proves critical to the future protection of these resources. Maryland Park Quest is one way that DNR and the Maryland Park Service are ensuring that the treasured natural resources they work so hard to protect and promote do not go unappreciated by future generations.



Top: Ranger John Fitzroy helps a Park Quest team during the Nature Quest competition at the Finale.

Middle: Ranger Jessica Conley monitors the casting competition at the Park Quest Finale.

Bottom: A family taking advantage of the biking paths at Herrington Manor State Park. See the website www.dnr.state.md.us/publiclands/parkquest/ to see which parks offer family biking quests.



Visit Garrett County State Parks
on the new Virtual Tour Site at
DeepCreekDiscoveries.com