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Recreation and Nature Education at a City-Owned Nature Preserve: Service
Placement Experiences at Bays Mountain Park, Spring 2019

An undergraduate English major did a service placement at Bays Mountain Park for her environmental studies capstone project. She experienced a range of activities from feeding wolves to outreach programs.

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Introduction

It was my first day at Bays Mountain Park, and I was slicing open packages of horse meat wondering what I had gotten myself into. As I listened to a volunteer, John, and the naturalist, Rhonda Goins, tell me about what we were doing and how the afternoon would go, I tried to pretend like I knew what I was doing. When the giant, black tub was full of bloody meat, we prepared a second, much smaller bucket in a similar fashion. It was then time to help with my first assigned task as an intern for my service placement. We loaded the buckets into the back of Rhonda's truck, and then, at a leisurely pace, John and I walked over to the enclosure. It was time to feed the wolves.

As someone who has always had an irrational fear of wolves, being thrown into this task on my very first day was quite nerve-wracking and out of my comfort zone. Ultimately though, it was actually kind of fun and an interesting experience as I learned a little bit about the wolves and the park as a whole. Bays Mountains Park is unique because it is actually a city-owned nature preserve that covers approximately 3,550 acres of land. Within this area, the park features hiking trails, a planetarium, an adventure course and zipline, animal habitats, a nature center, herpetarium, barge rides, a lake, and more ("Park History"). It is pretty unusual for a city-owned park to be so large and offer such a variety of activities, and that is what makes Bays Mountain Park such a unique place. Through all the opportunities available at the park, visitors are offered recreational experiences as well as educational experiences.

For my service placement, I knew I wanted to work somewhere that combined the environment with educational opportunities. I think it is important for individuals to experience the natural world uninterrupted and to also learn about topics such as conservation, useful outdoor skills, and about animals in our region. Bays Mountain Park was the perfect place to

combine all of these topics. Before heading to the park, I did not know much about Kingsport other than that it smells due to the Eastman and Domtar Paper factories. However, Bays Mountain escapes the smells produced by these factories, and visitors are truly able to enjoy the nature around them. Throughout my time there, I had the opportunity to actively help with the services the park provides, and through these interactions, I experienced how the public utilizes Bays Mountain Park and appreciates the nature and programs. The park truly offers recreational and educational opportunities in a way that fosters an appreciation for nature in individuals that will motivate them to protect the environment.

According to the website, Bays Mountain Park has been used for a variety of activities by the locals since the 1900s, and one of its main uses for a time was a reservoir constructed in 1917



Figure 1. Lake at Bays Mountain from Author's Picture

that provided Kingsport with water until 1944. Today, that reservoir is the 44-acre lake featured at Bays Mountain Park. Between 1944 and 1965, the locals in the area used Bays Mountain for a

variety of activities such as early hiking, fishing, and timber. With the area being used in so many ways by the locals, it seemed logical to preserve the mountain in some way. In 1965, the mayor of Kingsport, Hugh Rule, created a committee to investigate Bays Mountain becoming a park. Following the report, the City of Kingsport hired an individual to design the park.

Additionally, it was suggested that the mountain become a nature preserve so that hiking, research, leisure activities, and nature programs could take place (“Park History”). Development of the park began in 1968, and throughout the next few years, the park would grow with the construction of the nature center and planetarium in 1970. Since then, the park has continued to grow with the addition of animal habitats, Farmstead Museum, and adventure course (“Park History”).

Park Naturalists and Other Individuals

Bays Mountain Park has so much to offer that there are many different components to what the naturalists, volunteers, interns, and other workers have to do. Through my time as an intern, I have had many of these experiences and met many individuals who help run the park. Megan Krager is the senior naturalist at the park, and she is the individual that I had the most contact with as she helped organize my schedule and assign tasks to me. Megan stands at about 5’5” and walks with a spring in her step. Wearing the standard naturalist uniform of a khaki-colored shirt and dark green pants, Megan is easily recognized as a person who knows what is going on in the park. Her mind is always going a million miles per minute as she carefully watches over everything, and she comes off as an extrovert as she is friendly and outgoing. Megan does not have a problem holding a conversation with anyone at any time, and that skill greatly benefits her in the job.

As I worked with her, I learned that Megan's career did not start at Bays Mountain Park. She previously worked in Virginia at Natural Tunnel State Park which features a naturally produced tunnel that is used as a railroad tunnel. About two years ago, Megan left Virginia and came to work for Bays Mountain Park. As the senior naturalist, Megan has a number of responsibilities at the park including the animals, education, and natural resources. As a result, she always seems to be on the run and moving from one task to another.



Figure 2. Megan Krager at Nature Tunnel State Park from <https://soundcloud.com/roadside-theater/interview-with-megan-krager/reposts>

From my experience, it seems that Megan takes responsibility for a number of the outreach booths. The purpose of the booths is to inform the community about the park and its resources. I assisted Megan with two booths, one at the Gray Fossil Site and the other at George Washington Elementary School, and through these, I have seen how passionate and excited Megan is about the park. During these events, the booth focuses on the information and pamphlets for interested individuals, and it also has interactive items such as pelts, a turtle shell,

a beaver tail, bird wings, and other such objects for kids and adults alike to discover. When interacting with the items, Megan can interact with a small crowd in a way that gets them excited and interested in the questions she is asking them; such as what type of animal the pelt represents. Through the interest she generates, she is able to connect everything back to Bays Mountain Park and everything it has to offer individuals with all their different interests. Overall, Megan is dedicated to the park, its success, and her role in it all.

The other naturalist that I have worked with somewhat frequently is Rhonda Goins. Rhonda has a long history with the park, and it is apparent that she deeply loves her job and the work she does. With curly, shoulder-length, black hair, Rhonda moves with a sense of purpose. In the same uniform as Megan, Rhonda looks and is a fountain of knowledge as she has years and years of experience at the park. Though somewhere around middle-age, Rhonda is still sprightly and ready to tackle every aspect of her job. I met Rhonda on my very first day as she is the naturalist in charge of the wolf habitat.

Therefore, she introduced me to the preparation of the



Figure 3. Rhonda Goins with a Wolf Pup in 2007 from <http://www.timesnews.net/News/2013/03/19/Four-pups-to-expand-Bays-Mountain-wolf-pack>

wolves' food and many interesting facts about them. Rhonda also works closely with the reptiles and amphibians in the herpetarium, and she even offers programs to the public focusing on the wolves, reptiles, and the general ecosystem.

According to her LinkedIn profile, Rhonda has worked at the park for nearly 20 years as she started as a naturalist in October of 1999. She graduated from ETSU in 1998 with a Bachelor of Science in biology, and it is clear in her 20 years at the park that she has gained a lot of knowledge. Rhonda's love for what she does extends into her personal life as she shared with me that she is trying to receive licensure to rehabilitate injured animals. From what I gather, it does not seem a stretch to say that Rhonda loves animals a little more than people, so she is hoping to help some more animals through the rehabilitation avenue. Rhonda's love for animals, amphibians, and even arachnids is evident as she spends her days surrounded by them and working with them, and she currently even has a tarantula named Pink in her office. Through her desire to rehabilitate animals, Rhonda has a continued love of her job, and her excitement comes through when she is teaching individuals through her programs and interactions.

John is an older individual that works with Rhonda quite a bit as he is a volunteer at the park who mostly works with the wolves. John is an elderly gentleman who is still very active, and he has been volunteering at Bays Mountain Park for about three years now. He started as a volunteer with the introduction of the most recent wolf pack as he became a puppy parent for the then newly acquired wolf pups. From his time as a puppy parent, John has a deep love for the wolves at the park, and I experienced his passion and love for them when I worked with him on multiple feedings for the wolves. John is from Bristol, about 20 miles from Kingsport, but he drives up to Bays Mountain Park two times every week to help with the feedings on Tuesdays and Fridays. When I worked with John, he was excited to share facts about wolves with me, such as their ability to have a 1,200-1,500 pounds of pressure bite force, and he had personal stories for each wolf in the pack. When together, Rhonda and John are a plethora of information about wolves and the pack dynamics at Bays Mountain Park.

Though I have spent most of my time working with Megan, Rhonda, and John, I have encountered many other individuals who help make Bays Mountain Park run and offer the recreational and educational experiences. Mark Kilgore is another naturalist at the park, and he helps facilitate programs and many of the events surrounding the zipline and adventure course. Mark is a tall man who has a goofy personality and loves to joke with those around him. Amy, Sharon, and Michael are all individuals who work at the front desk in the Nature Center, and they run the registers for tickets, the gift shop, and memberships. However, they are also the frontline for questions about the park, events that are happening, and other information that visitors may need. Edgar is another intern who has been there for about two years, and he is a twenty-something individual with an old soul. Edgar helps the park with the planetarium and other astronomical programs such as the sun watch. Through the various tasks I was assigned and assisted with, I have met each of these people, and they all seem to love the park and have some passion for one or more aspects of it. While there are many individuals that I do not know, the park would not be what it is without everyone's efforts.

Animals

One of the biggest draws for Bays Mountain Park for many individuals is the animal habitats. The park features several animal habitats that introduce visitors to a range of animals they may not otherwise encounter face to face out in the wild. The habitats include bobcats, a red fox, deer, an otter, wolves, and raptors. As an intern, I had the opportunity to get closer to the animals as I helped feed them all, other than the raptors, and the animals are one of the ways that Bays Mountain Park offers educational opportunities to its visitors. Through programs that focus on a specific animal or habitat, the park informs visitors about species that are native to their

region. Some examples of the nature programs that focus on the animals include: Snakes Alive, Wolf Howling, Raptor Tour, Local Mammals, and What Does the Fox Say. Each of these programs are educational to visitors while still entertaining. While working at the park, I often heard visitors discussing the various animals and which ones are their favorites. From what I overheard, the wolves appear to be the favorites by far. Visitors are fascinated by them and love watching the wolves in their habitat.

Wolves

At this time, Bays Mountain Park has featured wolves for over 20 years as the wolf habitat was introduced to the park in 1992 (“Park History”). Currently, the park is on about its fifth pack of wolves since their initial introduction. While the park has acquired its various animals in a number of different ways, the wolves are typically purchased from a breeder. When questioning Megan about the wolf-acquisition process, she said that they can buy wolves from breeders in a few different places, but she mentioned Missouri specifically. Megan told me a story about Rhonda having to drive to Missouri to pick up the current pack, and then drive back to Kingsport with a bunch of wolf puppies, amounting to seven, in the back of her car in cages. The wolves cannot be shipped to the park because they are classified as dangerous predators which means they are not allowed to travel on a plane, even as pups. Therefore, someone has to drive to pick them up for transportation.

Currently at Bays Mountain Park, there are 8 wolves. Seven of them are about two or three years old, and they are the pack that Rhonda had to drive to pick up. Rhonda and John, the volunteer, helped raise the wolf pups, and that is how John became a volunteer through the Puppy Parent program. As the wolves are now fully grown, no one is allowed to directly interact

with them anymore, but John swears that they still recognize him and that he has a special connection with them.

Now, the eighth wolf now has to be separated from the pack of 7 because she is about 12 years old, and the younger wolves no longer interact with her in a safe way. Additionally, with this wolf's old age, some health problems are inevitable. As Rhonda explained to me, wolves do not typically live to be about 12 years old in the wild, so the wolf at the park has a few health issues. To keep her as healthy as possible, she is fed medication packed in the middle of a ball of raw horse meat. The meds are very effective as they keep her active and moving, but the wolf's need for human intervention to stay healthy is a form of extreme conservation reliance. Since the wolf directly depends on human involvement to stay alive and healthy, she would most likely not be alive if she was living in the wild. However, even though the wolf depends on the meds, Rhonda says there is a noticeable difference with the medications the wolf is taking.

To generate more public interest in the wolves, the feedings are always done at the scheduled time of 2pm every Tuesday and Friday. The program, named Dining with the Wolves, is free to the public, and individuals who are interested come to the wolf habitat at 2pm. A naturalist is always present and stays with the visitors at the wooden bleachers next to the fence. While the volunteers, interns, or other workers are feeding the wolves, the naturalist will be interacting with the public, answering any questions, and relaying information about wolves in general and the pack specifically. The public is free to interact by asking questions or simply watching the wolves as they feed. Since the wolves are such a big attraction at Bays Mountain, there is usually a group at the feedings during the warmer months. They enjoy watching the feeding because they have the opportunity to observe the wolves in a way they normally do not, and they can also learn more about wolves from an expert. Since the wolves have to be fed either

way, the park is able to generate more interest and create more opportunities to interact directly with the public by making feedings a scheduled event for visitors.



Figure 4. Wolf at Fence from Author's Picture



Figure 5. Wolf Submitting from Author's Picture

I helped feed the wolves multiple times, and each time I did it, we fed them something different. Bays Mountain Park gets the meat for their wolves from a few different sources. My first time feeding them, we used packages of horse meat that the park bought. The horse meat comes ground up in plastic wrappers, and we simply had to cut the packs open and dump them in a bucket. Since no one is allowed in the actual wolf habitat, there is a wooden ramp running along the fence, and whoever is feeding the wolves goes up this ramp and throws the food over. In the case of the horse meat, we take a fist-sized chunk and then throw it over the fence. Depending on how hungry they are, the wolves may or may not be interested in this meat.

The wolves do not only consist on this diet of horse meat. Instead, they sometimes receive other types of meat depending on if anything has been donated or given to the park. Sometimes, hunters that have too much kill will donate their catches to the park. These donations usually consist of deer. Sometimes, individuals who live in or around Kingsport will donate some other type of animal if it dies or has to be put down. For example, on my first day, cuts off llama were being brought into the freezer. Rhonda said a local had llamas and that one unexpectedly broke its back, so instead of just putting it down and disposing of it, the owner thought of the park and that the wolves may like the meat. The park has also received pigs in a similar manner.

Additionally, sometimes roadkill will be brought in by animal control in Kingsport. The second time I helped feed the wolves, animal control brought in a whole deer that had been hit. As a fresh kill that day, Rhonda elected to feed the whole deer to the wolves that day. As someone who does not do well with gore and blood, I personally elected to not watch the wolves tear apart the deer. However, the volunteer that helped me feed did watch, and the visitors that were present also observed, though from a farther distance since they are not allowed up the ramp. I was surprised by how many different ways Bays Mountain Park can receive its meat for the wolves, but it is nice to know that the community sometimes supports the park in that way.

Jamie the Fox

Another popular animal at the park is Jamie the fox. Jamie was raised by humans in captivity, and with such an upbringing, he became domesticated. Therefore, when he was brought to Bays Mountain Park, he could not be released back into the wild, and that is how he ended up at the park. One of the first things I, and most visitors, noticed about Jamie was his

smell. Red foxes apparently give off a smell that is quite similar to a skunk. I helped prepare Jamie's food several times, and one of his favorite foods is smelt, a type of fish. The naturalists at the park keep track of what each animal is fed every morning and evening, and they do this to ensure that every animal receives a mixture in their diet and that they do not eat the same thing multiple days in a row. From the times I have helped feed him, Jamie usually receives some smelt with some type of fruits or vegetables like a peach slice, cucumbers, or pepper.



Figure 6. Jaime the Fox from Author's Picture

When it is time to actually give Jamie his food, the naturalists have trained him to sit on this specific rock while they place the food in the cage. I find the process quite entertaining as Jamie gets so excited when he sees the food that he often finds it difficult to stay in position until the naturalist is in the cage. I think Jamie is one of the more amusing animals to watch because he has been pretty active the times I was around, and he will run around his cage and very carefully watch you. One time, as I was walking around his cage, Jamie was basically chasing me as I moved along the edge of his cage. He was partly keeping an eye on me and partly

seemed to want to play. He would jump around on his rocks and race back and forth. Therefore, as long as you do not mind the smell too much, Jamie is a fun animal to be around. Additionally, he is more unique than the typical red foxes because he has some sort of genetic mutation that gives his coat a different coloring than the standard red fox coat.

Otto the Otter

Otto the otter is another park favorite. Otto is the sole otter Bays Mountain Park currently features, but visitors love him. With his little pond and ground to run around in, Otto loves to show off for visitors. Megan told me that people will sometimes call his name, and he will run around crazy for them or roll around in front of the viewing area. Like many humans and animals alike, Otto also gets excited for feeding time, and Mark explained that whenever he feeds the otter, Otto knows that it is feeding time when he hears the jingle of keys; there are locked gates between the walkways and the habitats to keep visitors away from the habitat fences. Along with Otto, the park also has two bobcats, a number of white-tailed deer, and a variety of raptors. Visitors love to wander the paths between all of the habitats to see each animal and learn about them through signs or programs. The habitats themselves seem fairly spacious for the animals, and they are very natural as the spaces are usually just the natural landscape with fences around them. Of course, some features have been added like a pond for Otto and such. Overall, all the animals are well-cared for and loved by the naturalists at the park.

Resources and Programs

Now to really understand why Bays Mountain Park is such a unique area, it is important to know all the resources and programs the park provides. Through spending many days at the

park, I learned about the different programs and such that it offers. The resources and programs highlight the recreational and educational opportunities that Bays Mountain offers its visitors. The park truly has a mix of everything that should please everyone; no matter what they are looking for on any given day. The park even offers many different areas that can be rented for parties, meetings, and even weddings. These areas include the pavilion, Nature Center, Farmstead, Discovery Center, amphitheater, cabin, and more. Each of the spaces allow visitors to adapt the spaces to their needs. As for programs, there are a variety of categories.

- Planetarium Shows- \$3.00
- Nature Programs- \$3.00
 - Wildflower hikes, survival series, beginner's mountain biking, bird box workshops, egg identification, etc.
- Barge Rides- \$5.00
 - Twilight barge rides are also offered
- Animal Programs- Ranges from free to \$3.00
 - Raptor tours, dining with the wolves, local mammals, snakes alive, frog foray, etc.

Hiking

Bays Mountain Park also offers an extensive network of trails which visitors are encouraged to hike recreationally. Total, there are just over 39 miles of trails in the nature preserve. They vary in difficulty, scenery, and accessibility. Some of the trails follow along the lake while another leads to a fire tower which seems to be popular among guests. The majority of these trails also double as bike routes. Therefore, visitors have the option to bike or hike the trails. As previously mentioned, Bays Mountain Park even offered a mountain biking series

which introduced individuals to the basics and ended with a group trail ride to introduce them to the sport.

Through working the front desk, I learned that before a bike can be ridden on any of the trails, it must be registered at the front desk. The bikes have to be checked to ensure that they are mountain bikes and that they have the correct tires. Typically, it seems the task of checking the bikes falls to the naturalists, though the front desk workers sometimes do it if none of the naturalists are available. Upon approval, a sticker is given to the visitor to adhere to their bike, and they are only required to register a bike once. By offering many different ways for visitors to enjoy the trails, more interest in the park's recreational aspects is generated.

Planetarium

The planetarium is another immensely popular aspect of Bays Mountain Park. First constructed in 1970 at the same time as the Nature Center, the planetarium was upgraded and renovated in 2009. The project cost \$1.3 million dollars and improved the seating, surround sound, dome, and provided a Zeiss star projector ("Park History").

The planetarium offers two shows, and they are updated about every 3 or 4 months. The shows are updated to ensure that members will not become bored with what is being offered to them, and it gives visitors a reason to come back a few months later. For non-members, a planetarium show costs \$5. During March of 2019, the planetarium offered shows entitled "The Dark Matter Mystery" and "Exploring New Horizons." On the weekends, the shows are offered three times a day, and during the week from Tuesday to Friday, the show is only offered one time a day. There are no shows on Monday as it is typically the slowest day for the park.

Zipline and Adventure Course

During the warmer months, starting in about April, the park also has an adventure course and zipline which are opened. The adventure course is often utilized for team building activities or school groups, and the zipline is used by these groups and other general visitors to the park. Through a recent conversation with Mark, I learned that the zipline and adventure course have created a new interest in Bays Mountain Park, and a new clientele is visiting as they are more interested in this adventure aspect of the park. As a newer area at the park, the adventure course and zipline prove that Bays Mountain Park is open to new ideas and ways to draw more visitors into the area.

Schools

Many schools in the surrounding area take advantage of the programs and resources at Bays Mountain Park by scheduling field trips. Typically, the park tries to schedule school programs in the morning and early afternoon so that the late afternoon is available for other guests to enjoy the park without groups of kids. Programs are offered to school groups of any age, and they are offered at almost any point during the school year from September to May. The programs are also offered during the entire school week apart from Mondays. To make the most of their time at the park, schools often schedule a nature and astronomy program on the same day, and each program is about 45-50 minutes long. The time slots available to schools are: 9:30am, 10:30am, 11:30am, 12:30pm, and 1:30pm (“School Groups”).

To schedule a field trip and determine the cost, schools must call either the park or naturalist Mark Kilgore. April and May are the busiest months for school groups at Bays Mountain Park, so schools must call early for those months. Additionally, there is a 15-person

minimum for any school group scheduling programs, but if their numbers fall below the minimum, the group can be combined with another same-age group. This policy ensures the best use of scheduling and the naturalists' time as they give the programs. The program fees for schools visiting the park vary depending on the city, the type of school, and even the individuals that attend the programs.

- Program Fees
 - Kingsport, Bristol (TN), Rogersville City Schools- No charge
 - Public, private, and home schools in Sullivan County and Hawkins County- No charge
 - Any school outside of Sullivan or Hawkins County- \$2.00 per student, parent, and chaperone; teachers are free
- Park Entrance Fees
 - Kingsport, Bristol (TN), Rogersville city schools, Sullivan County, and Hawkins County buses- No charge
 - Cars- \$5.00 per car
 - Buses- \$15.00 per bus

I was working in the nature center one Tuesday in April, and I experienced some of the chaos of school groups firsthand. Several school groups were visiting the park that day, and the energy of the kids was apparent as they ran around outside or chatted excitedly in the nature center. Sharon, one of the workers at the front desk, told me that several groups had already been through in the morning, and she relayed some of the challenges school groups bring as they try to jump and hit items hanging in the nature center or overwhelm the gift shop all at once. Through her stories, it was easy for me to see that some school groups are easier or more well-behaved

than others. The day I was there was a little crazy, but it was not even one of the busiest days the park will have with school groups. I cannot even imagine how busy and chaotic it must be on the days that are fully scheduled with school groups. However, I do think it is great that schools in the surrounding areas can utilize the park for learning opportunities.



Figure 7. Priscilla the Snake Utilized for a Program from Author's Picture

With the programs offered to school, the children are introduced to a number of educational experiences outside of the classroom. For Kingsport schools, this supplemental type of education is especially beneficial as they are invited to use Bays Mountain Park for free. I observed one program for a school when Megan was giving the program. We were in the herpetarium, and Megan was teaching the children all about snakes. Through the use of a real snake that everyone got to touch, stories, and facts, the children got to experience a new world of snakes. They learned about species native to their area, and they even had the chance to observe

several other species housed in the herpetarium. Programs such as the one I observed with Megan really enhance children's educational experiences at Bays Mountain Park.

Park Improvement

During the course of my internship at Bays Mountain Park, construction has been going on the entire time. While it can be inconvenient at times, the construction also signals that the park is expanding and making improvements for its visitors. The first construction project I encountered focused on the parking lot. During their busy times, the current parking lots at Bays Mountain Park quickly fill up, and then visitors do not have anywhere to park. To combat this problem, the park is constructing a new parking lot. The addition of the new lot should alleviate some of the parking issues for visitors as it will add a substantial number of new spots; I heard 75 new spots at one point.

The first few times I was at the park, the construction for the parking lots was very noticeable and even disturbing. Noise was constantly streaming throughout the park as the construction crew was drilling and breaking through rock to level out the area. While it was definitely not the calming sounds of nature filling the air, I noticed that I did start to acclimate to the noise after about an hour or so. However, the naturalists and other workers frequently commented on the constant noise which is understandable as they had to deal with it every day. Though the noise was bothersome, especially during drilling times, everyone seemed to agree that it was worth it as it would improve the park and help fix a problem at the park. More recently, the construction on the parking lot was completed as the area was level and prepped for paving. The park opened the lot to visitors on busy days even when it was still unpaved, but on my last day, I noticed that the lot had finally been paved.

The construction at Bays Mountain Park has not stopped though. Now, they are working on the road from the gatehouse to the parking lots. The stretch of road between the gatehouse and parking lots is approximately 1.3 miles, so it is a decent stretch that winds up the mountain. Prior to any work, the road had several potholes, dips, or other such problems that made driving over it a little bumpy.

At the beginning of April, I encountered the road construction for myself as I was heading up the mountain. As soon as I passed the gatehouse, the construction crew was actively working. They had cut a huge square into the road, I am assuming over what had been a pothole, and they were preparing to pour new pavement onto the spot. It was a tight squeeze to fit my car between the hole they had created and the pole on the opposite side. However, I was lucky as I missed being held up. A visitor that came into the visitor center later stated that he had to wait 30 minutes for fresh pavement to dry before he could continue up the road.

As I was leaving later that same evening, I experienced a similar holdup when one side of the road was closed for the construction. Luckily, I only had to wait about 10 minutes before I was able to continue down the mountain. Though the construction was causing some backups and delays, the work did in fact improve the road. As I exited the park by the gatehouse, the spot they had been working on when I arrived earlier in the day was complete and much smoother than it had been previously. Even though the construction on the road was only focusing on small patches that day, one of the workers in the visitor center informed me that the whole road would be repaved at some point soon. Therefore, even with the delays or inconveniences, the construction was causing, a new road will be well worth it for the visitors and workers at Bays Mountain Park. From the construction currently happening at the park, it is obvious that they are trying to make improvements for the good of the whole park.

Bays Mountain Park also has other improvement plans ready for when they either have the budget or time. Rhonda, one of the naturalists, was telling me that the park has some future plans to improve and upgrade the animal habitats. Since many of them have not been upgraded in several years, the naturalists are looking forward to sprucing up the habitats. Though I do not know the plan for all of the habitats, Rhonda did explain some of the plans for Jamie's cage.

Currently, Jamie, the fox, lives in a habitat that is a round cage. Though it is a fairly large cage, it is sitting on a cement block, and he does not have access to the dirt or earth. He mainly has a tree structure that he can climb up and down. Therefore, to improve his habitat, Rhonda is looking into expanding the back part of the cage so that it actually reaches the ground for Jamie. As she explained, this expansion would allow Jamie to dig around in the dirt, and he would also have a larger habitat to explore. To ensure that he could not get out, Rhonda told me about one of the plans a contractor drew up. A concern is that Jamie would dig under the wiring, so to prevent that, a hole would be dug around the entire perimeter. The hole would then be filled with cement which the fencing would be placed directly into. Therefore, Jamie would not be able to escape but he would still benefit from the increased space and access to the actual earth. With the naturalists' excitement about projects or future projects at Bays Mountain Park, the area will continue to improve and become better for its visitors, workers, and animals alike.

Park Visitation and Memberships

Through the different activities and conversations during my internship, I learned a considerable amount about aspects of the park such as what they offer, their memberships, and some of the average numbers for visitors. Unsurprisingly, the summer months are the busiest for the park. According to Mark, weekend numbers in the summer months typically average around

1,500-1,600 visitors a day. During their funfest week, when entrance to the park is free, visitors average around 2,000 every single day of that week. During the early spring months around this time of year, a weekend would average around 1,100 visitors. According to the website, the park hosts more than 200,00 visitors a year (“Park History”).

Through my own observations, I have noticed that weather directly impacts visitation at Bays Mountain Park. I worked two Sundays in a row, and the first one was a mild spring day in which visitors were continuously coming into the Nature Center all day. The second Sunday was chilly and cold, and there were considerable lulls in which no visitors would be in the Nature Center. These fluctuations help show how weather affects visitor interest during this transition time from winter to spring/summer.

Memberships are a great way for the park to ensure the continued visitation by its members. There are multiple levels to membership with start at individual and end with lifetime. Each membership is valid for one year from the month of purchase, and they also allow the visitors to enter the park for free.

- Individual Membership- \$30.00
 - 2 free tickets to every event/program
 - Zipline half price
- Family Membership- \$50.00
 - 6 free tickets to every event/program
 - Zipline half price
- Supporting Membership- \$100
- Lifetime Membership- \$1,000

When visitors invest in a membership, they have unlimited access to all the resources the park offers, and the great variety of activities at the park means that every family member will find something that they enjoy. There are programs for kids and adults that can teach them about animals, plants, survival skills, and more, or there are programs that are just simply for enjoyment. I learned from Megan that recently the membership prices were raised for the first time in about 20-25 years. She said that it upset some individuals who were accustomed to the old prices, but as Megan explained, the price raise was necessary to help the park to continue to function and provide its services to its visitors. The economy has changed quite a bit in the last 20 years, so I was surprised when Megan said the price had stayed the same for so long.

Budget

Though it is difficult to find an overall budget for Bays Mountain Park, some information was found in Kingsport's FY 2018-2019 Budget Book. Since Bays Mountain Park is a city owned nature preserve, the city of Kingsport does provide funds to the park for its functions. Many of these funds are used to improve aspects of the park that will directly or indirectly enhance the recreational and educational opportunities provided. In the section outlining the projects for the 2019 fiscal year, some projects for Bays Mountain Park were approved under general funding using bonds. These projects include:

- Nature Center Improvements- \$300,000
- Animal Habitats- \$270,000
- Planetarium Improvements- \$265,000
- Exhibit Upgrades- \$66,000
- Nature Center Balcony Improvements- \$60,000

- Watershed Exhibit Redesign- \$40,000

From the report, it looks as if each of these projects will continue to receive money from Kingsport for several years with variance between each project as some will be completed before others and thus not need any further funding.

The report also outlines some upcoming projects at Bays Mountain in the fiscal years of 2022 and 2023. These projects have a budget already and include:

- Farmstead Upgrade- \$200,000
- Nature Center Entrance Upgrade- \$170,000
- Discovery Theater Renovation- \$25,000

Through the projects the city is willing to fund, it is clear that they take into consideration upgrades, renovations, or other improvements Bays Mountain Park needs when planning their budget each year.

Kingsport's Budget Book also offers a look at the park's expenditures in a few previous years with an estimation for FY 18-19.

BUDGET INFORMATION

EXPENDITURES	ACTUAL	ACTUAL	BUDGET	REQUEST	RECOMMEND	APPROVED
	FY 15-16	FY 16-17	FY 17-18	FY 18-19	FY 18-19	FY 18-19
Personnel Services	\$1,010,042	\$927,283	\$996,900	\$1,045,507	\$1,028,031	\$1,028,031
Contractual Services	\$93,693	\$115,199	\$133,700	\$125,500	\$121,900	\$121,900
Commodities	\$101,694	\$93,097	\$103,900	\$112,500	\$104,600	\$104,600
Other Expenses	\$19,531	\$19,136	\$20,000	\$5,800	\$5,800	\$5,800
Insurance	\$1,423	\$1,530	\$1,200	\$1,200	\$1,200	\$1,200
Total Department Expenses	\$1,226,383	\$1,156,245	\$1,255,700	\$1,290,507	\$1,261,531	\$1,261,531
Total Excluding Personnel Services	\$216,341	\$228,962	\$258,800	\$245,000	\$233,500	\$233,500
Personal Services as a % of Budget	82%	80%	79%	81%	81%	81%

This graph helps illustrate some of the expenditures of the park and the numbers associated with its different services. The information present in the report helps shed some light on aspects of the budget or expenditures for Bays Mountain Park (Kingsport).

Conclusion

Bays Mountain Park is truly a special, one-of-a-kind place located in Kingsport. During my time as an intern at Bays Mountain Park, I learned so much about the running of a park, the behind-the-scenes tasks, the visitors' interests in various components of the park, and how it all works together to create an experience. Overall, I now see Bays Mountain as this place that combines nature and education to inspire youth and adults alike. Whether individuals visit the park just for a recreational activity like hiking or for an educational activity such as a wolf program, they will find a peaceful setting all around them. I had the opportunity to work with many individuals who help make the park what it is today, and nothing would be possible without them at the park.

On one of my last days as an intern at the park, I found myself right back where I had started the whole adventure. It was time to feed the wolves again. With the help of a volunteer, I sliced open those packages of horse meat like an old pro. I then helped lug a deer over to the truck and throw it into the bed. Following the path that I had walked that very first day with John, I made my way down to the wolf pen. A crowd of about 20 was prepared to watch the wolves eat. We loaded the deer and bucket of meat into a wheelbarrow to move it up the ramp, and grabbing the deer by the ankles, we counted to three and chucked it over the fence into the wolf habitat. Before the wolves dug into the deer, we tossed the fist-sized chunks of horse meat over the fence. As the sound of the wolves' jaws closing around the meat reverberated throughout the air, I reflected on all I had learned and experienced while completing my internship at Bays Mountain Park.

Works Cited

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