

# **GeoCaching; A Park Ranger's Perspective**

*by Doug Adomatis*

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If you stash a cache in Ranger Joe's jurisdiction with out asking permission, you are missing a great opportunity to make a friend and place a really good cache.

GeoCaching is a game that was made possible when the accuracy of handheld GPS receivers became good enough to locate objects within a few feet (see footnote [1] on the history of GeoCaching and related topics).

In brief, the game is played by obtaining the longitude and latitude coordinates of a cache from the Internet, and heading out to find the "hidden treasure" with little or no other clues. Once the cache (typically a Tupperware container) is found, an entry is made in the logbook found inside the container. Here's a common entry:

"April 30, 2002 - I've lived here all my life and never knew this place existed.  
This is beautiful! Thanks for the experience - Gagetreker"

The cache usually also contains trinkets left by previous finders, which are exchanged in kind. Back at home, participants can post and read messages about the cache.

The game has caught on and now there are tens of thousands of caches worldwide. The rapid proliferation of GeoCaching has caused some alarm among parkland managers. Recently, the National Parks Service has taken a stance against GeoCaching, citing existing policies regarding "abandon property" [2]. There are rumors that state parks will follow the NPS lead. If all parklands were deemed off limits, GeoCaching activity would be severely curtailed.

Currently, there are some contentious discussions in the forums between those disgruntled by the National Parks ruling and those who support it. Many argue that caches are not litter and people should be able to play the game on public lands without having to ask permission. Others contend that those who play the game by the rules will not adversely impact the environment.

To get a park ranger's perspective on the topic of GeoCaching, Joe Anderson has agreed to share his experiences with us. Joe is the manager of Mountain Bridge Wilderness Area in South Carolina, which includes Caesars Head and Jones Gap State Park. He represents the landowners on the Foothills Trail Conference Board of Directors and is a Search and Rescue Instructor.

TbGPS: Joe, you must be familiar with GeoCaching because of all the caches in your area. Tell me, in general, about the experience you've had as a park ranger with GeoCaching in the Mountain Bridge Wilderness.

JA: I've never found a GeoCache that wasn't in an interesting place, and I've never met a GeoCacher that wasn't an interesting person.

TbGPS: What is your impression of the type of people that GeoCache?

JA: GeoCachers are intelligent and educated, have a source of income and are interested in protecting our natural resources. The state parks do not necessarily need the support of the public, we need the support of an informed public – GeoCachers tend to be informed.

TBG: Is there a specific story about a particular cache that typifies your experience?

JA: Most of my pursuits have concentrated on those GeoCaches placed inside parks. I do not participate in the sport in the conventional way as your readers probably do. Though I have enjoyed using the GPS unit a couple of times, the majority of my finds were accomplished by tracking GeoCachers – identifying signs of impact for clues.

TbGPS: If I told you I wanted to place a GeoCache here in the park, what would be your reply?

JA: Well I'd say, let's talk. How can your anticipated GeoCache experience complement my desired park experience? Then, we'll talk about some possible locations. I'd also ask you what your plans are for maintaining the cache.

TbGPS: Alternatively, if I informed you that I had already placed a Cache here and now wanted permission (forgiveness), what would be your reply?

JA: Of all the caches (there have been as many as 6 at one time) located within the boundaries of the park, no one has asked permission first and that disappoints me. Now, some have come after the fact and I've appreciated that. There are not so many that are impacting the park that I'm on a campaign to reduce the number, so I probably wouldn't tell you to remove it as long as it's in an appropriate location. The Mountain Bridge Wilderness Area will never become 'GeoCache State Park.' Too many GeoCache sites may impact the desired experience for those participating in the sport. At times I wonder though... when there does get to be too many, and someone does come to ask permission to place another cache... what about those who didn't ask permission first? Should those caches be removed to make room for a cache placed by someone who played by the rules?

TbGPS: How many caches in your area would you consider to be too many?

JA: GeoCaching is relatively new to the park. Though I do not have an answer to the question today, I do anticipate the day will come when I will be able to. I don't believe we have too many – yet. I do believe you *can* have too many in small areas. Sesquicentennial Park, for example, has 6 and I think that is too many.

TbGPS: Tell me what you call a good cache or a bad cache?

JA: Any cache that is in a dangerous or environmentally sensitive location makes me apprehensive. A good cache can become a not-so-good cache if its not properly maintained. The cache owner needs to be committed to making sure that 1) everyone looking for the cache has the desired experience, and 2) the area around the cache is not being adversely impacted. I like the idea of virtual caches in locations where human impact has been anticipated, like caches placed at monuments. I have to back up a little and say that I'm not so sure that caches placed in and around historical structures are a good idea. For example, shell ring at Edisto Beach State Park that was built by the Native Americans. When pictures appeared on the web of people standing on the ring, the land manager had the cache removed and no longer tolerates GeoCaching on the property.

TbGPS: How do you use the online forums to manage caches in the park?

JA: Well for example, the Wildcat Wayside cache had been located within 30 feet of an endangered plant and there were tracks all around it, some within inches of doing some real damage. I notified the cache owners by posting a message to the cache's online log. The cache owners were very responsive. They voluntarily gave a 30 day notice before moving the cache so that cachers currently seeking the cache would not venture all over trying to find it.

TbGPS: Earlier you said that you GeoCache yourself – without a GPS. Explain how you do that.

JA: Our agency has used GeoCache locations to train Search and Rescue teams. GeoCaching is a great tool to teach others how to track the movement of people through the natural and wilderness areas.

TbGPS: How have you seen the Cache-in / Trash-out program at work in your area?

JA: Caesars Head and Jones Gap State Parks collectively form the Mountain Bridge Wilderness Area. The "Trash-out" program complements our "Project Green" program. For example – Jones Gap is a "trash-free" park. Patrons to the park will find no trash cans – they are expected to comply with a higher standard of stewardship of "pack-it-in pack-it-out." Classified as a special resource, everyone is asked to participate in the stewardship of the place – whether picnicking, hiking, backpacking, or GeoCaching. The trash out program is an interesting campaign. Many of the opponents to GeoCaching consider the practice to be a form of littering in itself. I do not interpret the cache as a garbage or refuse form of litter. I see the sport as an interpretive tool and possibly a marketing opportunity. Case in point, simply by answering this question I have taken the opportunity to introduce our Project Green program to your readers.

TbGPS: Do you have any other ideas about ways to have fun with GPS in the park?

JA: The fun in GeoCaching is the hike. Many of the caches I found outside the park have taken me to places that I didn't know existed, which I have since returned to enjoy.

For example, I liked the Furman University cache because it was right off the running trail so there was no additional impact with all the traffic the location gets anyway. I never knew about that trail, but I liked it so much that I've returned to Morgan Meditation with my wife and kids to enjoy sunny afternoons.

TbGPS: What can you tell me about decisions that are being made in South Carolina with regard to GeoCaching?

JA: The South Carolina State Park Service has taken notice of the sport. I trust that any policy we adopt will be based on informed decisions. We are in the process of establishing guidelines for GeoCaching activities on state parks. Currently, the individual park management plans will guide park managers when making decisions about the recreational activities managed on the park.

TbGPS: Any final thoughts you like to leave our readers with?

JA: GeoCaching is a great tool for introducing visitors to the real value of a park's resources. Properly informed, the people coming to GeoCache in the park can be real assets to helping us protect not only the park's flora and fauna, but also the recreational opportunities it has to offer. As one who has been entrusted with the stewardship of these resources, I believe GeoCaching, like any other recreational activity the park has to offer, can be managed to maximize the benefits to all park visitors.

TbGPS: Thanks Joe.

#### Footnotes and Links

[1] Links to GeoCaching.com

History of GeoCaching <http://www.geocaching.com/about/credits.asp>

How to Place a Cache <http://www.geocaching.com/articles/making.asp>

How to Find a Cache <http://www.geocaching.com/articles/finding.asp>

[2] At the time of this writing, no documentation was found that specifically outlaws GeoCaching in national parks. Instead, the Code of Federal Regulations – Title 36, Chapter 1, Part 2, Section 2.22 - regarding the prohibition of abandon property has been cited in incidents where GeoCaches have been impounded.

Travel by GPS Stash Page <http://www.travelbygps.com/stash.htm>