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Director



STATE OF WASHINGTON

WASHINGTON STATE PARKS AND RECREATION COMMISSION

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TO: Park Managers
Stewardship Managers
Field Operations Manager
Visitor Protection and Law Enforcement Program Staff

FROM: Don Hoch, Director 

SUBJECT: **Geocaching, Letterboxing and Related Activities in State Park Areas**

DIRECTIVE 06-01

This directive provides guidelines and instructions for permitting the placement of geocaches, letterboxes, and related "questing" or "treasure hunt" activities within State Park areas.

Geocaching is a family-oriented activity in which participants ("geocachers") hide waterproof containers, called "geocaches," and create online listings with the Global Positioning Satellite (GPS) coordinates and clues on a geocaching website (e.g., www.geocaching.com). Other players visit the website, choose which cache they would like to locate, and then visit a park or other location and use their GPS device or smartphone to find the cache, where they sign a logbook as proof of their visit and (optionally) swap trade items such as toys. Afterward, they report their experience online by posting a log on the cache's web page for the cache owner and other geocachers to see.

Earthcaching is a virtual form of geocaching that involves visiting a location to learn about a geoscience feature. While it is limited to geological processes (as opposed to ecosystems or human history), it may be appropriate in some areas where physical containers are not feasible.

Letterboxing is a predecessor to geocaching, having been a recognized recreational activity for around 150 years since its inception in England. The person hiding the "letterbox" provides map coordinates and compass bearings, along with cryptic clues, on a letterboxing website to lead the hunter to the hidden container, which has a logbook, rubber stamp, and trinkets. The finder makes an entry in the logbook and stamps their personal logbook to record the find.

Procedures for the placement of geocaches and letterboxes within State Park areas are described below. For the purposes of this directive, both activities are referred to as "caching." In the case of geocaching, Washington State Geocaching Association is the supporting organization and is referenced as "WSGA" where appropriate.

I. CACHE PLACEMENT GUIDELINES

In order to place a cache on State Parks' property, an individual or organization must obtain a Cache Placement Permit from the State Parks. Any cache located on State Parks' property that does not have a permit on file is subject to removal from its location, and after notification of the owner (if known) and WSGA (for geocaches), may be disposed of after 10 days if unclaimed.

- A. The person or organization applying for a Cache Placement Permit must provide a valid address, telephone number, email address, and the website address on which the cache will be posted.
- B. The general location and method of hiding the cache must be approved by the Park Manager or designee, who will coordinate a review of the location with the Regional Stewardship Manager. The primary considerations will be public safety and the prevention of undesirable impacts to natural, historical, and cultural resources. The exact location, including GPS coordinates and directions to the cache, must be provided to the Park Manager or designee and will become part of the Cache Placement Permit.
- C. Permits will not be granted for areas that are not accessible to the general public. No cache placement will be permitted during periods of extreme weather conditions, fire danger, or fire closure.
- D. If, for any reason, the location is not approved and a Permit is not issued, the cache owner must promptly remove the cache.
- E. Permits will be in effect for a minimum of one year unless otherwise agreed, as many geocaches remain in place for several years. The Permit may have an unspecified end date at the Park Manager's discretion, so long as the cache remains in good repair and the location is not adversely impacted (see Section IV). The exact starting date will be recorded on the Cache Placement Permit.

NOTE: If, during the effective period of a Permit, a cache owner needs to change the location of the cache, the Park Manager will be notified and will decide whether a new Cache Placement Permit must be issued.

- F. Once a cache is no longer active, for whatever reason, the cache owner is responsible for removing the container and for clearly indicating on website listings that the cache is no longer available.
- G. If a cache owner fails to remove an expired cache within 10 days, it will be removed by park staff, and WSGA will be notified if the item is a geocache. If the cache is not claimed by the owner or WSGA within 10 days, park staff will dispose of the cache. Confiscation and disposal by park staff will be recorded in an incident report.
- H. If park staff determines that a cache is causing adverse impacts to the park environment, aesthetics, facilities or public use, the cache owner will be notified and the cache may be removed by the Park Manager or designee. At the Park Manager's discretion, the cache

owner may be given the opportunity to revise the placement, but if this is not possible, the Cache Placement Permit will be cancelled. In such cases, the cache owner and WSGA (for geocaches) will be notified, will be given 10 days to reclaim the property from the park, and may be responsible for reasonable restoration costs.

II. CACHE CONTAINERS AND CONTENTS

- A. Cache containers must be non-breakable, have some form of latch or other closing mechanism to prohibit exposure of the contents to wildlife, and must be approved by the Park Manager or designee.
- B. Caches may not contain the following items: food; illegal substances; medications; personal/hygiene products; pornographic materials; or weapons of any type. Logbooks are required for each cache and are to be provided by the owner of the cache, unless otherwise agreed by the Park Manager or designee.
- C. All caches are subject to inspection at any time by State Parks' staff, who have the authority to immediately remove any item in a cache that is in violation of these guidelines or otherwise deemed inappropriate.

III. CACHE LOCATIONS

- A. Physical caches are prohibited inside any State Parks' building, facility, or structure, unless specifically approved and monitored by Park staff, and are not allowed in designated natural areas, natural forest areas, natural area preserves, or heritage areas. Only earthcaches are permitted in natural areas, natural forest areas, natural area preserves or heritage areas, and only to the extent that such areas are open to public access.
- B. The location of a cache must be approved by the Park Manager or designee and the Regional Stewardship Manager in accordance with the following conditions:
 - 1. Caches may not be placed in locations that could lead to the creation of spur/social trails. If such trails develop, this may be grounds for cancellation of the Permit.
 - 2. Cache placement may not involve digging or the use of attachments that may damage trees, buildings, or other park property. No structure, vegetation, or stones may be damaged when placing a cache. Caches may be placed under or behind live vegetation (e.g., ferns or trees), and may be covered with small amounts of dead vegetation (e.g., fallen leaves or branches) . However, the appearance of the cache location must remain natural and inconspicuous to the non-caching public.
 - 3. Caches may not be placed in dangerous locations, biologically or culturally sensitive areas, protected areas and habitats, or on cliffs.

4. Caches may not be placed underwater without the explicit permission of the Park Manager or designee.
 5. Caches may not conflict or interfere with visitor uses or experiences in the park.
- C. Metal detectors may not be used in cache searches.

IV. REQUIREMENTS FOR CACHE OWNERS

Following issuance of the Cache Placement Permit, the cache owner must meet the following requirements. Violation of any of these requirements may result in immediate removal of the cache by State Parks' personnel and cancellation of the Permit.

- A. The cache owner is responsible for adequate oversight and maintenance of the cache, including monitoring the online listing for reports of current conditions and any problems with the cache. Necessary maintenance may include repair or replacement of the container, logbook or contents; disabling the geocache at times when access to the area is prohibited (e.g., closures due to fire danger); and removal of the cache if the site is being adversely impacted. The Park Manager may require the cache owner to visit the cache and perform any maintenance deemed necessary, and may require proof of the same by e-mail, letter, or personal communication, as well as the owner's entry in the cache's logbook indicating the inspection date and maintenance performed.
- B. The online listing for the cache must display the State Parks logo and state the following:
 1. This cache has an approved Permit to be placed at this location on property managed by the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission. Visitors are responsible for acquainting themselves with policies and rules pertaining to State Parks areas.
 2. The following items may not be placed in the cache: food; illegal substances; medications; personal hygiene products, pornographic materials; hazardous materials; or weapons of any type.
 3. By searching for the cache, visitors agree that they are responsible for their own actions, and acknowledge that neither the State of Washington nor the cache owner is responsible for any loss or injury that may occur in relation to such search.
 4. Report any incident, problem, or violation to State Parks staff.

V. COMPLIANCE

Failure to comply with these guidelines will result in the revocation of the Cache Placement Permit. Continued failure to comply with these guidelines will prevent the issuance of any further caching permits to the non-compliant group or individual.

The Park Manager may close certain park areas or the entire park to caching activities if caching activities are found to have an adverse impact on park resources or the safety of park visitors.

VI. EXISTING GEOCACHES

The owner of any cache placed prior to the date of this Directive will bring the cache into conformance with this Directive (including obtaining a Cache Placement Permit) or remove it within 60 days of the date of this Directive.

VII. ATTACHMENT

Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission Cache Placement Permit.