



Facility Profile

TRAILS

Trail Blazers

CATOCTIN MOUNTAIN PARK THURMONT, MARYLAND

BY RICK DANDES

For the park rangers and officials at Catoctin Mountain Park in Thurmont, Md., there has always been a strong commitment to providing universal access to a nature preserve best known for its majestic beauty and solitude.

“We here at Catoctin Mountain Park are proud of being inclusive, and when the ADA laws came into effect in 1990, we were already well ahead of the curve,” said Park Superintendent Mel Poole. For example, he noted, Catoctin’s Camp Greentop, established in 1937, is the longest running public campground for people with disabilities.

But while Catoctin Mountain Park has plenty of scenic trails, not all of them were easily accessible. “We’ve always made sure that the campgrounds and services within Catoctin Park are accessible to everybody who wants to use them, from overnight campers to day tripping hikers, senior citizens and people with disabilities,” Poole said. But providing access to hiking trails has been more of a challenge.

“What we want to do within our trail system,” he continued, “is to offer everyone the same chance to enjoy the scenery. Some of our trails have that hard asphalt surface, and frankly, it would have been very easy for us to go and put asphalt back when we were doing an upgrade. But from an aesthetic standpoint, asphalt was not the best fix for us.”

So the park service conducted studies looking at alternatives to asphalt and concrete as suitable materials for making trails accessible. “We had already converted three of our campsites at the Owens Creek campgrounds into sites for people with disabilities, and that was our first use of Bonded WoodCarpet,” Poole said. “It proved to be such good experience for everyone involved that we thought it might be useful for a trail.”

Bonded WoodCarpet, Poole explained, is a poured-in-place wood fiber that is accessible, pervious and natural. This makes for a great trail through parks, natural areas and historic sites. You’ve come to the park to get into nature; well now you can get off the asphalt, too.

Debbie Mills, a park ranger, said that after the successful application of Bonded WoodCarpet at Owen’s Creek, “the superintendent indicated that he wanted to change his focus of accessibility to the Chestnut picnic area, which is directly across from Camp Greentop.

“In the spring of 2011,” Mills added, “the National Parks Foundation announced a call for an Active Trails grant, whose purpose was to increase the use of trails in a park service area. We applied for the grant in March 2011, asking for the funding to purchase the WoodCarpet with the understanding that it would be installed by a volunteer workforce and that the trail would be used



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to develop new partnerships within the park.” The grant of \$25,000 was approved two months later.

“We experimented down through the years with products that use a soil binder for an area that includes a handicapped parking space as well as play area and trails. We had mixed results in our search. I guess the Holy Grail that we were looking for was something that looks natural, and provides a ride-able surface for disabled visitors. We think this product is certainly a step in the right direction because it is the most natural in appearance of any of the products we’ve used. Part of our job is to push the envelope and try to go with state-of-the-art materials. We have to use things that are highly durable, we can’t gamble on something not working. I think this product exists at the intersection of having the durability we need, and it seems to have the aesthetic look we require.”

Mills also has been thrilled with the results. “One of my goals is to interest visitors of all abilities in various demographics to come to the park and use our facilities, to get people outside to enjoy the things that nature offers. And this trail has been like magic for us because it has gotten people talking. And the more people talk, the good word spreads. People are excited. It is beyond the range of what we initially anticipated.

“As far as this experience goes, it has been great,” Mills said. “I took a group of youngsters from a daycare center here. The trail is perfect for the toddlers because they can walk along, and not have to worry about tripping over stones as they walk. I also had some people from a local retirement home come, and they were all in wheelchairs. Until we fixed this trail, they would have had no way to actually enjoy the trail. We’ve also had a group of wounded veterans from a local VA hospital enjoy the park. Runners really like it because the surface is forgiving when you’re on it. So many people are excited, and as the word gets out about us, I have a feeling that we’re going to see a lot more people using this trail in the future.” **RM**



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