

wi-fi in the great outdoors



State Parks Fish for Visitors with Wi-Fi Access

Several states are providing Wi-Fi access at state parks to attract visitors and move with the trends of today's ever-connected world.

By Mikel Chavers

This summer at East Harbor State Park in Ohio, visitors can enjoy the shores of Lake Erie and the scenic wetlands. They can go camping, boating, skiing, fishing or swimming—or they can surf the Internet the way nature intended.

They can connect to a Wi-Fi hotspot right at the state park.

East Harbor is one of 17 state parks in Ohio equipped with free Wi-Fi for visitors. The wireless Internet hotspots allow visitors to check e-mail, get online and enjoy nature—all at the same time.

Ohio is one of several states that are equipping state parks with the wireless Internet hotspots. California has the most—50 state parks have Wi-Fi there. Kentucky, Ohio and Texas are next with Wi-Fi in 17 state parks. Half of Alabama's 22 state parks have Wi-Fi access.

To those in the state parks departments around the country, putting Wi-Fi access on parkland seemed like an unobtrusive way to keep the visitors coming.

"We know today that people live very complicated lives. People end up being tethered to their cell phones or their computers," said Alan Friedman, chief information officer for California State Parks. "We were concerned that we were going to start losing people at our state parks."

That concern called for action, and not just for California.

"All things in our industry seem to support that wireless Internet is an ever-increasing popular feature among many would-be park users," said Bryan Frazier, spokesman for Texas State Parks. The Texas legislature boosted funding for the state's parks during its last session and Wi-Fi is among some of the improvements planned, according to Frazier.

"Private campgrounds have done a great job for years at being responsive in the marketplace in meeting similar consumer demand. And we feel that it is also a big part of our responsibility as a state park system to not only manage our resources, but to also try and accommodate customer needs as best we can," Frazier said.

"It also keeps Ohio state parks competitive with our neighboring states," added Phil Hoffman, electronic services

manager with the Field Support Group of Ohio State Parks.

Benefits from a Natural Connection

So California, along with other front-runner states such as Michigan, began installing the Wi-Fi hotspots in parks.

In January 2005, San Elijo State Beach became California's first park to get wireless Internet access. Located along the San Diego coast, San Elijo is a haven for surfers. The narrow, bluff-backed stretch of beach hosts a reef nearby where visitors can snorkel or scuba dive.

Since then, some of the most remote parks in California boast the new connectivity. There's Wi-Fi at the Salton Sea State Recreation Area out near the Colorado River and the desert, nestled on the northeastern side of one of the world's largest inland seas. Created by accidental flooding in the early 1900s, the Salton Sea is about a three-hour drive from the Los Angeles area and the 360 square-mile basin is a popular place for boating, water skiing and fishing.

California visitors can also crack open their laptops and connect to the Internet in the dense forests of pine, fir, aspen and juniper at Ed Z'berg-Sugar Pine Point State Park on Lake Tahoe.

The Wi-Fi access uses invisible waves and unobtrusive antennas that do not interfere with the parks' natural beauty, Friedman said. "Wi-Fi has an almost negligible footprint," he said. "It's low-impact from the point of view of the actual parks themselves but at the same time, it can do a lot to improve communications to our visitors."

Campers are also excited to have the service, Friedman said. A lot of the retired people who travel enjoy having online banking access while on vacation—"it can be weeks and weeks until they make it back to their homes," he said.

Hoffman from Ohio offers the same anecdotal evidence. "It's a way for customers to keep in touch with family back home and friends and certainly for work. They're staying longer now, now that they can stay in touch," he said. "Folks who stay longer ... that's great for us. We can always use more customers throughout the week."

In Kentucky's 17 state resort parks equipped with Wi-Fi, the wireless connectivity is aimed at vacation travelers,

business travelers and various groups who plan events there, according to Chris Kellogg, spokeswoman for Kentucky State Parks. "Some groups in particular have made it a requirement that a live Internet connection be available to book a park for an event or meeting," Kellogg said. "So there would have been a decrease in business if it hadn't been available."

Not only does the Wi-Fi access benefit park visitors, it also helps state park employees' productivity, Friedman said. For example, employees at Cuyamaca Rancho State Park in a remote part of San Diego County, Calif., didn't previously have Internet connectivity at the park. It was just way too expensive, Friedman said. The Wi-Fi installation by AT&T changed all that.

Another park—Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park on the California coast and 20 to 30 miles south of the Monterey Peninsula—is "an absolutely enchanting place, but it's very far away from anything," Friedman said. A lot of locals actually come into the park to use the Wi-Fi.

It's a place "where there's no other alternative to broadband access—it's a magnet to people."

State parks are also using Wi-Fi Internet access to fulfill another mission. Internet makes for a convenient educational tool—and in California, visitors can access all the state park Web sites for free—learning about the history of the parks and recreational opportunities. To access non-state government Web sites, visitors must pay to access the Wi-Fi either daily or by subscription through AT&T.

That means visitors have free access to state-operated Web sites such as all of the state parks resources. "If there isn't a ranger available and there is no interpreter, our visitors can go to our Web site and we save on publication and printing costs—we don't have to print as many brochures if someone brings their laptop into the park unit," Friedman said.

State park visitors in California can also log onto to www.reserveamerica.com for free, where visitors can book campground reservations; www.dot.ca.gov, which provides road conditions updates; and the state's tourism site located at www.gocalif.ca.gov.

Wi-Fi Economics

California State Parks partners with AT&T Wi-Fi to bring high-speed wire-

less Internet to the picnic tables, tents, RV spaces and cabins of more than 85 million state park visitors each year. In 2005, when the state entered into the contract, California embarked on a two-year pilot concession agreement to bring Wi-Fi to its parks.

Now that the two years are up, California State Parks and AT&T are discussing what the future will bring in terms of Wi-Fi access, whether the state will begin paying to provide the service and whether the state will expand what it currently offers.

In many locations, an Internet circuit can cost around \$30 a month to hook up to a Wi-Fi access point—but that's in most urban locations. It can cost up to \$500 a month to provide Wi-Fi at a state park, according to Friedman.

"We get killed by the cost of access if we can even get access," Friedman said.

Some areas are still completely devoid of high-speed Internet connectivity because they are in far-flung parts of the country.

"Commercial broadband drives the bus when it comes to offering Wi-Fi in state parks," Hoffman from Ohio said.

Under California's agreement with AT&T, the state is not yet shouldering that cost—although that might change. The state is in talks with AT&T to perhaps start assuming some of that cost, Friedman said, although he admitted the current budget crisis in California may hinder that.

And in an increasingly wired world, public Wi-Fi isn't exactly becoming the money-making scheme some had hoped. In a competitive world for wireless Internet where it seems everyone has a cell phone or personal digital assistant equipped with Internet and e-mail access, a lot has changed since the first state parks were equipped with hotspots.

"The economics of Wi-Fi have changed over the last three years," Friedman said. "It is very difficult to make money in setting up Wi-Fi hotspots around the country."

But back when the project started, California was in a favorable position. Then-wireless Internet provider SBC Communications Inc.—now AT&T—approached the state parks department with a proposal to bring wireless Internet connectivity to the state's parks. Under the agreement, SBC shouldered the cost of the infrastructure and the logistics of setting up the hotspots on park land. In return, 10 percent of the total revenue from visitors who log in at the park and pay for service goes to California's State Parks. The other profits go to AT&T.

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—Bryan Frazier, spokesman
Texas State Parks



A state park visitor enjoys the free Wi-Fi connection at the lodge at Punderson State Park in Ohio. CREDIT: Mike Williams, Ohio Department of Natural Resources

Wi-Fi for the Customers

But in Ohio and Kentucky, visitors can connect to the Internet for free.

In Kentucky, Wi-Fi is accessible in all 17 resort parks' common areas, guest rooms, and conference and meeting facilities. The state is considering installing Wi-Fi at some of the busier campgrounds and cottages, according to Kellogg.

Unlike California, Ohio launched Wi-Fi hotspots internally, not contracting with a company for infrastructure and labor.

Because the Ohio Department of Natural Resources didn't have the initial capital to do full campground coverage, Ohio's state parks began offering access points at camp stations throughout the state.

"We know we're probably not going to get whole campground coverage, so our approach is, 'let's put the access point right at the camp station (where) in most cases we have a picnic table and a shaded area,'" Hoffman from Ohio said.

And because the department was offering a free amenity to visitors and was doing the work internally, the legislature did not have to take up the issue, according to Hoffman.

"People just want to be able to connect and connect for free," Hoffman said.

Wireless Internet connectivity, after all, was one of the most requested amenities in the most recent Ohio campground survey last year. So Ohio's state parks department went to work incorporating the new technology into its strategic plan. That plan outlined the pilot program to provide Wi-Fi to select state park campgrounds by December 2006 and then to provide Wi-Fi to all state park campgrounds within five years—although the last bit, Hoffman admits, was a little too ambitious based on funds to install Wi-Fi and Internet connectivity issues in rural areas much like the ones California faced.

Installing the Wi-Fi hotspots costs Ohio State Parks around \$3,000 per location—including hardware and labor, according to Hoffman.

Hoffman doesn't know that the state parks division will ever recoup the cost—then again, the Wi-Fi wasn't about recouping the cost, he said.

In Ohio, updating and taking care of the state parks is a priority, according to Hoffman. Wi-Fi was no exception to the services the state was pleased to offer. "It's

within our scope of adding services."

As far as attracting additional visitors to the parks because of the new Wi-Fi access, it's still too early to tell, Hoffman said. Although Wi-Fi was being tested as early as 2005 in the parks, it wasn't officially launched until 2006. Based on East Harbor State Park camping statistics from 2004 to 2007, no substantial increase in visits took place. Hoffman said the number of campground visitors is so weather-related it would be hard to attribute any increase directly to the implementation of Wi-Fi.

"We're still getting our feet wet with it," Hoffman said.

Ohio is looking to equip three more parks this summer with Wi-Fi, although that hasn't been confirmed yet, according to Hoffman.

"Although our strategic plan calls for Wi-Fi at all campgrounds by 2010, we are at the mercy of available commercial broadband," Hoffman said. "If broadband Internet is available, we'll offer it to our campers."

—Mikel Chavers is associate editor of State News magazine and wishes she could get out to state parks more.

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