

Springhouse Ink

The setting aside of public land is the best social program a government provides. Most people don't own much land, but they have equal opportunities to use public land to provide for their well-being.

Any person who owns the tools, applicable licenses and transportation can hunt, fish and gather their own food. Any person without a home can go camp, either in a tent or use a ready-made stone shelter to protect from the rain. Heat? It's free in the form of fallen firewood. Water? It's there in the creeks and springs, though best consumed after purification through charcoal filtering, boiling or chemical treatment.

If you heat your home with a wood stove or fireplace, you can even get a permit to cut up downed trees on U.S. Forest Service land at a charge of \$20 for four cords.

Most of us don't rely on the forest for our survival these days, but it is good to know this ultimate safety net is available to all citizens of the United States, regardless of income. These vast acreages are funded by our taxes. We have a responsibility for them and these responsibilities are easily met. Pack it in, pack it out. Leave only footprints, take only photographs — and maybe some berries, mushrooms, rocks, sticks, some restrictions apply.

The majority of us use the forest for recreation, education, mental health, physical health, escape, fresh air and swimming in cool water. The benefits from these activities are not measured in cords like firewood. They are immeasurable, free and priceless. At least for now. It may be a different story next summer.

The U.S. Forest Service is proposing to charge \$5 per vehicle to six sites on the Shawnee National Forest: Garden of the Gods Recreation Area — Observation Trail, Pounds Hollow Beach, Johnson Creek Boat Launch, Pomona Boat Launch, Little Grand Canyon Trailhead and Bell Smith Springs Trailhead. The proposal creates a \$30 Shawnee National Forest Annual Pass that covers the fees for all six day-use-fee sites and interagency recreation passes will be honored at the six sites.

The proposal includes an increase to \$15 from \$10 for electrified campsites at the Pounds Hollow Recreation Area Pine Ridge Campground. Non-electrified campsites will remain at \$10.

This proposal is made possible by the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act that allows day-use fees to be charged at developed sites on lands managed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Bureau of Land Management. The law came into effect in 2004 when it replaced the 1996 Recreation Fee Demonstration Act. The 1996 act set so few restrictions on qualifying lands that managing agencies were charging fees at roadside parking spots. The 2004 law stipulated the lands had to possess amenities, such as a picnic table, permanent toilet, interpretive signs, improved parking.

Local media reports have included rationales from the agency that Shawnee National Forest visitation has increased since the Aug. 21, 2017, Great Solar Eclipse put Garden of the Gods on the map. There has been no information made public that supports this supposed visitation increase. My own observations are that nice weather weekends get high visitation across the Shawnee and poor weather weekdays there may be no other vehicle in the parking lot, same situation I've witnessed for the past 20 years. There was a big enough crowd on the day of the eclipse that Garden of the Gods Road was closed to any new traffic because it was becoming too clogged for emergency vehicles to get through. Of course, for weeks, the Forest Service had been releasing videos and other marketing information begging people to come to the forest to enjoy the eclipse.

The fact Garden of the Gods showpiece Camel Rock is on a quarter no doubt also has attracted some new feet to the area. This special quarter was heavily promoted by the agency and tourism groups. Still, I have yet to see evidence the parking lots at these areas are more clogged on a more regular basis than they've ever been. They will be during the fall color season, as they have been every year, but the parks are typically deserted after the leaves have browned.

Several people have suggested charging a fee will filter out the users more prone to littering. This notion is troubling in its implication that poor folk take these lands for granted and have no qualms about leaving their beer cans on the ground instead of packing them out. I would argue the opposite. More groups are getting on the litter pickup bandwagon all the time, rich and poor,

local and distant, and are teaching their kids in the process. Just Aug. 24, Friends of Bell Smith Springs hosted a litter pickup event at Bell Smith Springs Recreation Area. Participants said they were surprised at how little litter there was near the popular swimming holes. During the Dec. 22, 2018, through Jan. 25, 2019, government shutdown, the Forest Service decided to keep Garden of the Gods Recreation Area open, but locked the vault toilets. Without any Forest Service staff available to stock toilet paper, much less do any patrolling of the popular Observation Trail, I expected the area to be littered up after a week or so. Not true. Maybe two dozen shivering people still walked the trails and climbed the rocks, but I could only find one spot of litter and that was due to a hole rusted into a picnic area dumpster. During the emptying of the dumpster the trash spilled out the bottom and the hauler moved the dumpster a couple feet over. The garbage disposal company was responsible for the only litter evident. During that shutdown, with Garden of the Gods open to everyone, completely free of any federal management, there were no reports of problems.

I would also argue that fees change our notions about public lands. Those of us poor local folk feel we have a stake in these places and that's why we take garbage bags along with us on our outings. The lands are free for daily use, but we pay through stewardship — and annual federal taxes. When the trails are eroded and dangerous, we notify the Forest Service. When trees have fallen over the trails, we let them know that too. When we see someone has dumped rubbish along a secluded road, we call it in or take care of it ourselves. These lands are an extension of our homes and we take it personally when someone damages them. I don't know that we would feel the same sense of ownership if we had to pay \$5 per visit. It always bugs me when people leave shopping carts in the parking spot, take items off the shelf and put them someplace else in the store or leave the garbage on the business floor instead of using the trash can. The justification: They pay somebody to take care of it. It's the justification of the lazy and selfish, but there are lazy and selfish people out there. Why should I pick up somebody else's mess in the woods? I paid to be here so why should I do somebody else's job for free? Public land management is not a business and we are not its customers; we are all owners.

While the Forest Service claims it is not getting enough federal money to provide upkeep to these proposed day-use-fee areas, it has sure spent a lot of money on improvements at Garden of the Gods Recreation Area over the past couple of years. Huge interpretive signs cropped up seemingly overnight in the parking area. New rail fences appeared near some of the bluffs. Cracked flagstones on the trail got replaced. At Jackson Falls Recreation Area a whole new wooden bridge appeared — to blight one of the most picturesque waterfalls in the region. An elaborate canoe and kayak launch

was added to Lusk Creek along the Eddyville Blacktop, complete with fake fossils in the sandstone walkway. At least three new massive parking lots appeared, one at Benham Ridge near One Horse Gap, one at Knights of the Golden Circle near Garden of the Gods and one at East Trigg Trailhead near Trigg Tower. Iron Furnace Recreation Area got a facelift with new interpretive signs added. It's good the agency is paying attention to our recreation sites. But, I never heard anyone complain that the signage at Garden of the Gods was insufficient before the replacement. Why spend thousands of dollars on materials and man hours to add new things just to come back a year or so later to say the maintenance of them cannot be afforded, unless the improvements were ultimately intended to justify charging day-use fees?

The Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act was intended to exist for 10 years and expire in 2014. Legislators have extended the act multiple times. The act expires Sept. 30, 2020. At that time it could be extended again. It could be allowed to expire. It could be replaced with some other law with greater or fewer restrictions on qualifying lands.

The U.S. Forest Service tried to use the FLREA to charge user fees on the Shawnee in 2007. The proposal was mostly the same as the current one, except in 2007 it included charging a fee of \$5 to ride horses on the forest's designated trails and a \$50 annual pass. The howls of outrage flushed herons from rookeries and rabbits from their hidey holes. Environmentalist and equestrian shook fists in solidarity at rallies. The Forest Service received 60 letters supporting the proposal, 93 letters opposing it and a petition of several thousand signatures not supporting it. Several area county boards approved resolutions opposing the plan. The Forest Service scrapped the day-use fee proposal and only increased the camping fees for the developed campgrounds.

Anyone familiar with the equestrian community in southern Illinois knows they are an organized and vocal constituency. It is notable the Forest Service chose not to include the \$5 fee for horses on the designated trails in this proposal.

The timing of this proposal is also notable, with the FLREA possibly expiring next year, a year between two eclipses when one day in 2017 brought historic Shawnee visitation and another in 2024 will likely do the same. Imagine how many new enormous interpretive signs could be built with all those \$5 fees.

I don't know if it's notable or not that the Shawnee National Forest Web site was down for several days following the public release of the fee proposal. When it came back online the site stated a new comment deadline of Nov. 1, 2019, for over a week until it was corrected to state Dec. 6.

We at *Springhouse* are not opposed to the idea of certain fees charged on the forest. We support a fee to use the beach at Pounds Hollow Recreation Area, but only if a lifeguard is on duty during the hours of opera-

tion. Until the Pounds Hollow renovation of 2004 the beach area had operated like Lake Glendale Recreation Area with a concessionaire taking money for swimming, providing a lifeguard, renting boats, selling snacks and bait. There was also a land line pay phone. The area is notorious for poor mobile phone service, so in the case of an emergency someone must waste precious time driving up to the road to get a signal. The renovation took away the building that also contained a shower house and intended the concessionaire to operate out of a food truck in the pavilion, but no concessionaire agreed to the terms. The Forest Service should figure out why no one agreed and sweeten the terms until they can find someone.

People use the forest for a lot of extra things to which special permits could apply. Horse riding, rock climbing using fixed anchor points, mountain biking, drone flying, geocaching. I'm not proposing the agency should charge people for these things, but it's preferable to charging a fee for simply existing at an area.

If maintenance costs are too great, downscaling is preferable to charging a fee for existing at an area. If someone makes the unfortunate decision of setting a picnic table ablaze, maybe just shovel the ashes into the brush and by the time the ground greens up people may forget it was ever there. Nobody has ever declared they would never again set foot at Garden of the Gods because there are not enough picnic tables. Maybe people wouldn't notice if there were only six vault toilets instead of eight. During the government shut down of nearly a month there were no vault toilets there, but people still visited.

If the intent of the fees is to cull the crowds to reduce wear and tear on the amenities, then shut the big yellow gates. It would be unpopular and would deal a blow to tourism, but the site could still be free and accessible to all. They would have to hike in from the Knights of the Golden Circle parking lot or the Hitching Post at Herod. Nothing wrong with stretching the legs. It's a shorter walk than from the parking lot to Delicate Arch in Arches National Park, which is the most popular trail in that park despite it being 5 miles uphill in the blazing sun.

I am not promoting these alternatives for serious consideration, but all would be better than charging people to visit our region's most iconic natural features.

These arguments are intended as an appeal to people to take pride our homeland and in its natural features. They are a part of who we are, in the same category as memories contained in a photo album, scrapbook or cemetery. I'd as soon sell out the public land as sell grandma's tombstone because the price of granite is up.

Others can and will present arguments of a more measurable sort. Our taxes already pay for our access. True. The fees will kill tourism and local businesses will suffer. Also true. The Forest Service will spend more time managing fees than tending to the maintenance the fees are supposed to fund. Can't rule it out. If this passes

they'll start charging for everyplace else, and raise the fees. Undoubtedly, probably in about seven years once everybody's used to paying, and will go after the horses, too.

Then there is the apathy response. "Oh, well, they charge in other places, times change, too bad." They charge in other places because we as a citizenry failed to prevent it, but now we have an opportunity to prevent it on the Shawnee National Forest just like we did last time.

From the Forest Service Web site <https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/shawnee/home/?cid=FSEPRD649386>:

Comments are being accepted on these proposed fees until Dec. 6, 2019. Comments cards are available at the Web site or can be picked up at any Shawnee National Forest office. Comments can be submitted by mail addressed to Shawnee National Forest, ATTN: Recreation Fee Proposal, 50 Highway 145 S, Harrisburg, IL 62946; by e-mail with the subject line "Recreation Fee Comments" to SM.FS.ShawneeRec@usda.gov

Comments may also be dropped off in person at the Harrisburg, Vienna or Jonesboro offices during business hours.

On a lighter note, find in this issue John J. Dunphy's story about life on the CCC Camp Simpson, as relayed to him by a book customer whose father worked at the camp. The photos included with "A Southern Illinois Man in the Civilian Conservation Corps" are true local treasures.

Gary DeNeal's "A Few Words on Catalpa" point out some of the near-miraculous features of an often unappreciated tree species.

Dixie Terry offers some suggestions for tomatoes in her "From My Kitchen Window" column.

Sam Stearns shares his love of a special canyon and an interest in the mycorrhizal fungi connections believed to serve as communication networks among plants in "Bell Smith Springs."

We are proud to publish two poems sure to move those who call rural places home: Roger K. Lyons's "The Farm" and Kay Rippelmeyer's "The Lay of the Land."

We review two recently-released books of local history: Todd Carr's *Cave-in-Rock Pirates & Outlaws* and Chad Lewis', Noah Voss' and Kevin Nelson's *The Big Muddy Monster: Legends, Sightings & Other Strange Encounters*.

This issue concludes with a new feature called *Pond Rings*, by yours truly. It may lack the sophistication of Bill and Jim Carr's *Springhouse Coloring Book* feature from the magazine's earliest years, but it is our hope the artist shows improvement with each issue as he imagines the interactions between species in a southern Illinois pond. Maybe someone will feel inspired to add some color to it.

The adventure continues.