



POCKET RANGER

App is a handy tool for navigating state parks

Back in April, for Earth Day, I wrote about the National Parks app from National Geographic. That column generated several emails from readers who wanted to tell me about a similar app for state parks. Since this is the time of year many people go camping and hiking, it seems appropriate to do another park-guide app.

The Pocket Ranger, from ParksByNature Network, currently features apps for 23 state park systems, with more than 20 in the development stage. The company works with various state agencies to develop the applications. In our neck of the woods, there are finished apps for Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Delaware, Virginia, Connecticut, Rhode Island and Maine. The ad-supported apps are free and run on both Apple and Android mobile devices.

Like a ranger in your pocket

The Pennsylvania state park system app is a handy tool for planning a trip to a park, or finding your way around once you get there.



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InSites

The home screen gives you several options for finding a park to explore. You can search a list of all state parks, or search by region, category (historic sites, natural areas, must-see parks) or activities (backpacking, biking, boating, rock climbing, etc.).

Once you find a park that you're interested in, clicking on its name brings up numerous options. General Information gives you a brief description of the park, its total acreage, hours of operation, amenities, regulations and directions.

Different parks have slightly different options to explore, but some of the more common ones are: Activities, Park History, Attractions, Reservations, Trails, Education & Events and Weather. A wireless connection allows you to get real-time updates for park events, news and weather information. There's even a function that connects you with opportunities to join conservation groups and do volunteer work for the parks. The app also contains a thorough user guide that explains all of the functions.

One of the most useful features this app has for exploring parks is maps. There are interactive Google maps, as well as detailed static maps that can be cached for viewing in areas without wireless coverage. Using a mobile app to find your way around a park offers some advantages over a traditional printed map. Size and portability are better with an app, since you can carry enough electronic maps to fill a backpack on your phone. Apps also can take advantage of the Global Positioning System.

GPS enabled

GPS is a network of satellites that allows a user with the right equipment — such as a smart phone — to determine his exact location on earth. The Pocket Ranger uses GPS for several functions. It can determine your current location to let you know what parks are nearby. If you're already in a park and come across a spectacular view, spot some interesting wildlife or find a great hiking trail, you can create a waypoint to mark the spot, record your track so others can follow, or share photos through social media sites that tell others exactly where they were taken.

The GPS capability also provides some safety features. If you are exploring with a group, you can enable Friend Finder, which allows group members to track each other's positions. You also can set up an alert that will notify designated emergency contacts of your location if you get lost or injured.

You also can use the GPS to play Geo-Challenges, a kind of nature-seeking scavenger hunt. Of course, GPS does have some limitations. There will be areas in parks that lack wireless coverage due to the terrain. And, of course, if your batteries die, you lose your maps.

Swiss Army app

The Pocket Ranger is a useful tool. The maps, information and other features will help you have a more enlightened and enjoyable visit to a state park. As with most things in life, there is room for improvement. The app crashed several times when I was using it, so the company needs to improve its stability. Also, viewing a large map on a small screen requires a lot of scrolling back and forth, and zooming in and out. One thing this app could really use is galleries of photos of scenery, flora and fauna from the parks.

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