

Great Smoky Mountains News Release

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Second Lady Karen Pence Highlights the Importance of Getting Outside for Mental Health *Park Increases Recreational Access*

Park officials were joined by Second Lady Karen Pence and Deputy Secretary of the Interior Katherine MacGregor at Clingmans Dome to talk about the mental health benefits of being outdoors and announced the next phase in the park's plan to restore public access to more roads and picnic areas.

Mrs. Pence is the Lead Ambassador for PREVENTS, an interagency task force that stands for the President's Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End a National Tragedy of Suicide. The task force launched a public health awareness campaign called "More Than Ever Before" to highlight the importance of checking in with family, friends and loved ones during the pandemic. During her visit, Mrs. Pence talked about this campaign, the holistic benefits of being outside, and the importance of public access to our country's incredible national parks and public lands.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has created an urgent need for us to pay closer attention to our mental health and emotional well-being," said Second Lady Karen Pence. "Our amazing national parks offer many mental health benefits and more than ever before, we must ensure that we are taking care of ourselves and each other."

Mrs. Pence, Deputy Secretary MacGregor, and Superintendent Cash opened Clingmans Dome Road today as the first step in the next phase of the park's reopening plan. Plans to open the following areas on Saturday, May 23 were also announced:

- Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail
- Big Creek Road and Big Creek Picnic Area
- Cosby Road and Cosby Picnic Area

- Greenbrier Road (to Ramsey Cascades Trailhead only)
- Tremont Road
- All park trails

“With nearly every state in the nation taking some action to reopen, what a joy it is to be in Tennessee with Second Lady Karen Pence to reopen areas of our most visited National Park for the enjoyment of the American People,” said Deputy Secretary Kate MacGregor. “The Great Smoky Mountains offer over half a million acres to relax and enjoy some fresh air and Vitamin D. Today we are thrilled to expand access for Americans to enjoy the mental and physical benefits of this stunning landscape.”

The park provides ample opportunities for outdoor recreation with over 800 miles of trails, quiet walkways, and self-guiding nature trails where visitors can disperse for a safe hiking experience. The health and safety of visitors, employees, and volunteers is the number one priority for the National Park Service. Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidance for this pandemic includes social distancing and wearing face coverings when social distancing cannot be maintained. By restoring access to additional roads this week, the Smokies offers even more opportunities for visitors to spread out and responsibly recreate across the park.

“We appreciate the patience of our visitors as we work together to safely share this space,” said Superintendent Cash. “When you’re planning your trip, have several options in mind so that you switch plans if you find an area congested. We want your Smokies experience to offer you a place to safely relax and recharge during these challenging times.”

Great Smoky Mountains National Park continues to increase recreational access and services across the park in alignment with guidance provided by the states of Tennessee and North Carolina, White House, CDC, and public health authorities.

The park began restoring access to the park on May 9 as part of a phased reopening plan with the following objectives: 1) support state health restrictions and local efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19; 2) allow the park, partners, and concession operators time to implement and improve mitigation actions with lighter levels of visitation; and 3) allow for an assessment of how returning visitors affect COVID-19 curves within surrounding communities.

The park has developed a range of mitigation actions that include new disinfection procedures and increased cleaning frequency for facilities; installation of protective barriers in visitor contact facilities; new employee practices for shared workplaces and vehicles; and focused messaging to prepare visitors for safe outdoor recreation.

Visitors are encouraged to follow social distancing guidelines and to wear facial coverings in busy areas like the Clingmans Dome Observation Tower when other visitors are present. Visitor centers and campgrounds will remain closed. These facilities will open when safe and appropriate mitigation measures are in place.

Park managers urge visitors to follow public health guidance for a safe and responsible visit: choose trails and overlooks without congested parking areas; visit early in the morning; stay in your vehicle while viewing wildlife and allow traffic to proceed; follow Leave No Trace principals by packing out everything you bring into the park; maintain social distance from other visitors; and wear face coverings where social distancing is not possible.

For the most up to date information about facility openings, service hours, and access, please visit the park website at www.nps.gov/grsm/planyourvisit/conditions.htm. Park rangers remain available to answer questions and help with trip planning via email or phone during business hours at (865) 436-1291, (828) 506-8620, or GRSM_Smokies_Information@nps.gov.

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