

BIG CREEK STATE PARK RECREATION USE PLAN

In advance of the 100th anniversary of Iowa state parks in 2020, the Department of Natural Resources is developing plans for future recreation opportunities that are compatible with the resources of each state park.

BIG CREEK STATE PARK - A BRIEF HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Iowa's first state park, Backbone, was dedicated in 1920 and more quickly followed - special places chosen for acquisition before their truly significant natural and cultural features were irretrievably lost through forces such as agriculture, logging, and urbanization. Recreation facilities were generally few in the early parks. As the 1920's progressed, however, there was a growing demand for more active things to do in state parks; pursuits like camping, swimming, and boating. The Great Depression of 1929 stalled state park efforts, but President Roosevelt's "New Deal" programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps, the CCC, and the Works Progress Administration, the WPA, brought thousands to work in a rapidly expanding park system building cabins, lodges, beaches, shelters, roads, dams and a myriad of other structures. World War II again slowed state park efforts, but peacetime brought another great expansion, with a number of new parks in southern Iowa. Camping became especially popular in the 1950's and 60's.

The state park emphasis on active recreation reached its peak with the early 1960's "Large Lakes" program of the Governor's Advisory Committee on Conservation of Outdoor Resources created to identify parts of the state lacking in water oriented recreation opportunities. Initial target locations included: the Ft. Dodge area, the Sioux City area, and the Fayette County area in northeast Iowa, each to feature a large lake of around 1,000 acres. In 1967, the Iowa Legislature appropriated initial funding for several recreation areas, including Big Creek, a part of the Saylorville Lake Des Moines River flood control project of the U.S. Corps of Engineers. The 866-acre Big Creek

Lake offered a much more stable water level than the larger Saylorville flood control impoundment.

The new state recreation areas would provide increased outdoor recreation opportunities, through public hunting in designated portions of the sites and 24 hour lake access for anglers. Big Creek Lake filled in 1972 and was designated a state park, but one surrounded by federal property and state wildlife management lands open to public hunting and 24 hour access. Plans included a large array of day-use outdoor recreation facilities, including a beach complex with concession, 13 shelters, modern restrooms, and boat launching ramps and parking areas. No campground was proposed for Big Creek since extensive Corps of Engineers' campgrounds were nearby.

Big Creek State Park was the northern terminus of a paved, multi-purpose trail extending 26 miles from Des Moines. In 1993, a large playground was constructed at the beach. In the 1990's also, a new east side entrance was provided south of the beach area and, later, another at the east side of the dam. A handicapped accessible fishing pier was constructed on the east side of the lake. The beach concession was razed and a new marina building was constructed in the late '90's, offering a variety of boat rentals, dock rental slips, as well as dry storage, bait and, boating accessories sales, and refreshments. In 2013, the Big Creek beach, featuring three beautiful new large picnic shelters and restroom buildings was re-dedicated. Staff are actively working to control invasive plant species and to replace them with hardwoods, wetland, and prairie species.

In recent years, Big Creek has experienced high bacteria levels, algae blooms, and high rates of sedimentation, the effects of run-off from agricultural lands in the watershed. Water quality has had to be continuously monitored and water contact activities such as swimming sometimes discouraged with potential effects also on the fishery.

The ongoing Big Creek Lake Watershed Project sponsored by the Boone and Polk County Soil & Water Conservation Districts provides cost-sharing assistance to landowners for agricultural conservation practices such as terraces, sediment basins, waterways, pasture management, stream bank stabilization, and other measures. In 2011, the DNR prepared a water quality improvement plan for Big Creek Lake which provides support for this ongoing effort.

BIG CREEK STATE PARK EXISTING FACILITIES

Existing Facilities	Quantity	Existing Facilities	Quantity
Beach	1	Restrooms	
Disc Golf Course	1	Seasonal (Flush)	13
Shelters	13	Year-round	2
Playground	1	ADA Fishing Pier	1
Trails	26 miles	Fish Cleaning Station	1
Concession Building	1	Boat Ramps	5

Table (above): Big Creek State Park Existing Facilities

A ROADMAP FOR THE FUTURE OF BIG CREEK STATE PARK

GOAL -

The over-riding goal of the recreation use plan is the enhancement of visitor outdoor recreation and educational experiences by improving recreation facilities and trails at Big Creek. This will promote visitor mental and physical health; encourage family time and making memories; protect natural resources for the future; create awareness and appreciation of the park's unique resources; and, generate economic activity in the region.



Image (above): Existing shelter to be replaced in the future.

OBJECTIVES -

PICNIC AREAS - CONTINUE UPDATING EXISTING FACILITIES PARK-WIDE

Built in the 1970s, Big Creek State Park is the most popular day-use state park in the state and has the largest number of picnic shelters (13) and seasonal restrooms (17).

ISSUES:

- The park's existing restroom facilities were the subject of an architectural and structural analysis conducted in 2000 which determined that replacement would be more cost effective than remodeling.
- Other original buildings need to be updated or replaced.

PROPOSALS:

- Over a multi-year period, systematically replace the shelters and restrooms parkwide in the following order:
 1. Beverly Dingy
 2. Cadet
 3. Hampton
 4. Inland Cat and Jolly Boat (assess waste water treatment options for restroom replacement options)
 5. Gannet
 6. Ensign
 7. Firefly
 8. Duster
 9. Remaining (5) shelters
- Add (3) year-round restrooms - Model Air field; Overlook area; Williams Drive.
- Eliminate seasonal restrooms at Overlook and Model Air Field, and replace with year-round restrooms.
- Eliminate one of two restrooms at the Hampton Shelter.



Image (above): New "Design Guide" picnic shelter 2

BEACH AREA COMPLEX - COMPLETE THE BEACH REDEVELOPMENT AND ENHANCEMENT EFFORT

The beach at Big Creek State Park is the most heavily used area in the park. Redevelopment of the area began in 2011 and included replacement of the existing shelters, restrooms, and walkways. Nine additional small lakeside shelters were also included in the development concept.

ISSUES:

- The amount of parking space is inadequate and the condition of the existing parking lot continues to cause problems.
- Continue the development of the beach area redevelopment effort.

PROPOSALS:

- Repave and enlarge the beach parking lot.
- Replace the concession equipment storage and the (2) chemical storage sheds.
- Construct small lakeside structures.



Image (above): Water recreation is popular at Big Creek State Park

PLAYGROUNDS - UPGRADE AND EXPAND PLAY OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG PARK USERS

A large wooden playground was developed at the beach in 1993 and requires increasing maintenance efforts every year, with replacement parts becoming difficult to obtain.

ISSUE:

- Playground replacement has been determined to be more cost effective long term than continuing the current maintenance program.

PROPOSAL:

- Replace dated play equipment with “nature-themed” play elements including climbing rocks, log/tree trunks, sand, vine tunnels, and tall grasses.

PAVED TRAIL - PROVIDE SAFE, ENJOYABLE MULTI-USE TRAIL OPPORTUNITIES

ISSUE:

- Both the existing paved trail within the park and the 4 miles of trail the state manages on the Neal Smith Trail are deteriorating.

PROPOSAL:

- Replace the 3 miles of trail within the park and 4 miles of trail on the Neal Smith Trail with 12' concrete surfacing.



Image (above): Existing wooden playground at Big Creek State Park

PARK ORIENTATION AND INTERPRETATION - INCREASE OPPORTUNITIES

ISSUE:

- In addition to the two recently constructed 4-sided kiosks, there are prime locations where signage would provide additional interpretive and educational opportunities, park-wide.

PROPOSALS:

- Add 4-sided kiosk at the welcome center at the south entrance.
- Add an interpretive panel - prairie area.
- Add orientation sign - West Williams Dr.

CABINS - EXPAND THE PARK'S OUTDOOR RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES WITH OVERNIGHT FACILITIES

ISSUE:

- With Big Creek State Park's suburban setting, modern overnight facilities would encourage a wider variety of park users.

PROPOSAL:

- Add (6) two-bedroom family cabins in one of the existing picnic areas.

RECREATION USE PLAN

Implementation of the Big Creek State Park Recreation Use Plan will help ensure that this classic Iowa state park remains a premier outdoor destination in the future. The draft plan was prepared with the input of park staff and will have review and input of current proposed park improvements from park visitors/regional stakeholders. It will be a detailed and practical blueprint for future action. All improvements will be completed with due regard for Big Creek State Park's unique natural resources and great scenic qualities.

The completion of a recreation use plan for each park will help determine the most effective allocation of funds on a project-by-project basis for the Iowa state park system as a whole. Big Creek's plan recommendations will be accomplished as necessary funding becomes available from ongoing sources as well as through partnering opportunities which may arise.

BIG CREEK STATE PARK RECREATION USE PLAN PROJECT PRIORITIES

High Priority (1)	Cost Estimate
Complete beach complex redevelopment	TBD
Replace (3) shelters - Park-wide	\$480,000
Replace (2) restrooms - Park-wide	\$150,000
Add (3) orientation panels - Park-wide	\$12,000
Add interpretive panel - Prairie Area	\$4000
High Priority Total:	\$TBD
Medium Priority (2)	
Replace (4) shelters - Park-wide	\$640,000
Replace (4) restrooms - Park-wide	\$300,000
Replace playground - Beach Area	\$90,000
Pave and widen 7 miles of trail - Park-wide	TBD
Medium Priority Total:	\$TBD
Low Priority (3)	
Add (6) year-round family cabins	\$900,000
Low Priority Total:	\$900,000

Table (above): Big Creek State Park's Project Priorities



Image (above): Fall color at Big Creek State Park

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BIG CREEK

