

MAQUOKETA CAVES 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.

MAQUOKETA CAVES STATE PARK - A BRIEF HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The area we now call Maquoketa Caves State Park in Jackson County was, at the turn of the last century, known as “Burt’s” and “Morehead Caves.” It’s truly unique system of caves and formations such as the “Pulpit,” “Dining Room,” “Dance Hall,” and “Ice Cave,” the dramatic natural bridge, rugged bluffs, and beautiful woodlands already made it a popular place for locals to enjoy.

Around that same time, a movement was building that would culminate in the State Park Act of 1917. The new Iowa Board of Conservation was empowered to create a state park system; to acquire significant natural and cultural areas like Maquoketa Caves before they could be forever lost by forces such as agriculture, urbanization, and logging.

The first land purchase took place in 1921 and the area became one of the first Iowa state parks, although not officially dedicated until 1933. The primary early emphasis of the Board of Conservation was the acquisition and protection of unique and sensitive natural and scenic areas like Maquoketa Caves. Formal state park outdoor recreation facilities like shelters and lodges were typically few, although Maquoketa Caves was somewhat unique in having some developed facilities, including a food concession building that, along with the one at Ledges, was one of only two in the state park system.

By the mid-1920’s, times were changing in Iowa and the rest of the country. The economy was good, better roads were being built, and folks wanted to do more active things like camping, swimming, and boating in their state parks.

But, in 1929, the Great Depression brought hard times to Iowa and the country and little funding was available for state parks. The election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932, however, brought an array of “New Deal” programs designed to get the country moving again, including the Civilian Conservation Corps, CCC and the Works Progress Administration, WPA, which put thousands to work building shelters, cabins, lodges, beaches, road, dams and a myriad other structures in national and state parks.

At Maquoketa Caves, two CCC companies worked from September, 1933 until May, 1937. The WPA continued the work of the CCC from July, 1936 through 1938. Both CCC and WPA worked on the Dance Hall Cave retaining wall and walkway project as well as over two miles of trails. Other “New Deal” work included three unique timber hexagonal trail-side shelters by the CCC, and entrance portals, latrine, a unique picnic circle with fireplaces, lodge concession building and picnic shelter completed by the WPA. The Board of Conservation assisted also in the lodge concession building project. By 1942, the park totaled 111 acres and was a popular outdoor recreation destination.

World War II brought another halt to state park efforts, but peacetime brought a period of great park system expansion, including a number of new southern Iowa state parks featuring artificial lakes. Camping became extremely popular, especially in the ‘50’s and ‘60’s.

In 1980, a Master Plan for Maquoketa Caves was prepared which called for the renovation of existing facilities and the provision of some new ones. Subsequent park improvement efforts have included the development of a modern campground with 29 sites (17 electric) and shower-toilet building; the conversion of the stone lodge and concession building into a lodge and restroom; the purchase of the nearby Sagers Museum in the mid-1980’s for conversion to a park visitor and interpretive center to help tell the area’s unique story to visitors; the

acquisition of 208 acres of adjoining land for buffer and resource management activities, as well as a nearby residence for staff use; and, an ambitious trail improvement effort.

The trail work by DNR personnel included construction of a dramatic system of stairs and boardwalks providing safer and more convenient access to the core of the park’s most unique features while, at the same time, helping reduce the environmental impact of the park’s many thousands of annual visitors.

While Maquoketa Caves enjoys great popularity, it has also been faced with some unique challenges. Periodic flooding on Raccoon Creek has sometimes filled portions of the cave system with a tremendous amount of debris, causing damage to walkway and lighting systems and requiring closure. Each time this occurs, a major effort is required for clean-up.

In 2010, the caves were closed to public use due to “white nose syndrome,” a fatal fungal disease affecting the bats which utilize the caves for hibernation. The caves were reopened in 2012 and visitors are now required to be screened before cave entry and to utilize disinfectant mats to help prevent the spread of the fungus.

Interpretation of the park’s natural features to increase visitor knowledge and appreciation has always been a priority for the DNR, but one very difficult to accomplish due to chronic staff shortages. In the late 1930’s and up to 1941, a seasonal naturalist had, in fact, been stationed at Maquoketa Caves and other key parks and provided numerous guided hikes and talks. Although seasonal help levels in recent decades have not enabled this program to be duplicated, staff has made an effort to provide this service, using their own resources and the assistance of volunteers. The former Sagers Museum contains a interpretive displays on the natural and cultural resources of the park. An interpretive kiosk is also located in the park.



Image (above): Natural bridge at Maquoketa Caves State Park

Maquoketa Caves Existing Facilities		Existing Facilities	
Quantity		Quantity	
Museum	1	Restroom - Seasonal (Flush)	3
Stone Shelter	1	Campground - Total Sites	28
Shelters	2	Campsites - Electric	16
Playground	1	Campsites - Non-electric	6
Caves	13	Campsites - Hike-in	6
Trails	6 miles	Campsites - Youth Group	3

Table (above): Maquoketa Caves State Park’s Existing Facilities

A ROADMAP FOR THE FUTURE OF MAQUOKETA CAVES STATE PARK

The over-riding goal of the recreation use plan is to enhance visitor outdoor recreation and education experiences by improving Maquoketa Caves State Park facilities. This will promote visitor mental and physical health; encourage family time and making memories in the outdoors, while protecting natural resources for the future; create awareness and appreciation of the park’s unique resources; and, generate economic activity in the region.

OBJECTIVES:

STONE SHELTER – CONTINUE TO DEVELOP THIS FACILITY FOR VISITOR SERVICES, INTERPRETIVE PROGRAMMING, AND EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

The stone shelter at Maquoketa Caves State Park is centrally located, serving as a host to the park’s cave exploration staging area and very popular interpretive programs.

ISSUE:

- The shelter’s interior lacks storage facilities for the interpretive program equipment and temporary exhibit materials, creating inefficiency in transporting all materials daily between the shelter and park office.

PROPOSAL:

- Construct a simple storage bench/cabinet unit and permanent interpretive signage inside the shelter that blends with the historic stone architecture and remains sensitive to limited floor space and visitor circulation.

YOUTH GROUP CAMPGROUND – CONTINUE DEVELOPMENT OF CAMPING AREA TO SERVE AS THE PREMIER OVERNIGHT GROUP EXPERIENCE IN IOWA

The three youth group campsites at Maquoketa Caves State Park are currently the most popular in the Iowa state park system. Their prime location near 13 caves to explore and 6 miles of hiking trails make them a popular destination for youth and people of all ages.

ISSUE:

- In addition to the recently installed water hydrants and restrooms, further the development of the three youth group campsites to provide modern camping facilities.

PROPOSALS:

- Add a small picnic shelter in each campsite to provide a covered area for dining, gathering, and overhead cover from the elements.
- Add a large group fire ring and seating for group activities and gathering space.



Image (above): Exploring the caves at Maquoketa Caves State Park

CAMPGROUND – UPGRADE THE EXISTING CAMPSITES TO MEET MODERN DAY CAMPER NEEDS.

The current campground was redeveloped in 1993 with (17) 30 AMP electrical sites, (6) non-electric sites, and (5) hike-in sites that range from 70' – 300' from the nearest parking area.

ISSUE:

- The 1993 campground upgrades are already dated and do not meet modern camper desires for more electricity and utility options while camping.

PROPOSAL:

- Convert all (23) campsites to 50 AMP electrical service, and include (6) full-utility hook-ups.



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

PICNIC AREA – REVITALIZE THE PICNIC AREA AND INCREASE PARKING AVAILABILITY

The picnic area's existing parking currently accommodates users of the (2) existing picnic shelters and serves as overflow parking for the caves staging area.

ISSUE:

- Parking is inadequate and the possibility of expansion is unfeasible due to the surrounding location. Shelters are aging and deteriorating.

PROPOSALS:

- Replace one picnic shelter with a CCC-inspired design shelter and eliminate the second shelter to increase available parking
- Renovate existing restroom.

HISTORIC STRUCTURES – MAINTAIN THE INTEGRITY OF THE PARK’S HISTORIC STRUCTURES

Maquoketa Caves State Park’s stone structures were completed between 1936-1938 by the Works Progress Administration (WPA), but were originally started by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The CCC also constructed the hexagonal log shelters located in various remote areas in the park. These structures are a legacy to be treasured and enrich the park visitor’s experience.

ISSUE:

- Historically significant structures require ongoing maintenance and periodic restoration efforts to preserve their integrity.

PROPOSALS:

- Restore the stone picnic circle (last restored in the 1990s and in need of tuck pointing, etc.) and two hexagonal log shelters located in remote areas of the park with no vehicular access.



Image (above): Unique Entrance Portal at Maquoketa Caves

PLAYGROUNDS - EXPAND PLAY OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG PARK VISITORS

ISSUE:

- Older playgrounds with traditional equipment typically provide limited, less challenging, non-wheelchair accessible play elements.

PROPOSAL:

- Replace existing play equipment with play ground that includes enjoyable and challenging “nature-themed” elements such as climbing rocks, log/tree trunks, sand, vine tunnels, and tall grasses.



Image (above): “Nature-themed” play elements: climbing rocks

PARK HEADQUARTERS - ENHANCE VISITOR ACCESS AND PROVIDE EFFICIENT OPERATIONAL WORK AND EQUIPMENT STORAGE FACILITIES

ISSUE:

- The heated work space is smaller than a standard state park shop, making normal tasks and operations difficult. The current office and shop area does not have enough space for a standard equipment storage building.

PROPOSAL:

- Add an additional heated bay to the existing park office/shop to increase work space, and construct an equipment storage building in a nearby location (western field area).

RECREATION USE PLAN

Implementation of the Maquoketa Caves Use Plan will help ensure that this classic Iowa state park remains a premier outdoor destination in the future. It has been prepared with the input of park staff. Future input will be sought from park visitors/regional stakeholders as well. This will act as a detailed and practical blueprint for future action. All improvements will be completed with due regard for Maquoketa Caves 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. Maquoketa Caves’ plan recommendations will be accomplished as necessary funding becomes available from ongoing sources as well as through partnering opportunities which may arise.



Image (above): Trails at Maquoketa Caves State Park

MAQUOKETA CAVES STATE PARK RECREATION USE PLANS PROJECT PRIORITIES

High Priority (1)	Cost Estimate
• Add small picnic shelter, fire ring, seating to each youth group site	\$255,000
• Add storage unit/interpretation signage to stone shelter	\$50,000
High Priority Total:	\$305,000
Medium Priority (2)	
• Convert all (23) campsites to 50-amp electric service and (6) to full hook-up	\$545,000
• Renovate existing restroom - picnic area	\$110,000
Medium Priority Total:	\$655,000
Low Priority (3)	
Restore stone picnic circle and (2) hexagonal log shelters	\$600,000
• Replace picnic shelter - picnic area	\$160,000
• Replace playground - picnic area	\$80,000
• Add additional heated bay - park shop	\$30,000
• Add new equipment storage building	\$510,000
Low Priority Total:	\$1,380,000

Table (above): Maquoketa Caves State Park Project Priorities

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MAQUOKETA CAVES

