

MOUNTAINS

WORD FROM THE SMOKIES

Partners help meet the needs of park, visitors

Valerie Polk

Word from the Smokies

Great Smoky Mountains National Park preserves more than 500,000 acres of treasured mountain landscape and roughly 2,900 miles of rivers and streams, all habitat for thousands of species of plants, animals, fungi, and more. In the midst of this impressive biodiversity are nearly 850 miles of trails and numerous iconic landmarks that regularly draw more than 12 million visitors each year — and a record of 14.1 million visits in 2021.

The National Park Service is charged with protecting and preserving this abundant and much beloved place, but thankfully it is not alone in its mission. It relies on four primary nonprofit partners to serve a growing number of visitors and care for a vast and varied park.

In describing Great Smoky Mountains Association's role as one of these partners, GSMA CEO Laurel Rematore recalled a quote attributed to writer Freeman Tilden, whose work shaped the field of interpretation in national parks: "Through interpretation, understanding; through understanding, appreciation; through appreciation, protection."

"To me," said Rematore, "that means that as human beings, we instinctively protect what we care about. GSMA is in the business of helping visitors to better understand the cultural and natural resources found in this park so that they will be inspired to care about and become stewards of this land."

GSMA has been working side-by-side with the National Park Service since 1953 and has given more than \$47 million in support to the park in that time. It supports NPS educational, scientific and historical preservation efforts by operating official bookstores inside the park and in gateway communities, publishing books and other media featuring cultural and natural resources, providing monetary support for park programs, and building an informed constituency of individuals and businesses that care about the park as part of an extensive membership program.

GSMA engages readers in park stories and gives voice to important topics through its publications — which include the new "Fishes of the Smokies" field guide, the chapter book "A Search for Safe Passage," the 2022 firefly-themed wall calendar and the award-winning Smokies Life biannual journal — and with its Smokies LIVE blog and Sepia Tones: Exploring Black Appalachian Music podcast. It also collaborates with the park on projects like the Smokies Smart initiative, an effort to promote visitor safety through education. As part of this project, GSMA-operated bookstores feature Smokies Smart hiking essentials, like backpacks and water bottles, to help hikers prepare for outdoor activities.

"We do not do this work alone," Rematore said. "It takes a village of part-



Great Smoky Mountains Association operates official bookstores inside the park and in gateway communities, offering a selection of educational, park-service-approved merchandise including publications, gifts, foods, stuffed animals, and more. PROVIDED BY JOYE ARDYN DURHAM

ners to meet the needs of millions of park visitors each year."

Another educational partner, Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont has been inspiring learning and curiosity for more than 50 years through its student and adult programs, workshops, and camps.

"While some visitors spend only minutes or a few hours outside their car exploring, we bring people into the park for days on end," said Catey McClary, GSMIT president and CEO. "We encourage and invite them to take the time to get to know the plants, the streams, and the critters that make up the ecosystem that the park service works so hard to protect, fostering lifelong learners that will be both current and future stewards of our beloved Smokies."

GSMIT staffers witness first-hand the positive effects nature has on their campers and program participants, a fact that has become even more significant during a global pandemic that has drawn people outdoors and into the park in record numbers.

Friends of the Smokies is the park's philanthropic partner. Since its founding in 1993, FOTS has provided more than \$75 million through the individuals, businesses, and foundations that donate. The organization now supports some 70 park projects annually and recently made a 20-year agreement to continue its commitment to funding trail restoration, environmental educa-

tion programming, wildlife research, hemlock treatment and other projects that might not be achieved without this assistance.

A successful NPS/FOTS partnership, Trails Forever supports the work of skilled trail crews to restore and rehabilitate trails, improving safety and sustainability for years to come. A new program recently introduced by FOTS called Forever Places will support a permanently funded historic preservation crew with an endowment goal of \$9 million.

A fourth primary park partner, Discover Life in America, is on a mission to discover, understand, and conserve biological diversity in the Smokies, positioning itself as the park's nonprofit science arm. In 2023, DLiA will celebrate 25 years during which it has more than doubled the park's known species — from around 9,000 to more than 21,000 species found to exist within the park's diverse habitats. Of that number, 1,049 are completely new to science.

"You can't protect species if you don't know they exist," said DLiA Executive Director Todd Witcher, "so the first step is the discovery, but we also have to determine species rarity and their roles in the ecosystem, and how that changes over time, so the park can better manage this unique space — a globally disappearing temperate rainforest. We've accomplished loads, but there is much more work to do here — and everywhere

— when it comes to biodiversity conservation."

DLiA's newest initiative, Smokies Most Wanted, calls on the public to submit observations of lifeforms in the park through a simple phone app called iNaturalist and has already achieved more than 80 new park records.

These four nonprofit partner organizations work together with the National Park Service to ensure they are supporting the park in a complementary fashion, and there are enough unmet needs to go around.

"There's an old adage that says, 'No one person can do everything, but everybody can do something.' That's how I feel about the support and collaboration that the park receives from its four primary partners: Great Smoky Mountains Association, Friends of the Smokies, Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont, and Discover Life in America," said Superintendent Cassius Cash. "It takes all of their combined missions working together to meet the needs of today's visitors as we usher in the next generation of users, supporters, advocates ... and even employees for the next century."

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Till

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Emmett Till Legacy Foundation, Deborah Watts, said the memoir is new evidence that shows Donham's involvement in the case and is particularly important when combined with the arrest warrant.

"I truly believe these developments cannot be ignored by the authorities in Mississippi," she said.

In the memoir, Donham says she attempted to help Till once he'd been located by her husband and brother-in-law and brought to her in the middle of the night for identification.

"I did not wish Emmett any harm and could not stop harm from coming to him, since I didn't know what was planned for him," Donham says in the manuscript compiled by her daughter-in-law. "I tried to protect him by telling Roy that 'He's not the one. That's not him. Please take him home.'" She claims in the manuscript that Till, who had been dragged from a family home at gunpoint in the middle of the night, spoke up and identified himself.

Donham adds she "always felt like a victim as well as Emmett" and "paid dearly with an altered life" for what happened to him.

"I have always prayed that God would bless Emmett's family. I am truly sorry



In this Sept. 23, 1955, photo, J.W. Milam, left, his wife, second from left, Roy Bryant, far right, and his wife, Carolyn Bryant, sit together in a courtroom in Sumner, Miss. Bryant and his half-brother Milam were charged with murder but acquitted in the kidnapping and torture slaying of 14-year-old black teen Emmett Till in 1955 after he allegedly whistled at Carolyn Bryant. AP FILE

for the pain his family was caused," she says at the end of the manuscript, which is signed "Carolyn" but indicates that it was written by her daughter-in-law Marsha Bryant.

The memoir is remarkable not only because it's the most extensive account of the sensational episode ever recorded by Donham, but also because it contains contradictions that raise questions about her truthfulness through the

years, said Dale Killinger, a retired FBI agent who investigated the case more than 15 years ago.

For instance, Donham claims in the memoir to have yelled for help after being confronted by Till inside the family grocery store in Money, Mississippi, yet no one ever reported hearing her screams, Killinger said. Also, Donham never previously mentioned that she and Roy Bryant chatted about the abduction. In the manuscript, she says they did.

"That seems ludicrous," Killinger said. "How would you have a major event in your life and not talk about it?"

The Justice Department closed its most recent investigation into the case in December and Mississippi authorities haven't given any indication they plan to pursue the kidnapping warrant or other charges against Donham. But the Till family is pushing authorities to act.

Keith Beauchamp, a filmmaker whose documentary preceded the Justice Department probe in which Killinger was involved and that ended without charges in 2007, said the memoir shows that Donham "is culpable in the kidnapping and murder of Emmett Louis Till and to not hold her accountable for her actions, is an injustice to us all."

"Our fight will continue until justice is finally served," Beauchamp said.

It was Beauchamp, along with two of Till's relatives, who discovered the ar-

rest warrant with Donham's name on it earlier this month in the basement of a Mississippi courthouse.

Tyson, the historian who provided the roughly 35,000-word manuscript to the AP, helped spur the government's most recent investigation into the killing by publishing a book in 2017 in which he quoted Donham as saying she lied when she claimed Till grabbed her, whistled and made sexual advances. In the memoir, however, she claims Till did do those things. During the most recent investigation, Donham told the FBI she had never recanted, the Justice Department said.

Tyson said Donham's statements in the memoir exonerating herself of wrongdoing need to be taken with "a good-sized shovel full of salt," particularly her claim that Till identified himself to the men who took him from the family home and later admitted killing him.

"Two big white men with guns came and dragged him out of his aunt and great-uncle's house at 2 o'clock in the morning in the Mississippi Delta in 1955. I do not believe for one minute that he identified himself," Tyson said.

Neither Donham nor any of her relatives have responded to messages and phone calls from the AP seeking comment. It is unclear where Donham currently lives or if she has an attorney. Her last known address was in Raleigh, North Carolina.