

rich and varied, the important end result is that the park remains open and accessible to everyone.

Friends of the Smokies is an important ally to the park. As Dana Soehn, Public Information Officer for the GSMNP, states, “Right now, the government funds many of our ‘must dos.’ But Friends allows us to do things we could not otherwise accomplish.”

How it works, according to Holly Demuth, NC Director of Friends, is that each year the park puts out a “Needs List.” The needs are varied—everything from suppressing hemlock woolly adelgid infestation and reducing ginseng poaching to fixing historical buildings and maintaining visitor amenities (such as making sure the toilets work). The organization helps to spread the word, raises fund and enlist volunteers.

The organization’s first flagship project was the reconstruction of the historic Mt. Cammerer Fire Tower. In the 20 years since Friends was founded, it has helped other flagship projects, including returning elk after a 150-year absence; creating historical exhibitions at the new Oconaluftee Visitor’s Center, restoring historic cabins and homesteads, rehabilitating trails, and much more.

“Parks as Classroom” is another Friends of the Smokies project. It allows teachers to use the park as a classroom

while meeting state’s core curriculum requirements in science and social studies. “We see students’ eyes come alive,” says Dana. “They find, through their own experience, they don’t have to go to the rainforest to find biodiversity. It’s right here in their backyard—one of the most ecologically diverse places on the planet.”

The organization receives funding through membership, grants, and donors. “It is all about the people,” continues Holly. “Their reasons for contributing vary. Some people came to the park as children on family vacations, and although it has been 50 years, still treasure it. Some are businesses that appreciate the park as an anchor of tourism. Some are people who love taking their children for a walk in the woods or showing them the way people used to live.” Another source of funding comes from the Specialty License Plates program.

The GSMNP is a living link to our ecological and historical past, as well as to the hope

and beauty of our future. To help protect this amazing resource, consider becoming a member of the Friends of the Smokies, perhaps buy a specialty license plate, or join a guided hike.

For more information and a current “Needs List,” visit friendsofthesmokies.org.



(Photo by Esther Blakely)



(Photo by Sam Hobbs)