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Ryerson's attendance rebounds with improved campgrounds

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WIND RIDGE – The modernization of Ryerson Station State Park's campgrounds is immediately paying dividends as campers flocked to the park last year to spend more time outdoors during the coronavirus pandemic.

Attendance in the camp area, which was renovated for nearly two years, more than doubled in 2020 compared to the last full year it was open to the public in 2017.

The upgrades included new indoor showers and deluxe cottages as part of the "reversioning plan" designed to make the state park in western Greene County more appealing to visitors after the loss of its key attraction, Duke Lake, nearly 16 years ago.

Park Manager Alan Johnson said attendance at the newly renovated campgrounds was up 128% last year over 2017's figures, even after the site was closed from mid-March to late-May during the original shutdown at the beginning of the pandemic. The campgrounds soon recovered those lost visitors and more after reopening in June, attracting many people from Allegheny and Washington counties and as far away as Chicago, Boston, South Carolina and South Dakota, Johnson said.

"It's incredibly satisfying to know we're on the right track with our renovations, moving forward 'reversioning' the park with that being the first phase of it," Johnson said. "What was interesting to me over the summer was that the majority of the campers were people who had never been here before. Almost everyone we talked to ... all indicated they would be back."

He's happy that positive experience is encouraging people to return, especially as construction is continuing on Ryerson's aquatics center that will include a new pool and splash park. Johnson described the park's overall attendance last year as "skewed" because the pool area has been closed since 2019 and construction vehicles traveling back and forth at the site triggered counters, giving park officials unreliable figures.

That construction is part of the park's "Revision Ryerson" plan announced in June 2015 after it was determined the dam at Duke Lake, which was allegedly damaged by nearby longwall mining a decade earlier, could not be rebuilt due to continued ground movement. A \$36 million settlement payment in 2013 from Consol Energy, which denied responsibility for the damage to the dam, is being used for a multitude of upgrades at the park for its campgrounds, pool area, trails and streams for fishing.

State Department of Conservation and Natural Resources spokesman Terry Brady said the uptick in attendance at the campgrounds and the impending reopening of the pool indicates their efforts are working to make the park more attractive to visitors after struggling upon the loss of Duke Lake in 2005.

"The upgrades and modernization at Ryerson Station – and the resultant surge in camping at that park – show parks visitors appreciate and respond to improvements," Brady said. "With the new swimming area soon to come on line (this year), that appreciation only will get stronger."

Johnson said the biggest change so far was transitioning from a "rustic" campground to a modern one with showers and three new deluxe cottages and two other cabins that can be rented year-round. The renovation project began in early 2018 and was completed in late 2019, meaning last year was the first opportunity for visitors to fully enjoy the new campgrounds.

"That helped spur visitor numbers," Johnson said. "I don't think we received one complaint over the campsites."

The cottages and cabins all were rented over the Christmas and New Year's holiday weekends, he said. Johnson expects attendance to improve again this year since the normally slow winter season has been busier than usual, and spring and summer bookings are already picking up.

He's hopeful the new pool will be open this summer, although construction has stopped until March due to the weather. Once it's ready, Johnson thinks the new-and-improved aquatics center will be a springboard for more project at Ryerson.

"I think it will attract people," Johnson said. "But at the same time, it's important interact with people who come to that facility and show them what else is here other than just a swimming pool."

People who want to reserve a cabin or campsite can call 1-888-PAPARKS or go online to pennsylvaniastateparks.reserveamerica.com.

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