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## Resource Protection in the World's Largest Urban Park: A Model for Partnership Between Parks, Higher Education, and the Community

### Introduction

**S**helby Farms Park, the world's largest urban park (4,500 acres), is located within the city limits of Memphis, Tennessee. The park is in the geographic center of Shelby County, approximately 12 miles east of the downtown area. Of the 4,500 total acres, 1,032 have been designated as a Tennessee State Natural Area. The park is a significant natural and recreational resource for the citizens of Memphis and Shelby County.

The Memphis Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) completely encompasses Shelby County and includes portions of four other counties. According to the 1990 census and the Bureau of Economic Analysis, the Memphis MSA has a population of just over one million persons and grew at a rate of 8.73% from 1990-1997 (Memphis Chamber of Commerce 1999). The central location of Shelby Farms Park within the county places it within approximately 15 miles of the majority of the county's residents, and at the center of the county's suburban growth.

The park is a major source of recreational opportunity in the Memphis area and contains a sensitive bottomland hardwood forest and a number of archaeological sites. It is part of a landscape that is culturally and historically rich. Due to natural geographic barriers (mainly the Mis-

issippi River to the west of the city), much of Memphis's growth and development has moved eastward from the downtown area, and into northern Mississippi to the south. Shelby Farms Park, once considered remote, is currently surrounded by commercial and residential development. Owing largely to its proximity to developed areas, the park's resources are threatened by frequent proposals for its development, and by the recreational pursuits of more than one million visitors (Shelby County Department of Public Works 1998).

To address the resource protection and management concerns within Shelby Farms Park, Shelby County Administration and the Shelby Farms Board enlisted the assistance of the University of Memphis Park Ranger Training Program. The university's role was to provide training, expertise, and qualified per-

sonnel to assist in the planning and implementation of park resource protection and management at Shelby Farms.

This descriptive case study outlines the partnership arrangements and participants, and the methods employed to achieve park management goals. These methods include adopting a resource protection and management philosophy based on the National Park Service (NPS) model of conserving and protecting the resources while providing for their enjoyment. Specifically, the plan includes the use of seasonal resource protection rangers to patrol the park augmented by a volunteer-based program.

#### **Administration**

Shelby Farms Park is under the administrative mantle of the county government. In 1996, Shelby County's mayor appointed a board of advisors to make policy and directives regarding the park's administration and operation. Since its inception, the Shelby Farms Board has repeatedly promoted efforts to preserve natural resources in the park while voting down any proposal for park use that had potential for damaging the park's resources. The mayor and the board have become determined advocates for preservation of the park's unique natural and cultural resources.

#### **Park Visitation**

The park was visited by more than one million visitors last year,

and their recreational activities ranged from early-morning running to evening fishing. In fact, there are 45 recreational activities officially recognized and accommodated within the park's boundaries. The park is open to visitors during daylight hours throughout the year. There is currently no entrance fee.

#### **A Brief History**

Shelby Farms was designated as a penal farm for the rehabilitation of criminals in 1929. The facility was considered a model of practical rehabilitation and self-sufficiency. "The Farm" as it was called, cultivated a number of crops and raised livestock from which nearly all the needs of the prisoners were derived. What could not be raised was purchased through the sale of surplus food and livestock. During the mid-1960s the penal farm concept came under a great deal of scrutiny, largely as a result of the civil rights movement. Eventually the farm sold most of its livestock and ceased production.

In 1966, the penal farm site was under consideration as a proposed nuclear fuel processing facility. Although the penal farm site was eliminated from consideration, Shelby County officials agreed that the property should be sold. Throughout the late-1960s and mid-1970s a variety of plans for the development of the penal farm property were put forth. These included commercial and residential development, an airport, and a dam and recreational res-

ervoir. More recently, proposals have surfaced to develop golf courses and a 10,000-seat soccer stadium. The stadium proposal was denied by the Shelby Farms Board.

In 1975, park planner G. Eckbo proposed a "pastoral park" for the citizens of Shelby County on the penal farm property. The "Eckbo Plan," as it came to be known, proposed a large natural area along the Wolf River, and included restoring the channelized river to its original meandering flow. Interestingly, the Eckbo Plan also proposed a large "African safari"-type zoological park for the interior of the penal farm property which, at that time, consisted mainly of open, formerly cultivated fields. In 1976, Shelby County government officials passed a resolution to develop the penal farm land according to the Eckbo Plan; however, the land was never developed according to that plan because of citizen action against it.

In 1977, the undeveloped park came under the supervision of the warden of the county prison (located at the northwest corner of the property) because that position oversaw the 4,500 acres of land formerly used for penal farm activity. For the next eight years, the penal farm property remained undeveloped and mostly closed to the public. In 1985, the position was changed from warden of the county jail to superintendent. By this time, the would-be park was at the very edge of encroaching suburban development.

The first superintendent enlisted

local businesses to support his efforts to open the newly named Shelby Farms Park for public use through donations of funds and equipment. Basic playground equipment and picnic tables were installed and began to draw a few visitors, including the families that he hoped would use the park. However, almost immediately, outlaw motorcycle gangs began to occupy sections of the park. Crime, especially incidents involving drugs and firearms, increased rapidly. Within a few weeks only the gang members dared venture into the fledgling park.

To address the crime problem, the park's superintendent arranged for local law enforcement agencies to concentrate enforcement efforts at Shelby Farms. After several weeks of intense scrutiny by law enforcement officers, the outlaw motorcycle gangs left Shelby Farms. Crime in the park was dramatically reduced and park visitors again returned to Shelby Farms. To ensure the safety of park visitors, the superintendent employed auxiliary police officers and off-duty regular officers to patrol the park. This procedure was effective until the early 1990s, when increased visitation presented threats to the park's resources.

Although a wide variety of recreational activities were being pursued in the park, mountain bike use best exemplifies the growing resource management problems in the park at that time: hikers began complaining that the trails were eroding, widening, becoming braided, and devel-

oping numerous mud holes. There were additional complaints that mountain bikers were forcing hikers off of the trail as they sped by. As mountain biking continued to grow in popularity, so grew the need for resource management and protection at Shelby Farms.

At this point, the superintendent contacted the University of Memphis for assistance in planning for resource management. The university's Park Ranger Training Program—about which more will be said below—is an interdisciplinary program that prepares students from a variety of academic majors for work as seasonal protection and interpretive park rangers for the National Park Service (NPS), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and a number of state and local land management agencies.

In January 1996, the park's first superintendent retired. The Shelby Farms Board conducted a national search for a new superintendent, and subsequently hired one of the authors (Martin), a long-time park volunteer and local businessman, as interim superintendent. After six months, the Shelby Farms Board conducted another search and later chose him to continue in the position permanently.

As is the case in many public agencies responsible for recreational service delivery, Shelby Farms Park is challenged by fiscal constraints. A large portion of the park's budget is allotted for personnel-related expenses, while a much smaller portion

is required for equipment (e.g., grass-cutting equipment and park ranger patrol vehicles). In consultation with the University of Memphis Department of Geography, the superintendent has been able to reallocate personnel resources in such a manner so as to ensure optimal staffing during both high and low park-use times, and transfer surplus funds to resource management efforts.

#### **The Volunteer Reserve Ranger Program**

Shelby Farms Park now maintains a reputation as a safe, relatively low-crime recreation area within the city limits of Memphis. As the park's reputation as a safe recreation area has grown, so has visitation. With more visitors using the park, the demand for facilities and amenities has grown as well. Recognizing the needs of visitors, Shelby County administration, Shelby Farms Board, and park management expanded services in many areas. The most notable of these was the need for security in the park. Although few crimes were being committed within the park, nearly all of its visitors reside in a large metropolitan area with typical crime problems. The potential for criminal incidents is ever present, but kept in check by judicious use of visible patrol by resource protection rangers, resource staff, and volunteer rangers.

The Volunteer Reserve Ranger program is the result of a partnership between the University of Memphis Park Ranger Training Program, the

citizens of Shelby County, county administration, the Shelby Farms Board, and park management. The program is patterned after the NPS seasonal resource protection curriculum and provides a comprehensive three-day training course for those wishing to participate, preparing them to provide visitor-centered service in the park. The reserve rangers are asked to give a minimum of 16 hours per month to the park, and are encouraged to work on projects of interest to the individual and of benefit to the park visitors. The Shelby Farms model relies on three elements critical to the success of a volunteer ranger program: selection and recruitment, training and preparation, and motivation and retention.

**Selection and recruitment.**

Shelby Farms Park relies on recruiting university students with majors in the natural sciences or park resource management, and members of the community who possess valuable knowledge, skills, and abilities and who desire to give service to their community. Volunteer ranger candidates are often referred to Shelby Farms park management by friends who are rangers or through academic programs. Each volunteer candidate is interviewed by the superintendent, and before beginning the next phase, a background check is performed. Persons who wish to volunteer for the purpose of gaining an inside track on paid positions in the park will likely become discouraged quickly and will not persist in the program. Therefore, each volunteer

is told at the outset that the program will be exclusively a volunteer program, and that the volunteer program is not an intake program for law enforcement work.

**Training and preparation.** The philosophy of the park with respect to its mission must be imparted at the outset. The mission of the park should act as a guide for the volunteer's actions. The Shelby Farms model provides for an initial 20-hour course for volunteers which includes coverage of topics such as constitutional law and civil liberties, legal liability issues, appropriate interactions between volunteers and visitors, ethics and conduct, park-specific knowledge, and field training to be completed with experienced paid or volunteer ranger staff. Examples of park-specific skill-building include equestrian activities, use of park vehicles, such as all-terrain vehicles and watercraft, and other tools utilized for resource protection and management efforts.

**Motivation and retention.** Once the volunteer ranger has been selected, every effort is made to keep those who are active and serve the needs of the park motivated so that they will want to continue. Shelby Farms assigns a paid staff member to serve as volunteer coordinator. The responsibilities of the volunteer coordinator include providing opportunities for knowledge and skill acquisition and recognition of accomplishments of the volunteer rangers. The goal is to gather a relatively small, manageable number of volun-

teers who will serve the park in the long term. The volunteers, too, should benefit from the experience, thus encouraging them to persist in service to the park. A recently completed dissertation (Bartel 1999) found that supporting the intrinsic motivation of volunteers tends to increase a sense of organizational loyalty and subsequent performance. To this end, the park offers on-going training and certification programs that are of interest to the volunteers and which benefit to the park.

**Evaluation and study.** On-going study of the partnership's role in resource protection and conservation is necessary to ensure continued viability of the program. Additional study of visitor perceptions of the park's resource protection efforts

would assist in quantifying the effectiveness of the partnership.

#### **The Future of the Partnership**

Recently, Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania has joined the Shelby Farms partnership, providing student interns and trained resource protection rangers for the summer months. To enhance the training and preparation efforts of the program, innovative educational strategies, such as Web-based and -enhanced instruction, are being developed for the park by Slippery Rock faculty and graduate students. Future efforts to enhance the partnership include innovative training to support manageable growth of the volunteer program, in concert with an increasing emphasis on resource protection and management.

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