Chicot State Park: Deteriorating treasure?

By JEFF GUILLORY
Parish Editor

(Editor’s note: This is part one of an investigation into the possible deprivation of Chicot State Park. Information was obtained through on-site examinations by this reporter and through extensive interviews with knowledgeable sources. Because of the highly sensitive information revealed, the sources have been guaranteed anonymity.)

Chicot State Park, located seven miles north of Ville Platte, is the state’s largest and arguably the most beautiful park. However, recent evidence suggests the local park is deteriorating rapidly. Allegations of abuse, neglect, and mismanagement have begun to surface.

Chicot generated over $350,000 in revenues last year. Under current law, 50% of the proceeds are supposed to be put back into the park for improvements and renovations.

However, according to inside sources, much of the money is not getting back to the park.

Here are a list of alleged, worsening conditions:

1. Supplies and materials used to upgrade operating equipment and vehicles are being purchased through salvage and junkyards.
2. Requisition orders for new equipment and supplies are misplaced, sometimes indefinitely.
3. The park’s garbage truck (See Chicot - Page 2A)
Chicot State Park

has been inoperable since April of 1990. Garbage is currently being picked up in an open-bed dump truck and brought to a dump site.

4. Offices have insufficient heating and cooling and no hot water.

5. Collection booths have broken windows and inadequate locks even though employees at times have large amounts of cash in the register.

6. Most of the lawn mowers are unsafe and constantly broken down.

7. Linens in the cabins are stained.

8. Some restrooms operate without toilet paper and/or cleaning material.

9. The first restroom on the South Landing camping area dumps raw sewage – sewage which eventually drains into the lake.

In addition to these allegations, other perceived problems exist.

The South Landing camping area, consisting of 104 sites, has been closed since October 1, 1991. The area was initially closed to modernize the existing facilities. The plan was to apply asphalt to the sites to resemble the sites at the North Landing.

FAME Construction of Baton Rouge, which leased operating equipment from contractor Donnie Sharp, worked on the area prior to Christmas, but postponed the project due to poor weather conditions and excessive rains.

The area has not been worked on since. In addition, gas and water pipes were broken during the initial project. After walking through the closed area, this reporter noticed that the pipes have yet to be repaired.

In the meantime, Sharp picked up the equipment.

The move caused speculation. Some visitors and local merchants assumed the contractor was bankrupt. The Gazette has learned differently.

According to Norwood Davis, chairman of the State Parks Commission, the project, initially scheduled to be completed in 90 days, is currently using its 45 rain days allowed under contract. Work is reportedly scheduled to begin within the next four to five days, according to Davis.

That news, if accurate, may be reassuring to visitors because, according to one former employee, March is the busiest camping month of the year. At a cost of $9 per night per site, the park is currently losing $936 per night if filled to capacity.

The pool, picnic and Big Shelter area has also been closed since the beginning of October 1991. The area was closed to repair roads and to add a parking extension. The extension was constructed to provide an additional parking area for fishermen who use the South Landing boat launch. Work is near completion.

As this reporter noticed, nothing is currently preventing the public from using the picnic area or Big Shelter; however, the area is still roped off.

The pool is scheduled to open during the Memorial Day weekend in late May.

Wyle Harvey, assistant deputy of Office of State Parks, issued this response when told of the allegations. “I’m sure there are reasonable answers to most of these questions that have been raised. The state would be more than happy to respond after it has an opportunity to view the allegations.”

When Wiley was asked if Jo Edwards, park manager, could respond to these allegations, he responded, “Jo hasn’t been in charge of the park long enough to respond to these charges. Besides, we would like to speak to her before she answers any questions.”

A copy of this investigation along with other allegations have been sent to Office of State Parks in Baton Rouge. The Gazette intends to reveal the State’s response as soon as it is available.