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Cherokee exhibit in Park dedicated - Tribal leaders give blessing to displays, stories

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by Darren Dunlap
of The Daily Times Staff

CHEROKEE, N.C. -- Rain tapped the roof of the tent as tribal elder Marie Junaluska prayed, first in Cherokee, then in English.

She was thankful for many things at Friday's Oconaluftee River Trail dedication and unveiling of a Cherokee culture displays in Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

"We thank you for our ancestors," said Junaluska. "Our grandmothers, our grandparents, who preserved these stories."

Seven interpretive panels couple the art of working Cherokee artists and traditional tribal stories displayed on the 1.5-mile Oconaluftee River Trail. Park officials and representatives of the Eastern Band of Cherokees marked the dedication Friday outside the Oconaluftee Visitors Center near Cherokee, N.C.

"It's wonderful to see how we're moving forward on issues that help to educate people who come to visit Cherokee on the language, the culture," said Michell Hicks, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians Chief.

The stories on the displays are printed in both English and the Cherokee syllabary and come from Eastern Band Cherokee storytellers like Jerry Wolfe and Freeman Owle.

B. Lynne Harlan, public relations coordinator for the Eastern Band, said the Cherokee were "very, very happy" with the depictions.

The exhibits got a lot of scrutiny, said Kent Cave, park interpretive media

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branch chief, on Thursday.

“These stories are a part of our nation's heritage and need to be inclusive and relevant to everybody,” said Diane Chung, acting associate southeast regional director for the NPS. “For many years we only told the obvious stories in our parks. This often left out very important, but lesser-known stories and histories, like those of the Cherokee.”

The project has been in the works for six years and hit a point where it began to lose a little momentum near the beginning. Park officials pointed to Ed Bernbaum of the Mountain Institute as someone who gave the project a boost and a global perspective.

He met with Cave in 1999 when the Mountain Institute was “working with a number of different parks to develop interpretive materials based on the evocative, cultural, spiritual meaning of features and natural landscape of the mountain environment.”

One year later Bernbaum walked the Oconaluftee River Trail with Cave and storyteller Jerry Wolfe. Wolfe pointed out natural features while recounting traditional Cherokee stories like “The Long Man,” which is about a river.

“So the idea was born to develop these wayside signs that would link features of the national landscape along this trail to Cherokee stories and traditions,” said Bernbaum, director of the Sacred Mountains Program for the Mountain Institute.

In 2002, contributions from the Ford Foundation and the Cherokee Museum Foundation also gave the project a funding boost of \$50,000. At that meeting in 2002, the idea to use Cherokee artists' work came up, he said.

“It was wonderful to involve the artistic community and to bring in contemporary Cherokee art, because it's really important to bring these signs to life,” Bernbaum said. “Equally important was to have on these signs the stories and living words of people like Jerry Wolfe and Freeman Owle.”

The project marks a recognition of Cherokee history by the National Park Service and better relationship between cultures, Owle indicated.

“I think this will give us an opportunity to take a little while on this pathway, which has been used by the Cherokee people for hundreds if not thousands of years,” Owle said. “To gather our lives together, to appreciate this creation, and then and only then, can we walk as neighbors -- and this is great progress.”



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The Daily Times
307 East Harper Ave.
Maryville, TN 37804

Mailing Address:
PO Box 9740
Maryville, TN 37802-9740

Phone: 865-981-1100
Fax: 865-981-1175
