Behind the scenes of the U.P.'s national parks

UPPER PENINSULA, Mich. (WLUC) - While the summer has just about come to an end, the three national parks in the Upper Peninsula have been working hard in committing more time to making the parks more efficient, safe, and enjoyable for locals, tourists and staff.

Staying up in the northern part of the U.P., Keweenaw National Historical Park is located up in Calumet. This summer, the KNHP has been mainly focusing on both resource management and visitor services.

One project under resource preservation work is working to combat invasive species and volunteer vegetation at the Quincy Mine. This will restore panoramic views of the industrial area to make it easier for visitors to understand the mine property and mining history. KNHP has been assisting their Keweenaw Heritage Site partners with maintenance and preservation needs that include painting, landscape work and other needs.

Jo Holt, Historian and NEFA/106 coordinator for KNHP says collectively, these projects and a few not mentioned here have cost nearly $500,000 and much of that has been spent on local contractors and employees, including youth.

“We are partnering with the non-profit SEEDS organization from Traverse City, Michigan to hire local high school students to help with masonry repair and work at our Heritage Site partners, which helps the students gain skills in historic preservation.”

SEEDS stand for Seeking Ecology Education and Design Solutions.

Holt has says the seasonal staff of interpretive rangers on board this summer for the NPS Centennial have been exceedingly helpful. They have been very busy leading visitors on guided tours at Quincy and in Calumet, giving programs through the Keweenaw, and sharing Keweenaw history through videos and posts on social media, reaching an international audience. This includes a good following in Cornwall because of their shared copper mining history and family ties.

Over the summer, the park had a great opportunity to work with local high school students to develop GIS Story maps about the park and their Heritage Site partners. The GRACE Project (GIS Resources and Applications for Career Education) is from Eastern Michigan University that provided funding for three students to work at the park over the summer and their maps will help visitors learn about and navigate the Keweenaw.

The park also launched an education program that reached grades K-12 with an emphasis on the Every Kid in a Park initiative. In May, over 400 local 4th grade students spent a full day in the park learning about copper mining history through hands-on activities. The park worked with 16 partner organizations and provided a locally-sourced lunch.

Holt says all the funding for this program came from the National Park Foundation.

One of the more expensive projects that occurred this summer was the park staff assisting their legislated partner, the Keweenaw Advisory Commission. They continued environmental cleanup efforts at the Quincy Smelter in Hancock. Great Lakes Restoration Initiative funding has funded the removal of hazardous materials from the site, enabling continued stewardship of the exceptional historic property. The planning, condition surveying, and cleanup represent a nearly $700,000 investment into the property.

Whether they are smaller projects being done, like replacing heating systems or restoration of windows or bigger projects, the park has really stepped up on its appearance and function over the summer months.

“The work preserves nationally significant structures and landscapes form the copper mining era, so there’s a very tangible and real benefit and impact to the park and our visitors,” said Holt.

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