

MOUNTAINS

21,183 species described in park – and DLiA keeps on discovering



Word from the Smokies
Frances Figart
Columnist

Did you know that there are now 21,183 total known species in Great Smoky Mountains National Park? That's a lot of species, and new ones are always likely to be discovered during bioblitz events hosted by nonprofit park partner Discover Life in America (DLiA).

DLiA manages the All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory (ATBI), a groundbreaking effort to identify and understand every form of life within the park. Contributors to the project include some of the world's leading scientists, park educators, and volunteers who are interested in nature.

"Bioblitzes are free, fun, educational opportunities for people to come together and look for animals and plants in understudied areas both inside and outside the park," said Todd Witcher, DLiA's executive director.

This summer bioblitzes have been held at Abrams Creek, Cave Mountain, and Tellico Lake, Tennessee. There is one coming up September 11 at Tennessee National Wildlife Refuge near Springville.

With DLiA and the ATBI both in their 23rd year, an astonishing 1,044 new species have been discovered in the park. The species new to science include 36 moths and butterflies, 41 spiders, 78 algae, 64 beetles, 29 crustaceans, 58 fungi, 22 bees and bee relatives, 270 bacteria and 18 tardigrades (water-dwelling micro-animals with eight legs).

How did it all begin? Back in December of 1997, a group of about 120 scientists, resource managers and educators convened in Gatlinburg. They were concerned about the threats to diversity in GSMNP and wanted to discuss the feasibility of conducting an All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory in the Smokies.

"These were days of vision and excitement," wrote Peter White of UNC Chapel Hill, one of the scientists in attendance. "The park has always been a key field site for biologists, and had attracted much research over the years, but we imagined a great step forward."

Soon after the 1997 meeting, DLiA was created to oversee and coordinate an exhaustive inventory of life forms in the park. This required a collaborative effort on the parts of GSMNP, the National Park Service, Great Smoky Mountains Association, Friends of the Smokies, the U.S. Geological Survey, National Biological Information Infrastructure, and many universities and other institutions.

But the ATBI is more than just a list of species, White explained. "We seek to discover not only which species are present in each taxonomic group in the park, but also (1) which of these species are rare enough to be of management concern, (2) where each species is found in terms of natural community affinities, (3) the seasonal occurrences and changes in abundance of each species, and (4) what the ecological roles and interactions of the species are."

Reflecting on the project in the Southeastern Naturalist, White provided three characteristics that continue to make it a solid contribution to the world of ideas.

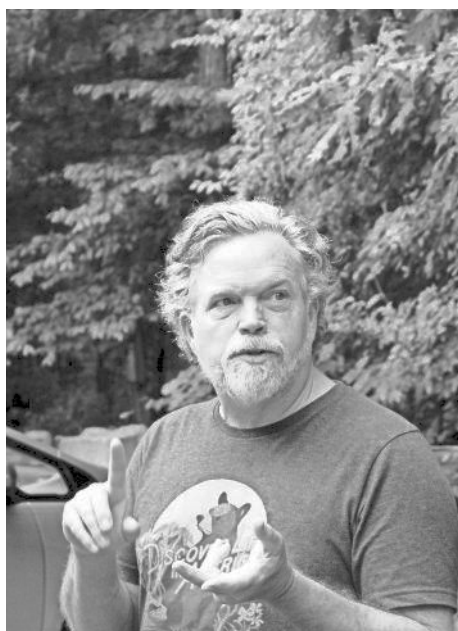
First, it focuses on all taxa — groups of organisms — not just those already known to be important. "We found our-



Entomologist Ken Hobson showcases an invertebrate find to bioblitz participants at Abrams Creek. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY XAVIER REYES



Bioblitz participants ford Abrams Creek to search for biodiversity on the other side (and cool off, too).



DLiA Director Todd Witcher explains how a bioblitz works.

selves investigating everywhere; not only under rocks, but also climbing the tallest trees, examining grains of soil, and descending into the deepest caves. ATBI investigators examined the species that live in the feathers of birds and in the guts of other species. ... I found myself, for the first time since my early undergraduate courses, dealing with all of biology (not just my specialty)."

Second, the ATBI includes people from all walks of life. "The project was not solely a scientific effort, but rather a deliberate weaving together of science, stewardship, and education... One area, however, that I didn't anticipate at the beginning was art! Photographers, artists, and even musicians, inspired by the excitement of exploration and the

beauty and intricacy of the life forms we discovered, soon joined our project. Artists collaborated with the science teams as essential members responsible for illustration and documentation."

Finally, Great Smoky Mountains National Park provides a self-contained focus and sustainable boundaries for the concentrated efforts of the ATBI. "Whereas taxonomists often focus on a particular group of organisms regardless of location in order to fully circumscribe the species, the park itself provided the common denominator to make us all focus on goals, and also brought us together in ways that will support ecological understanding, monitoring, and conservation objectives."

What the park has learned through conducting the ATBI in the Smokies has been remarkable, not only from a park management perspective, but from an ecological one according to Becky Nichols, an NPS entomologist who has been involved with the ATBI since its inception.

"All of this information helps us better respond to threats, such as invasive species, and we also gain a better understanding of ecosystem function and how it is dependent on biodiversity, not only locally, but globally as well."

Learn more about the ATBI and bioblitzes at DLiA.org.

Frances Figart is the editor of Smokies Life magazine and the Creative Services Director for the 28,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Learn more at SmokiesInformation.org and reach the author at frances@gsmassoc.org.

YouTube revises policy on medical misinformation

Rebecca Walter
Hendersonville Times-News
USA TODAY NETWORK

YouTube is re-examining its medical misinformation policies as they pertain to local governments after taking down at least a dozen uploads of meetings, mostly for claims made during public comment periods that are not backed by facts.

The streaming platform told the Washington Post Friday, Aug. 6 that it had updated guidelines to "make exceptions for videos of school board or town hall meetings, where the intention isn't to promote misinformation."

Henderson County was mentioned in the article that highlighted local governments with meetings taken down by YouTube. The removal of videos sparked conversations about free speech and whether public comment should be governed by the same policies that platforms such as YouTube applied to other content.

The commissioners' June 16 meeting was pulled from YouTube, which cited medical misinformation surrounding the COVID-19 vaccine. At the meeting, a dozen people spoke out against the vaccines, claiming they were harmful and part of a hidden agenda by the government, media and pharmaceutical industries.

YouTube's new stance has not changed county leaders' intention to move away from the streaming platform. County commissioners voted during an emergency meeting June 18 to replace YouTube as its video upload service.

"While the Henderson County Board of Commissioners appreciates the correction to YouTube's policy, the board stands by its decision to move the county's video recordings to another platform to provide a venue for the public to review all open meetings. The Board of Commissioners has no plans to revert to the YouTube website for this service," a news release from the county said Monday.

Last month, the county selected video conferencing service BlueJeans by Verizon to replace its reliance of YouTube for video uploads. The new platform comes with an annual \$1,200 price tag. The county did not pay to upload videos to YouTube, which is a free service.

The dozen videos that sparked controversy after being yanked have since been reinstated, YouTube spokesperson Elena Hernandez told the Washington Post. Henderson County's video was not reposted since the county has deleted its YouTube page.

"The Board of Commissioners voted to completely shut down/delete the county's former YouTube page. Immediately after that decision, the page was deleted," according to county PIO Kathryn Finotti. "To my knowledge, YouTube did not and cannot restore a video to a page that no longer exists. Also to my knowledge, we did not receive any information from YouTube regarding their policy change."

Vice Chair Rebecca McCall was quoted in the Washington Post as speaking on behalf of the board, where she questioned how YouTube could determine what was and was not misinformation.

McCall told the newspaper that the county gives the School Board funding for Google Chromebooks, but is "urging the schools to find a suitable substitute this year since Google owns YouTube."

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