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CITIZEN TIMES

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A cyclist rides the carriage roads at Acadia National Park. Many of these roads were originally built by the Rockefeller family before the land became a national park. PROVIDED BY THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Book explores roots of Rockefeller generosity to national parks



Formerly the publications director for Smokies Life, author Steve Kemp had long been curious about why Rockefeller Jr. was so willing to provide the enormous donation that helped save the Smokies. PHOTO BY JOHN RUSH/ PROVIDED BY STEVE KEMP.

Holly Kays
Smokies Life

In 1927, a \$5 million donation from the richest man in America—the equivalent of \$92 million today—secured the Great Smoky Mountains’ then-tenuous future for protection as a national park. But when John D. Rockefeller Jr. agreed to write the check, he had never so much as glimpsed these ancient peaks. Smokies Life’s former publication director Steve Kemp spent years wondering: why?

“Most people just said, well, he had more money than he knew what to do with,” Kemp said in a recent interview. “Having known some wealthy people, very few have that problem. And the Rockefellers especially were very thrifty and very careful with their money.”

During his 30-year tenure with

Smokies Life, Kemp often considered writing a story on the topic, but he knew the research phase would require him to spend multiple days at the Rockefeller Archive Center in upstate New York. Amid his myriad other job responsibilities, he could never spare the time. After retiring in 2017, it was one of the first stories he set out to do—the resulting piece, “Angels Can’t do More,” appeared in the fall 2019 issue of *Smokies Life Journal*.

Kemp quickly realized that Rockefeller Jr.’s importance to the national parks effort was much bigger than the Smokies.

“You couldn’t explain why he was so generous with the Smokies until you traced the whole trajectory of his life and his philanthropy,” Kemp said. “So I

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HELENE HOUSING PROGRAM

More than 1K apply since June launch

Jacob Biba
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

A state program set up to repair and rebuild damaged and destroyed homes in the aftermath of Tropical Storm Helene has received more than 1,000 applications, the state commerce department announced in an Aug. 13 news release.

The \$807 million Single-Family Housing Program, part of Renew NC, launched in June. Homeowners in 29 North Carolina counties are eligible to apply. The program is funded by a Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery grant the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development awarded the state in January.

“Too many families in Western North Carolina lost their homes after Hurricane Helene,” Gov. Josh Stein said in a Aug. 13 statement. “This program will help people rebuild their homes and their lives after the storm.”

As required by HUD, the program prioritizes low-to-moderate income households earning 80% or less than the area median income, but it’s open to homeowners earning up to 120% of AMI. In the Asheville Metropolitan Statistical Area, the median income for a four-person household is \$93,100, according to HUD. Most households impacted by Helene were earning below the area median income, the Citizen Times previously reported.

The state is slated to receive a total of \$1.4 billion from HUD, which will fund two additional long-term housing programs — one for multifamily and another for workforce housing. Both are slated to launch in 2025. The city of Asheville will also receive \$225 million.

The North Carolina Department of Commerce Division of Community

See HELENE HOUSING, Page 2A

DC sues Trump to halt takeover of police force

District’s AG says president exceeded his authority

Joey Garrison
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON – The District of Columbia has sued President Donald Trump and his administration over his federal takeover of the city’s police force, saying the president’s “brazen” intervention was illegal and has wreaked “operational havoc” within the department.

The lawsuit, filed Aug. 15 by the District of Columbia’s Attorney General Bri-

an Schwalb, says Trump exceeded his authority under the Home Rule Act of 1973 when he invoked a section of the federal law by declaring a local crime emergency to assert control over the Metropolitan Police Department.

Schwalb cited language in the provision that says the president’s authority to target the Washington, DC, police force is limited to “federal purposes.” The suit also states the law does not permit a full takeover of the Metropolitan Police Department but only requires Mayor Muriel Bowser to “provide services” of the department to the

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Washington, DC, Metropolitan Police officers detain a person after an altercation on Aug. 14. NATHAN HOWARD/REUTERS



MOUNTAINS

Great Smoky Mountains NP reports more visitors feeding black bears

Ryley Ober
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

Great Smoky Mountains National Park staff have seen a recent uptick in visitors feeding bears, with three separate incidents in the past week alone, the park announced Aug. 13.

After the park received reports of visitors intentionally feeding bears three different times in the last week, officials are reminding visitors that feeding wildlife is illegal and endangers the person, other visitors and bears. In one of the interactions, a visitor was seen feeding a mother bear and her two cubs, the park said in a news release. Law enforcement issued the visitor a citation.

Feeding wildlife in the park is a federal offence that can result in up to a \$5,000 fine or imprisonment for up to six months, the park warned. Staff urges visitors not to feed or approach black bears. The Citizen Times asked the park for more details on the three interactions and how the number of reported bear feedings compares to previous years.

The Great Smoky Mountains National Park is home to about 1,900 American black bears and is the most visited park in the United States, with about 12 million visitors each year. The park, which sprawls across a half-million acres of rugged, forested terrain in Western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee,



A black bear walks across a road in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Staff are warning visitors against feeding bears after a recent uptick in reported incidents.
PROVIDED BY THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

had 12.1 million visitors in 2024 despite disruption from Tropical Storm Helene. Because of the high visitation and thriving bear population, there is an increased likelihood of human-bear encounters, the park said.

Feeding bears is not only illegal, but it can be “extremely dangerous for bears and visitors,” the release said. Bears are quick learners, and feeding a bear even once can cause that bear to lose its nat-

ural fear of humans and seek them out for food. A food-conditioned bear may exhibit more aggressive behavior toward visitors and is more likely to be struck by a car as it seeks out human food, according to National Park Service staff. In some cases, feeding can lead to euthanasia of the bear.

Bear activity in the park is especially high because of peak breeding season and a scarcity in natural food sources, the release said. During this time of year, mother bears are separating from their 18-month-old yearlings, leaving the young bears to survive on their own for the first time.

“These inexperienced juveniles are more likely to wander into populated areas, increasing the risk of encounters with humans,” the release said.

It is prohibited to willfully approach within 50 yards of a bear under federal regulation. Federal law also prohibits “the feeding, touching, teasing, frightening or intentional disturbing of wildlife nesting, breeding or other activities.”

The penalty for feeding or approaching within 50 yards of a bear on the parkway is a minimum of \$100 fine to a maximum of six months imprisonment, plus fines and court fees.

NPS’ bear safety guidelines and regulations

- **Never feed or approach bears.**

Stay at least 50 yards (150 feet) away. Violating this regulation can result in fines and arrest.

- **Store food and trash securely.** Keep all food, trash and scented items in a locked, hard-sided vehicle. In back-country areas, use bear cables to hang food properly.
- **Leave pets at home.** Dogs can provoke defensive and predatory behavior in bears. Only two trails in the park allow dogs: the Gatlinburg Trail and the Oconaluftee River Trail.
- **Be prepared and stay alert.** Be aware of the surroundings, especially when hiking or camping. Always stay together when hiking in a group. Visitors may consider carrying bear spray. Predatory behavior from bears, such as stalking, has occurred in the park.
- **Report violations and unusual bear behavior.** If visitors see someone feeding or approaching a bear, or witness a bear acting unusually, report it to park authorities immediately: (865) 436-1230.

“Visitors play a crucial role in their own safety and the well-being of our black bears. By practicing these precautions, you contribute to the conservation of black bears and foster a safer environment in the park,” the release said.

Ryley Ober is the Public Safety Reporter for Asheville Citizen Times, part of the USA Today Network. Email her at rober@gannett.com and follow her on Twitter @ryleyober

Book

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did the article but immediately started thinking about the book too.”

That book—*An Exaltation of Parks: John D. Rockefeller Jr.’s Crusade to Save America’s Wonderlands* by Steve Kemp, published by the University of Utah Press—came out in July. Covering a timeframe from 1908 to 1950, it looks well beyond the Smokies to explore the roots of Rockefeller Jr.’s involvement with land preservation in what would become Acadia National Park. It then travels to beloved sites across the country: Mesa Verde, Yellowstone, Grand Teton, Shenandoah, Yosemite, the redwood forests of California, the Blue Ridge Parkway, and, of course, the Great Smokies.

“For him the Smokies were probably his easiest project, because the grass-roots conservationists and business boosters did all the work,” Kemp said. “They just recruited him at the end to come in and write the big check. But most of his other projects he was involved with from the very beginning.”

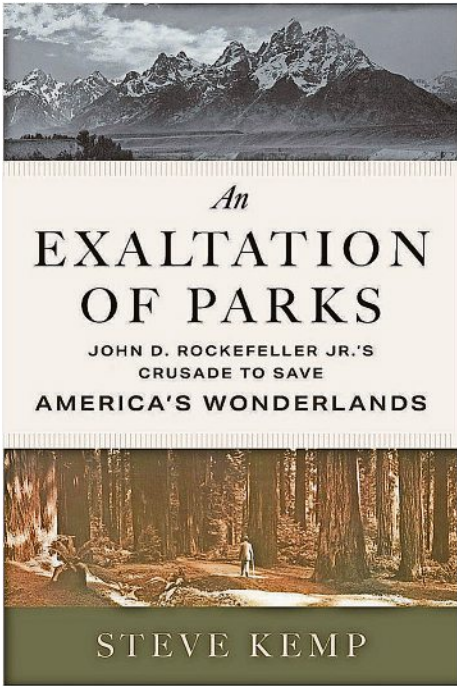
During Rockefeller Jr.’s lifetime, the Rockefeller family was one of the wealthiest—if not *the* wealthiest—families in America due to Rockefeller Sr.’s success in the oil business. But their lifestyle and overall approach to wealth was much different from the rest of the Gilded Age tycoons who, as portrayed in contemporary works like *The Great Gatsby*, loved lavish parties, luxury yachts, and ostentatious displays of excess. To the contrary, Kemp writes that Rockefeller Jr.’s college friends at Brown University “once chided him for ‘trimming frayed edges on his cuffs or standing in rapt concentration over a teakettle’ attempting to separate two conjoined postage stamps.”

“It’s worth noting, however, that Rockefeller thrift was never practiced with the aim of purchasing larger yachts or more brilliant jewels, since neither Junior nor his parents considered such luxuries alluring,” he continued. “Money and its conservation were important to the Rockefellers because they believed their money had a purpose.”

Steadfast northern Baptists, the Rockefellers were “largely motivated by their Christian morals and sense of duty” in their philanthropy, Kemp wrote. “Senior viewed himself as a ‘steward of wealth which God had placed in his trust.’”

Even before amassing his fortune, as a struggling teenager shouldering the formidable task of supporting his mother and younger siblings, Rockefeller Sr. took generosity seriously. In addition to “punctual” tithing to his own church, he made small contributions to an African American church and Catholic orphanage, both local to him in Cleveland, Ohio, and began what would become a lifelong practice of handing out coins to less fortunate churchgoers on Sunday mornings.

Rockefeller Sr. and his wife Laura impressed the importance of both frugal-



An Exaltation of Parks by Steve Kemp is published by the University of Utah Press and widely available from bookstores and online retailers.
PROVIDED BY UNIVERSITY OF UTAH PRESS/ STEVE KEMP.

ity and generosity on their children from a young age. This ethic, combined with a lifelong struggle with mental health issues and a corresponding appreciation for the restorative power of nature, cleared a natural path to Rockefeller Jr.’s eventual role as a linchpin benefactor of the nascent national park system.

“Whenever he had these bouts—he had some pretty severe nervous breakdowns, even during his youth—he would retreat to one of the family’s estates near Cleveland, Ohio, to recuperate, to just spend time in nature, planting trees, chopping wood, cutting brush, just working around the estate doing manual labor, and that was his prescription for recovery,” said Kemp. “So at an early age, he made that connection between good mental health and time spent in the out of doors.”

Rockefeller Jr. was 41 years old when a letter from Harvard President Charles W. Eliot changed the course of his life—and the future of national parks in America. Eliot sought money and support to preserve Mount Desert Island in Maine, where the Rockefellers loved to spend their summers, as public land. The effort culminated with the creation of Acadia National Park in 1916.

Rockefeller Jr., a shy, socially awkward man who Kemp describes as “kind of a nature nerd,” quickly recognized the importance of the national park effort and became a central figure in conservation projects across the country. All told, he donated the equivalent of \$800 million in today’s dollars to expand the national park system. His steepest uphill battle came in the Tetons, where the park service convinced him to purchase 31,000 acres for the future Grand Teton National Park. When Wyoming officials fought the land’s transfer to the federal government, Rockefeller Jr. was forced to hold it for 23 years, paying property taxes the whole time.

“Those prerequisites of respecting the beauty of nature and mental health and the landscape architecture background and the pride in duty that he felt every minute of his life primed him to become that person who really accelerated development of the national parks,” Kemp said. “Nobody else would have fought 24 years for Jackson Hole [in the Tetons].”

Rockefeller Jr. wasn’t focused only on stewarding the landscape. He cared about the people as well. Kemp said he

“melded with the National Park Service like a seasonal ranger. . . he just became one of them.” Rockefeller Jr. was continually impressed by how hard NPS employees worked and how dedicated they were to their mission. Many of them became his close friends, and he often used his wealth to help pay expenses like medical bills and college tuition.

“The ease in which a Rockefeller melded with these famous park service

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In split decision, court clears Trump to restart CFPB firings

WASHINGTON – A divided federal appeals court on Aug. 15 found that U.S. President Donald Trump should be able to resume mass firings at the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, ruling that a lower court had lacked jurisdiction in temporarily blocking this, court records showed.

However, the court said its decision would not take immediate effect, allowing lawyers representing CFPB workers and pro-consumer organizations to seek reconsideration by the full Circuit Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia.

“We hold that the district court lacked jurisdiction to consider the claims predicated on loss of employment, which must proceed through the specialized-review scheme” under laws governing the civil service, the majority wrote.

Other objections raised by the plaintiffs did not concern final decisions made by the agency and so could not be reviewed in court, wrote U.S. Circuit Judges Gregory Katsas and Neomi Rao, both Trump appointees.

In a dissent, Circuit Judge Cornelia Pillard said the lower court had acted properly in blocking the Trump administration from eradicating the CFPB entirely as the lawsuit played out, writing that “it is emphatically not within the discretion of the President or his appointees to decide that the country would benefit most if there were no Bureau at all.”

Plastic pollution treaty stalled as U.N. talks end without deal

GENEVA – Delegates discussing the world’s first legally binding treaty to tackle plastic pollution failed to reach consensus, diplomats said Aug. 15, voicing disappointment and even rage that the 10-day talks produced no deal.

Delegates had been seeking a breakthrough in the deadlocked United Nations’ talks in Geneva, but states pushing for an ambitious treaty said that the latest text released overnight failed to meet their expectations.

The chair of the negotiations Ecuador’s Luis Vayas Valdivieso adjourned the session with a pledge to resume talks at an undetermined later date, drawing weak applause from exhausted delegates who had worked into the early hours.

French ecology minister Agnes Pannier-Runacher told the meeting’s closing session that she was “enraged because despite genuine efforts by many, and real progress in discussions, no tangible results have been obtained.”

In an apparent reference to oil-producing nations, Colombia’s delegate Haendel Rodriguez said a deal had been “blocked by a small number of states who simply did not want an agreement.”

King Charles warns of war’s ‘true cost’ on V-J Day’s 80th anniversary

LONDON – Britain’s King Charles III on Aug. 15 released a message commemorating the 80th anniversary of V-J Day, which marks the Allied victory over Japan and the end of World War II, re-

flecting on current conflicts and warning that the cost of war reaches far beyond battlefields.

While fighting in Europe ended in May 1945, the conflict with Japan continued until it signaled its intention to surrender on Aug. 15 that year after atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States.

Charles said the war’s final act brought an “immense price” for Hiroshima and Nagasaki, one he prayed no nation would ever pay again.

The monarch used his six-minute address to highlight ongoing conflicts: “War’s true cost extends beyond battlefields, touching every aspect of life, a tragedy all too vividly demonstrated by conflicts around the world today.”

He said that in World War II, nations that had never fought side by side learned to work together, proving “that in times of war and in times of peace, the greatest weapons of all are not the arms you bear, but the arms you link.”

Trump says he hopes to ‘save’ Hong Kong democrat Lai

WASHINGTON – President Donald Trump on Aug. 14 said he would see what he could do to help “save” detained Hong Kong media tycoon Jimmy Lai, even though Chinese President Xi Jinping would not be “thrilled.”

“I’m going to do everything I can to save him,” Trump told Fox News Radio’s “The Brian Kilmeade Show” in an interview. “We’ll see what we can do ... we’re going to do everything we can.”

Lai, 77, has pleaded not guilty to

charges of conspiracy to collude with foreign forces, under Hong Kong’s national security law, as well as to a separate charge of conspiracy to publish seditious material. He has been held in solitary confinement for more than 1,500 days since December 2020.

Liu Pengyu, the spokesperson for China’s embassy in Washington, said Lai had been “a key orchestrator and participant in anti-China, destabilizing activities in Hong Kong.”

Trump has said he would raise Lai’s case as part of negotiations with China over trade and tariffs.

Trial date set in Arkansas killings as prosecutor mulls gag order

Andrew James McGann, who is accused of attacking and killing an Arkansas couple who were hiking in a state park with their two young daughters, pleaded not guilty during his Aug. 14 arraignment.

McGann, who authorities say did not know Clinton Brink, 43, and his wife, Cristen, 41, was ordered held without bond until his trial, set for Nov. 14. Prosecutor Brandon Carter asked that McGann have no contact with the victims’ families, and he said the state has not ruled out pursuing the death penalty against McGann, who is facing two capital murder charges.

Investigators believe McGann acted alone, said Col. Mike Hagar, director of the Arkansas State Police. They said McGann, who had recently moved from Oklahoma, admitted to killing the couple after he was taken into custody.

USA TODAY Network and Reuters

Book

Continued from Page 3A

icons and granted their conservation wishes—almost like a genie coaxed from a magic lamp—is one of the most remarkable parts of the story,” Kemp wrote.

One of Rockefeller’s warmest such relationships was with Arno Cammerer, who was the park service’s associate director when Rockefeller Jr. made his donation. The gift came

on the heels of a potentially catastrophic fundraising failure on the part

of Major W. A. Welch, the man who had been tasked with the primary fundraising for the project.

The future of the Smokies hung in the balance, and Cammerer stepped into the gap, traveling to New York in hopes of discussing the project with his friend. But Rockefeller Jr. was an extremely busy man—their short meeting left no time to consider the Smokies, but Rockefeller Jr. invited Cammerer to make his pitch in a letter. Cammerer rose to the challenge, explaining the park’s potential to save priceless virgin forests, provide respite to millions of Americans unlikely to ever have the opportunity visit the distant western

parks, and “wipe out the greatest moonshine distilling section of Tennessee”—an attractive outcome for the teetotaling Rockefellers. After receiving the letter, Rockefeller Jr. donated an unheard-of amount of money to preserve a mountain wilderness he had never seen.

It’s hard to say what would have happened to the Smokies without Rockefeller Jr.’s help. Perhaps the land would have become a national forest. Perhaps it wouldn’t have been conserved at all.

“Without Rockefeller,” Kemp said, “the whole drive would have collapsed.”

Steve Kemp is the former interpretive products and services director for Smokies Life. He will present his new book An

Exaltation of Parks: John D. Rockefeller Jr.’s Crusade to Save America’s Wonderlands, at 6 p.m. Thursday, August 28, at the Anna Porter Public Library in Gatlinburg. The book is published by The University of Utah Press and widely available at bookstores and online retailers.

Holly Kays is the lead writer for the 29,000-member Smokies Life, a non-profit dedicated to supporting the scientific, historical, and interpretive activities of Great Smoky Mountains National Park by providing educational products and services such as this column. Learn more at SmokiesLife.org or reach the author at hollyk@smokieslife.org.

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