



NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Center for Governmental Studies

Outreach, Engagement, and Regional Development



NIU's Center for Governmental Studies Researches Options for Starved Rock State Park

SEPT. 12, 2019 - Illinois' Starved Rock State Park in Oglesby attracts as many visitors as major national parks. As the state's most popular park, it has struggled with overcrowding certain days, necessitating closing the gates when parking lots fill, as occurred over Labor Day weekend.

To address overcrowding and other issues, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) and Starved Rock Lodge turned to Northern Illinois University's Center for Governmental Studies (CGS). They asked CGS to research ways to improve the visitor experience, protect natural resources and work with nearby communities that provide services to park and lodge visitors.

The research findings are contained in *Starved Rock State Park & Lodge: Options for the Future*, a report recently released to IDNR and Lodge management. The report includes recommendations regarding parking shortages, managing large crowds, adding new facilities and lodging options, social media usage, and ways for the Park, Lodge and surrounding communities to work together.

Starved Rock State Park is located along the south bank of the Illinois River. The beautiful park attracted more than two million visitors in 2018, who came to explore its scenic trails and canyons, dine or stay in its historic Lodge. The park features panoramic views from tall bluffs that offer a unique contrast to the flatlands of Illinois. The backdrop for hiking is 18 canyons formed by glacial melt-water and stream erosion. They slice dramatically through tree-covered, sandstone bluffs for four miles at Starved Rock State Park.

The completion of the CGS report is particularly timely with the recent addition of 2,629 acres to Starved Rock State Park and legislative consideration of charging entry fees to generate additional funding.

"The underlying strategy is that Illinois can draw on proven ideas from elsewhere and anticipated future recreation interests of Illinois residents to create a balanced solution for Starved Rock," said Mim Evans, CGS Research Specialist working with IDNR and Starved Rock Lodge. Other CGS specialists conducting the study were Andy Blanke, Abigail Evans and Norm Walzer.

How NIU-CGS Developed Potential Strategies for Meeting Starved Rock's Challenges

In developing the report for Starved Rock, Evans and the CGS team drew from actual projects and successful experiences at State and National parks across the nation.

Evans said certain questions needed to be answered for Starved Rock: Who visits the park? What is the relationship between the park and the surrounding area? Are there trends in demographics and interests that should be considered? Do other states have effective strategies for their most popular parks?

As they worked to answer those questions, CGS researchers followed a methodology that included learning from IDNR, Park and Lodge management; surveying visitors, states, businesses, and agencies; researching trends; and interviewing management at parks in other states. The economic impact of the Park and Lodge also was considered.

Suggestions from the research findings include new ways to manage visitors, Evans said.

"Reservation systems like one used at Enchanted Rock State Park in Fredericksburg, TX, seem to work by controlling access, allowing for flexibility and data gathering, redirecting visitors to low visitation days, delivering pre-visit education, and collecting fees," she said.

Creating broad-based public support for Starved Rock State Park and Lodge will make it easier to sustain and improve both over the long run. Adding a variety of new large- or small-scale facilities is a possible strategy for broadening support, the research shows.

Large-scale facilities such as treetop rope and zip line courses, expanded museums and education centers, and water play areas can bring in new visitors while possibly diverting some visitors from overcrowded trails, creating a better experience for everyone. These kinds of facilities also can make a state park more of an overnight attraction, growing the local economy.

Private-public partnerships can make these projects affordable to build and manage. Small-scale improvements such as disc golf and dog parks are relatively inexpensive to install and operate, and they can generate revenue that more than supports their maintenance.

"It may seem odd to suggest attracting more visitors as a way to address overcrowding at Starved Rock, but with the right mix of facilities and management, and given the acreage added to the park and yet to be developed, more visitors can be part of an overall strategy. For Starved Rock, it's all about finding the right balance," said Evans.

"Critical are ways to enhance the visitor experience, preserve the natural resources, find funding sources, and build support from the surrounding communities by providing opportunities to grow the local economy."

Contact IDNR for more information about Starved Rock State Park and Lodge or to request a copy of the report, or visit <https://www.dnr.illinois.gov/Parks/Pages/StarvedRock.aspx> or <https://www.starvedrockstatepark.org/>. For more information about resources available at NIU's Center for Governmental Studies, visit <https://www.cgs.niu.edu/>.

###