

Chapter 10

PARKS AND RECREATION



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Access to Nature's Bounty 10.1

The rural beauty of McDonald County is found in woodlands, fields, and clear flowing waters, making it a perfect outdoor playground for residents and visitors alike. Swimming, boating, hiking, bird watching, trail riding, bountiful wildflowers, hunting and fishing and other activities entice people out of doors to enjoy nature's bounty. Eagle watching is also popular during the eagles' wintering from November to March.

Many commercial businesses in McDonald County offer recreational opportunities such as canoe rentals, swimming and camping. Most of these services would require a service charge regardless of who provided them. In the neighborhood of 16 such businesses in McDonald County provide competition which produces outstanding facilities, prices and services which need not be replicated by public parks.

The State of Missouri has invested heavily in parkland in McDonald County, owning thousands of acres of land. Water access at these properties is limited and facilities have been slow to develop. Much of the land is intended to be kept in its natural state and its use is limited to hiking.



Communities within the county have developed parks for sports activities such as baseball. The only golf course and swimming pool are located at the Noel Country Club. The pool and golf course are available to non-members for a very reasonable fee.

McDonald County has no county operated parks or recreational facilities. This chapter is a review of ways McDonald County can enhance recreational opportunities for residents and visitors.

Commercial Recreation 10.2

"On a typical weekend, you get 10,000 people on the river," former McDonald County Sheriff Robert Evenson said in a 2004 interview. (www.mornews.com/280290198380522.bsp) "And that's just on a typical weekend. On holidays, it's more." Those figures may be exaggerated and actual numbers may be only half of that, but still there may be 5,000 or more floaters each weekend. These floaters pay an average rental of more than \$15 each, contributing about \$100,000 per weekend into the McDonald County economy. Add to that figure money spent at concession stands and for camping fees or cabins, gas at local convenience stores and shopping at county liquor stores - making tourism McDonald County's number two industry behind agriculture. Most of the expenditures occur at the commercial campgrounds along Elk River. Recreational tourism is an important aspect of McDonald County's economic base.

When the population of McDonald County increases by thousands on weekends and holidays, with those visitors come problems as well as benefits. Law enforcement becomes an important issue on the river during the tourist season. McDonald County's River Patrol works 21.5 miles

of the Elk River from sunup to sundown, Saturdays and Sundays between Memorial Day and Labor Day every summer. Most of the work of the River Patrol is law enforcement but sometimes includes rescue. Problems center mainly around assaults, alcohol and drug violations, and "minor in possession" cases. The deputies also enforce the county's anti-littering laws. "Anything on land you're going to have on a river," the sheriff noted, "and if it's alcohol-related, you're going to have a lot more of it." The county has to foot the bill for law enforcement expenses even though the canoe rentals are not taxable items.

In 2004, McDonald County instituted a nudity ban ordinance for the river due to the many problems caused by the indiscretions of floaters. Debate now centers on the need and effect of a potential ban of alcohol and drugs from the river in order to ensure the enjoyment and safety of families with children and to gain control of the problems faced by law enforcement each river season. Public education needs to be provided by the use of signs and brochures to publicize state and local laws which apply on all McDonald County waterways and streams and the penalties for infractions. Positive identification of all canoes and rafts by outfitter, both logo and number, would be helpful in fielding complaints against people causing problems on the float routes..

An even more serious problem created by these visitors on waterways is to the environment. When thousands of people float the river all day without the benefit of restrooms along the way, the water and riverbanks become the restrooms. A health problem is created as well as an environmental one by the lack of sanitary facilities. Without a safe environment, the canoe businesses cannot prosper.

In addition to recreation, these commercial campgrounds provide constructive use of land in the flood zones and help keep development away from the riparian areas. The private ownership of these properties could make them subject to sale for purposes other than recreation in the future. It is important to realize that these commercial recreation facilities could disappear some day.

Some commercial recreation facilities for camping and canoeing in McDonald County include but are not limited to: Eagles Nest Campground and Canoeing, Big Elk Camp and Canoe, Indian Creek RV Park and Campground, River Ranch RV Park and Campground, Shady Beach Campground, Elk River Floats/Wayside Campground, Camp Tilden, Cherokee Camp and Canoe, Indian Creek Bait & Tackle, Kozy Kamp, Snupes, Sugar Island, Three Rivers Canoe, Gracies Campground, Cowskin Floats, Indian Summer RV, Creekside (Mustains') Campground, Two Sons, Owl's Nest, Hog Heaven, Mack's Big Rock, and Crag O' Lea.

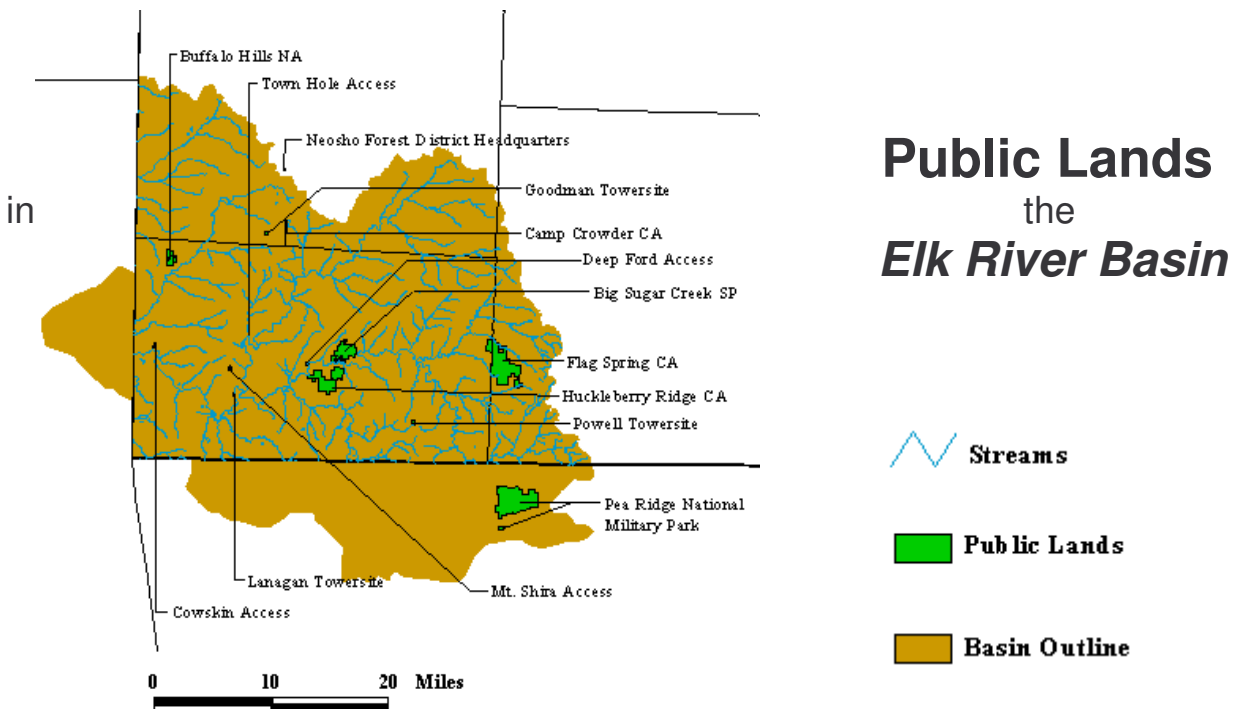
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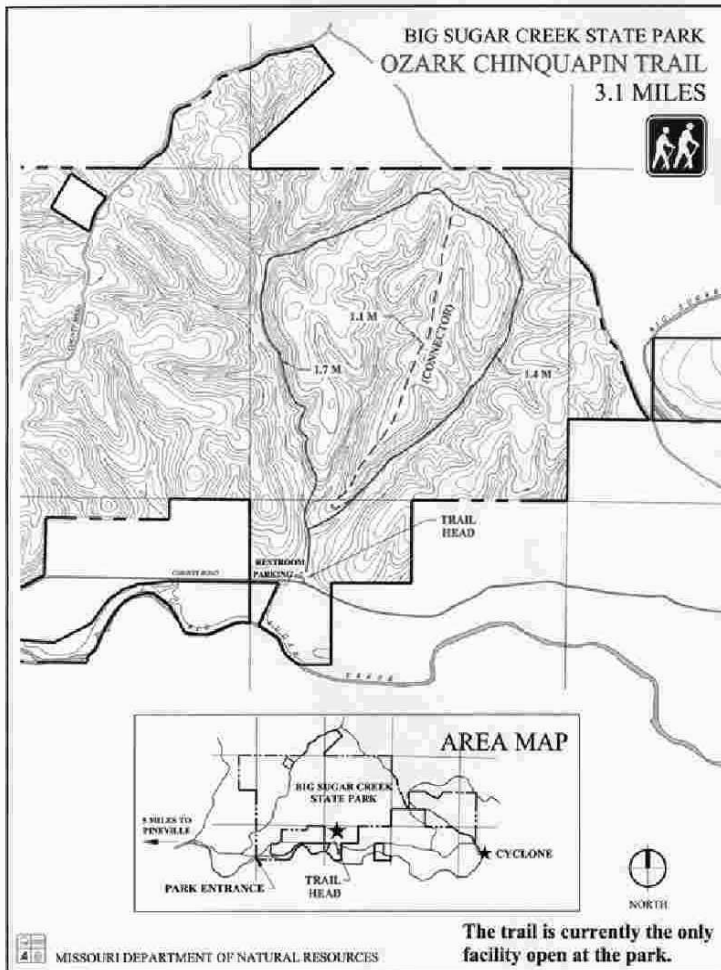
A primary feature of public park systems is affordability to the users. Access to the waterways for recreation without a fee is important to local residents. The state of Missouri has invested heavily in land preservation in McDonald County, purchasing thousands of acres of land. Little of this property has water access and few facilities have been developed for public use. Much of it will be dedicated to open space conservation areas which will not be developed beyond hiking trails. These lands represent a valuable recreational resource to be developed within McDonald County. Big Sugar Creek State Park (2048 acres), Buffalo Hills Natural Area (486 acres) and Huckleberry Ridge Conservation Area (2106 acres) represent some of Missouri's parkland in McDonald County. Future amenities planned for Big Sugar Creek State Park include a day-use area, a special-use area for organized youth groups, hiking trails and a canoe launch.

Elk River Basin - Access Points Missouri Dept of Conservation

The Missouri Department of Conservation has many “access points” throughout the state. An “**access point**” is a **location for boat launching** into rivers or lakes. Access points may offer picnic facilities or good fishing spots. The following is a list of access points and parks in the Elk River Basin: For a map of the access points within the Elk River Basin, visit the website at: <http://www.conservation.mo.gov/fish/watershed/elk/landuse/010luf11.htm>.

Area Name	Acres	County	Activities	Managed
Buffalo Hills NA	486	McDonald	Hunting, Hiking, Camping, Bird watching, Nature study, Trapping	MDC
Big Sugar Creek SP	2,048	McDonald	Currently not open. Permitted activities not known.	MDNR
Cowskin Access	41	McDonald	Hunting, Fishing, Hiking, Bird watching, Nature study (0.1 miles Elk River frontage)	MDC
Deep Ford Access	42	McDonald	Hunting, Fishing, Hiking, Bird watching, Nature study (0.25 miles Big Sugar Creek frontage)	MDC
Flag Spring CA	3,955	Barry/ McDonald	Hunting, Hiking, Camping, Bird watching, Nature study, Target shooting	MDC
Huckleberry Ridge CA	2,106	McDonald	Hunting, Hiking, Camping, Bird watching, Nature study	MDC
Lanagan Towersite	57	McDonald	Hunting, Hiking, Bird watching, Nature study	MDC
Mt. Shira Access	26	McDonald	Fishing, Camping (0.25 miles Elk River frontage)	MDC
Powell Towersite	80	McDonald	Hunting, Hiking, Bird watching, Nature study	MDC
Town Hole Access	2	McDonald	Fishing (Indian Creek frontage)	MDC
Lanagan City Park	10	McDonald	Swimming, Fishing, Canoeing, Picnicking, Outdoor recreation (Indian Creek frontage)	Leased by City of Lanagan
Noel City Park	less than 5	McDonald	Swimming, Canoeing, Fishing, Picnicking (Elk River frontage)	City of Noel
Blankenship Park	16	McDonald	Fishing, Outdoor recreation (Honey Creek frontage)	Southwest City





Ozark Chinquapin Trail in Big Sugar Creek State Park 5 miles East of Pineville in McDonald County

Because of the Big Sugar Creek Park's natural significance, 1,613 of its 2,082 acres have been designated as the Elk River Breaks Natural Area. Ozark Chinquapin Trail, a three-mile loop trail through the natural area, follows a small bedrock stream, between towering hills, before heading up into the upland woodlands and glades. The three-mile trail allows visitors to view these distinctive natural features in the park that has been designated as a natural area. The woodlands found in Elk River Breaks Natural Area are among the last of a landscape that was once common across the region. They feature open growths of shortleaf pine, oaks and hickory trees over a grassy hillside rich with shrubs and wildflowers. The trail follows a small bedrock stream, surrounded with steep hills on both sides, before climbing up into these woodlands, which offer wonderful views across the rugged Elk River landscape. The trailhead includes a vault toilet and a parking area.

<http://www.mostateparks.com/bigsugar.htm>

Missouri's 2002-2007 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) provides a framework for the planning, development, management and protection of Missouri's outdoor recreation resources. Identified as priority (greatest importance) in that plan is to provide a better waste disposal program on land and reduce water pollution and to provide better coordination among outdoor recreation providers.

http://www.mostateparks.com/scorp02_07.pdf

Intergovernmental cooperation is an effective way for county government to respond to recreational needs. Cooperative efforts can eliminate unnecessary duplication of services, reduce overall park and recreation costs and can more effectively allow taxes to meet the recreational and leisure time needs. Working with the State of Missouri to develop parklands in McDonald County to meet the needs of local citizens and help the state realize their conservation goals will enhance recreational opportunities for everyone.

Other Recreation 10.4

A favorite way for many people in the Ozarks to get out in nature is by horseback. Trail rides and stables are another form of commercial recreation available in McDonald County. In addition, there are natural wonders to explore in the form of caves. There are a couple of



caves open to the public in McDonald County. Truitt's Cave, which is located off of Highway 59 in Lanagan, offers guided tours, panning for gems, a gift shop, and underground picnics; however, it is currently closed. Bluff Dwellers Cavern & Browning Museum is located off of Highway 59, 2 miles south of Noel, MO. This cave system is known for its diversity of cave formations. Guided tours and a museum are available at the cave. <http://www.mowin.org/Project31903/ElkRiver/recreation.html#parks>

A bowling alley opened in Pineville in 2008. Miniature Golf is available in Noel at River Ranch. Golfing is available at the Noel Country Club, as is the county's only swimming pool. These facilities are open to the public for a very reasonable fee to non-members. Hunting brings many people to McDonald County each season. Most hunting is done on private property. However, the Missouri Department of Conservation does allow hunting on eight MDC areas within the county. (See chart on page 9.3)

Cities and communities within McDonald County have parks and ball fields which support team activities. Most school grounds have recreation areas which are open during non-school times.

Hiking, nature walks and bird watching attract many visitors to the beauty of McDonald County. Conservation areas are most appropriate for these activities. Increasing walking trails and bike trails throughout the county should be a long range priority for leisure and recreation. The enhancement portion and the recreation trails portion of the new federal highway legislation provides potential funding for trails. Camping is available in some of these conservation properties, although commercial campgrounds accommodate most overnight campers. Property owners along the rivers and creeks complain of campers who trespass on private property for overnight camping. These 'free' campers should be directed toward the conservation properties.

Enhancing Recreation 10.5

The goal of this Parks and Recreation Plan is to enhance recreational activities within McDonald County. Outdoor recreation is the primary objective, to take advantage of the natural beauty which abounds here, attracting thousands of visitors each year and enhancing the quality of life for residents.

Missouri Law allows tax funds to be used for parks following state guidelines. Missouri Statute 64.450 permits County Commissioners to allocate up to 5 percent of the general budget for parks. Voters in the county may increase property taxes to pay for parks if more financing is needed. The state has grants available for parks financed by the state parks sales tax. Many other governmental agencies and private organizations also provide support for recreation and parks in relation to clean water programs, open space, and conservation practices.

- **Working with other agencies will greatly enhance the opportunities for funding parks.**
- **The Planning Commission recommends McDonald County designate a portion of the general budget to provide parks and recreational facilities for the citizens of this county.**

Land costs will continue to escalate and availability will lessen as the county population increases, while the need for parks and recreation will grow.

- **The purchase of land or donations of land will be a primary objective of the park plan.**
- **When planning parks and recreation facilities, three factors are important to consider:**
 1. Purchase of land,
 2. Site improvement costs.
 3. Ongoing operations/maintenance costs.

State lands within this county have very little water access. Such land will become less available to the public and will become more expensive to purchase in years to come. Concentrating parks along the waterways will allow for conservation of green space and keep development out of the flood plain, as well as allowing for prime recreational opportunities. Nature hiking trails are available in rich abundance in McDonald County. Indian Creek and Elk River are reported to be among the best small mouth bass fishing waterways in the state and this activity should be promoted.

- **Water access should be a primary objective of the McDonald County Parks and Recreation Plan.**
- **Fishing, swimming and picnic facilities need to be provided without the congestion associated with canoe access.**
- **County parks should concentrate on leisure and fitness walking trails and bike trails**
- **Beginning improvements should be limited to those most affordable such as playground equipment, picnic facilities, and water access.**
- **Roads, parking, lighting and signage will be necessary, as well as toilet facilities.**
- **Civic involvement with the improvements and maintenance will produce much more desirable and effective services.**

In order to assist law enforcement to respond to citizen complaints along the river, canoes and rafts need to be identifiable by number and outfitter.

- **Positive identification on both sides of all canoes and rafts by outfitter logo and number. Numbers should be at least four inches high and in contrasting colors to the craft. Numbers and outfitter logo should be at opposite ends of the craft.**
- **Prominent signs should display regulations and laws as well as penalties for infraction. Signs should also encourage floaters to be “good neighbors” while visiting and to respect private property.**
- **McDonald County should have available a standard signage to be used for campgrounds, access points and public right-of-way giving notice of laws.**

In 2001, the MCCDC obtained a grant to place port-a-potties along the river for two years. When those grant funds were depleted, there was no replacement for the funding and the program was terminated.

More than just a convenience to those on the river, there is the matter of sanitation. Septic pollution of the waterways threatens the health of citizens. It could also seriously damage the commercial businesses which rely on the river should full-body water contact become restricted due to E. coli readings. This problem demands immediate attention in order to avoid serious damage to the environment in McDonald County and its reputation as a recreation destination.

Over 95% of the crafts on the river are placed there by canoe outfitters. The thousands of customers who rent those crafts are entitled to be provided restroom facilities at reasonable distances along the float route. The citizens of McDonald County require that our environment be protected.

- **A permanent solution for restrooms needs to be established.**
- **Perhaps the greatest need/problem for recreation in McDonald County is restrooms along the float routes. Port-a-potties should be used to address immediate needs and a permanent solution should be sought for future years.**
- **Canoe outfitters should make their restrooms available to all river users and have signs along the river directing floaters to those facilities in order to protect the waterways.**
- **Restrooms near waterways should be required at all campgrounds and access points used by canoe outfitters as a condition to obtain a business license from McDonald County. These restrooms must be accessible to all river traffic.**
- **Signs are needed to point the way to available restrooms and to advise floaters where the next public restroom is located.**
- **Maps showing locations of public restroom facilities should be on websites and verbal information from canoe outfitters should be available to all river users.**

Where these measures prove inadequate to provide the necessary facilities along the float routes, canoe outfitters should be financially responsible to the entities providing additional facilities for water access, signage, trash receptacles and both temporary and permanent toilet facilities along the float routes.

- **Possible options to fund water access, signage, trash receptacles and toilet facilities along the float routes are:**
 1. **Voluntary contributions by canoe outfitters.**
 2. **User fees on the float rentals, either per person or by canoe or raft.**
 3. **Annual registration fees on commercial rafts and canoes.**

There are outstanding recreational opportunities within McDonald County.

- **Websites and brochures should be available to the public so they will be aware of these recreational facilities and parks.**

Such publicity would do more to enhance recreational opportunities than probably any other project under this plan and should be considered a top priority. Events and festivals at county parks could provide significant economic benefits and promotion for McDonald County.

While Missouri has acquired property for Big Sugar Creek State Park, little has been developed in the way of recreation facilities at that park. Currently, the use of Big Sugar State

Park is limited to hiking trails. By partnering with other agencies, recreational facilities can be greatly enhanced within McDonald County.

- **The Planning Commission should encourage and participate in improvements at Big Sugar State Park and Missouri Dept. of Conservation lands to stimulate the creation of recreational opportunities, especially restrooms near the creek for floaters.**

Missouri Statutes require that public (tax) financed county park facilities be free to the public.