



## Coastal Services, January/February 2011

### "CACHING" IN ON THE NATURAL RESOURCES OF THE GREAT LAKES

"As a new market niche, geocachers are looking for places to go."

Dave White,  
New York Sea Grant

What if coastal resource managers could bring a new group of technologically savvy visitors to their coastal areas who would pump money into local communities and be open to learning about natural, cultural, and historic resources?

Coastal managers in New York and Pennsylvania feel they have done just that by installing 75 geocaches along the 518-mile Great Lakes Seaway Trail, one of America's National Scenic Byways and a National Recreation Trail.

Geocaching is a treasure hunt where visitors find previously hidden caches with a Global Positioning System (GPS) device.

The Seaway Trail's new GeoTrail, which opened in August 2010, "provides a recreational, historic, cultural, and outdoor adventure for travelers," says Teresa Mitchell, president and CEO of Seaway Trail, Inc. "It's a way for people to see more and learn more about what's along the Scenic Byway."

"I think as coastal managers we can look at geocaching as a really unique opportunity," says Dave White, recreation and tourism specialist for New York Sea Grant. "It's bringing in a new and often younger audience who spend time learning about and understanding the environmental and cultural resources where the caches are hidden."

"This is a fabulous way to drive new travelers into our shoreline communities and their accommodations, restaurants, shops, and services," notes Kurt Schumacher, Great Lakes Seaway Trail project manager.

### Adventure Seekers

Geocaching is often described as a "game of high-tech hide and seek" played throughout the world by adventure seekers equipped with GPS or other navigational devices. The basic idea is to locate hidden containers outdoors and then share the experience online.

The primary geocaching website, Geocaching.com, reports that there are more than 4 million geocachers worldwide.

The website publishes the GPS coordinates for and provides information about geocaching sites. When a cache—usually a large plastic storage container or an ammo box—is located, finders enter their names in the logbook inside. Caches can also contain items for trading, usually toys or trinkets of little value.

### Coin Collecting

At least 10 ammo boxes emblazoned with the new Great Lakes Seaway Trail logo have been placed in each of five regions along the route, which parallels the freshwater shorelines of New York and Pennsylvania.

Each Seaway Trail cache has a uniquely shaped punch that cachers use to mark their logbooks. Once participants find 10 caches in a region, they can have their logbook validated at an area tourist information center to receive a distinctive Great Lakes Seaway Trail GeoCoin for that region. A total of five coins can be collected along the GeoTrail.

Schumacher says they seeded the tradable items in the cache boxes with guidebooks and area tourism information.

### Expert Guided

Developing the GeoTrail was not overly complicated, Schumacher says, but it did take a lot of time and effort. To make sure they did it right, they hired a consultant to coordinate the trail's development.

One of the biggest challenges, Schumacher says, was finding volunteers to help place the containers along the 500-plus-mile route and continually monitor them to ensure they aren't misplaced or stolen.

"We recruited experienced geocachers and gave them directions to select places for the containers in scenic, historic, and culturally significant spots," he says. The volunteers wrote proposals for their choices, which were reviewed to ensure the sites were in prime areas of interest, were adequately spread out geographically, and wouldn't cause any environmental harm.

"You want to showcase what's unique to your region and educate geocachers about the need to be good stewards of those resources," Mitchell says.

Permits were required to place the geocaches at historic locations or in state parks.

A grant from the Federal Highway Administration and sponsorships from local tourism agencies were used to fund the GeoTrail's development.

## Exceeding Expectations

Two months after the GeoTrail's launch, more than 1,000 coins had been given to geocachers who had found at least ten caches in a region. "We only ordered 2,500 coins last year, and if this level of use continues, we'll be out by early spring," says Schumacher, who is already planning to order more coins.

Before receiving the collectible coin, geocachers are asked to fill out a survey that will help measure the economic impact of the trail. "We have hard data from the survey," Schumacher says, "including how many days they spent in the area, how much money they spent, and where they are coming from."

They can also track the traffic on the Seaway Trail's pages on Geocaching.com. "We can see from the website how many people are finding each individual cache," he says.

According to the survey, most of the people seeking caches along the GeoTrail thus far are from the Northeast and are spending two to three days in a region. Most are planning to take about two weeks to do the whole trail. After only two months, geocachers had spent about \$80,000 and were projected to spend \$210,000 before the initial stock of GeoCoins would be depleted.

"It's exceeded our expectations," Schumacher says. "Many of these people say they wouldn't have come here if it wasn't for the GeoTrail, and many are already planning to come back."

## New Market

"As a new market niche, geocachers are looking for places to go," White says. "Coastal managers have the opportunity and structure to provide access, while training people to come to their resource and leave it better than it was."

White advises coastal managers interested in geocaching to think about "providing the opportunity in a sustainable, environmental way, and if the area can provide the resources that geocachers would need," such as lodging and meals.

Schumacher says he is "extremely proud" of the trail they have created. "It's been good for the region and good for the Great Lakes Seaway Trail."



For more information on geocaching, go to [www.geocaching.com](http://www.geocaching.com). For more information on the Great Lakes Seaway Trail GeoTrail, go to [www.seawaytrail.com/geotrail/](http://www.seawaytrail.com/geotrail/). You may also contact Kurt Schumacher at (585) 857-1004 , or [kurt@seawaytrail.com](mailto:kurt@seawaytrail.com), Teresa Mitchell at (315) 646-1000 , ext. 202, or [teresa@seawaytrail.com](mailto:teresa@seawaytrail.com), or Dave White at (315) 312-3042 , or [dgw9@cornell.edu](mailto:dgw9@cornell.edu).

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