

Amid challenges of COVID-19, a community organization contributes to USACE public lands

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Despite the months of May through September being the height of the recreation season for U.S. Army Corps of Engineers public lands, in March the USACE conducted an orderly shutdown of all USACE-managed campgrounds to protect the public and its workforce from further spread of COVID-19. Upon reopening the Douglas Creek Recreation Area at Lake Sakakawea in North Dakota in late June, a local community organization hosted a 5K race and used some of the proceeds to donate a custom picnic table to the park.

With a vision to help the rural community, Terrell Officer, a McLean County, North Dakota resident, and avid runner, founded the non-profit ND Rural Races. The overall mission of this organization is to give back to the rural community schools for educational purposes, supplies, field trips, and athletics for kids, said Officer. Officer spent most of his childhood in Minot, North Dakota and would often visit his great uncle on Lake Sakakawea and wanted to give back to the community.

“Every now and again I’d come down here to my great uncle’s place and I always had to run on the roads and I thought, man, this place would be so cool if you just made a trail down here,” Officer said.

He dreamed of creating an organization that would make an impact. In 2018, he bought a summer home in Hideaway Point, North Dakota, a small community at Lake Sakakawea. That’s when his dreams of having a 5K race turned into a reality.

Officer also pondered on how he would give back to the rural Garrison community. He remembered a story that one of his friends, a teacher, shared about purchasing a student some shoes because their parents could not afford to. “Parents are strapped and lots of times teachers pay for books and school supplies for students,” Officer said. “So, I thought it would be cool to do something along those lines.”

According to Officer, in the summer of 2019, he started mapping out the trail, sketching plans, and going through the process of getting approval from USACE to conduct the race on the Corps public lands; he also sought support from the manager of his housing development. The goal of 5K race was to get people moving physically, promote overall well-being, provide a community environment where people could still feel part of something bigger than just themselves, and raise money for a local school.

After months of planning and getting approvals, Officer planned to have a community 5K race in June 2020. Unfortunately, due to the challenges of COVID-19, he was not sure if the event would even happen.

With safety being a top priority of USACE, in March USACE announced that all public meetings and other public gatherings at all USACE-managed sites and facilities would be closed or put on hold until further notice.



Participants in the Hide Away Bay 5K Race run around the Douglas Creek Recreation Area at Lake Sakakawea in North Dakota, June 20, 202

The preventive measures to protect the public from the spread of COVID-19 changed the way people could participate in activities. Lake Sakakawea is nationally known for its year-round recreation activities.

In a 2016 interview with Midwest Hunting and Fishing Magazine, Mike Jensen, Outdoor Recreation Manager for North Dakota Tourism named this lake an “outdoor mecca”. According to Jensen, Lake Sakakawea has a variety of great options for anglers for any season—and fishing season never closes in North Dakota.

This year, during the height of the recreation season, events at Lake Sakakawea were canceled. In fact, the North Dakota Gaming and Fishing Department announced that all fishing tournaments for April and May were cancelled due to public safety concerns. Events scheduled for June through October were faced with the possibility of having their permits revoked if COVID-19 conditions persist.

Officer remained in contact with USACE and local officials but was aware that there was a possibility of the race being postponed or cancelled.

In late June, after carefully monitoring the disease and following the guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and other federal, state and local public health officials, the USACE slowly began reopening some public lands. “We continue to monitor the disease,” said Zach Montreuil, Natural Resource Program Manager, USACE, Omaha District. “We are encouraging people to frequently wash your hands, wear masks, bring hand sanitizer with you.”

Officer explained that this decision allowed race plans to move forward with a “physically distant” 5K race at the Douglas Creek Recreation Area. The event took on new meaning with the challenges of COVID-19. In addition to contributing to the community, participants were eager to get active and battle against self-isolation. On race day there were 25 participants, not including young children who could ride bikes.

“My aunt and uncle handed out face masks and hand sanitizer, and the port-a-potties were stationed six feet apart. The land is spacious so there was plenty of room for everyone to remain physically

distant while running or walking. I feel the goodness in my heart about it—human connection is everything,” said Officer.

“I am not sure where this will all lead but this event was created for the community and by the community. Next year I’d like to add a 10K loop to the 5K so people can run from the Douglas Creek Recreation area to Garrison. I think a marathon would be pretty cool.” he added.

Officer said that the organization raised \$3,200 to provide funding for rural schools and used half of the proceeds to customize an 800-pound, precast concrete table, which was donated to the Douglas Creek recreation area. He delivered the solid table with help from his Dad, nephew, and a few friends.



Non-profit organization, ND Rural Races uses half of the proceeds from the Hide Away Bay 5K contribute a customize an 800-pound, precast concrete table to a look-out at Douglas Creek recreation area, Lake Sakakawea, North Dakota, October 2020

“It’s great to have people in the community that want to help maintain the public lands for the greater good,” said Nathan Busche, USACE, Omaha District Lead Natural Resource Specialist and Park Ranger. “The public land is here for the public’s enjoyment. This is a great example of a number of ways the community can help and volunteer around the project,” he added.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is one of the nation’s leading federal providers of outdoor recreation with over 400 lake and river projects in 43 states. USACE manages nearly 12 million acres of public lands and waters including natural landmarks, cultural resources, open space, and provide important habitats for fish, wildlife, special and endangered species.