

	DEPARTMENT OF RECREATION & PARKS POLICY AND PROCEDURE TITLE: GPS Based Recreational Activities	No: 450.20
		Director: John R. Byrd
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PURPOSE

The Howard County Department of Recreation and Parks (HCRP) is responsible for the management of parks and facilities throughout the County. As such, HCRP needs to be aware of the variety of GPS based recreational activities and location based technology games that occur on its properties. The following guidelines are established to define duties, responsibilities and procedures for both the Department of Recreation and Parks and the geocaching public, particularly in the matter of placement and monitoring of all types of geocaches. There are three main objectives for this policy:

1. Maintain an updated list of all GPS based recreational activities on HCRP-managed properties, including details such as location, content and cache owner's personal contact information.
2. Provide park staff with GPS based recreational activity location information; address public inquiries about this activity and to protect the local environment from damage, possible overuse, etc.
3. Establish an approval procedure for new and existing geocaches to ensure compliance with the rules and responsibilities established in this policy.

Upon implementation of this policy, all GPS based recreational activities on HCRP properties must meet the established policy guidelines.

SUBTITLE

Definitions

Cache - a shortened version of the word geocache.

Cache Owner - is the person who has created, hidden and maintains the physical or virtual cache.

Geocacher - is a person engaged in the activity of searching for a published geocache.

Geocaching.com - is an official global GPS cache hunt site maintained by the private company Groundspeak, Inc.

Geocaching - is a modern day hide and seek treasure hunt using **GPS** technology. Players try to locate hidden containers using a handheld GPS device. A physical container is called a **geocache** or cache, at minimum, contains a logbook for geocachers to sign. The containers range in size from that of a business card holder or a tube of Chapstick (only containing a log), to large waterproof containers capable of storing the log, a pen or pencil, trackable items and “treasure,” small items left for others to trade like matchbox cars, small figurines, etc.

GPS - stands for Global Positioning System. It is a system of satellites that work with a GPS receiver to determine your location on the planet.

HCRP Property - Howard County Department of Recreation and Parks owned and managed properties including developed, undeveloped and historic properties.

Maryland Geocaching Society - a Maryland nonprofit corporation with its main office in St. Mary’s County. One of the principal objectives of the corporation is to promote geocaching as an existing and adventurous outdoor recreation activity for the whole family and gain acceptance of the game within Maryland.

Trackables - geocaching “treasures” that are created for the geocaching community. Once discovered by geocachers, Trackables travel from geocache to geocache, and their movements are logged and monitored by the listing geocache site.

Types of Caches

There are multiple geocache types that are subject to the guidelines in this policy, including traditional, multi and virtual, as well as any other type of cache that involves a physical container or item to be placed on HCRP managed property.

1. **Traditional Cache** - This is the original geocache type consisting of, at minimum, a container and a log book or log sheet. Larger containers generally include items for trade. “Nano” or “micro” caches are tiny containers that only hold a log sheet.
2. **Multi-Cache (offset Cache)** - A Multi-Cache ("multiple") involves two or more locations. The final location is a physical container. There are many variations, but most Multi-Caches have a hint to find the second cache, and the second cache has a hint to the third, and so on. An offset cache (where you go to a location and get hints to the actual cache) is considered a Multi-Cache.
3. **Virtual Cache** - is about discovering a location rather than a container. This type of cache does not require any sort of physical presence, and is not subject to the defined

procedures for geocache approval as long as the seeker does not need to traverse environmentally sensitive areas within a park or managed property.

4. **Mystery or Puzzle Cache** - is the "catch-all" of cache types; this form of geocache may involve complicated puzzles that you will first need to solve to determine the coordinates. Mystery/Puzzle Caches often become the staging ground for new and unique geocaches that do not fit in another category.

Other Types of Location Based Technology Games

Waymarking.com is a way to mark unique locations on the planet and give them a voice. While GPS technologies allows one to pinpoint any location on the planet, mark the location, and share it with others; Waymarking is the toolset for categorizing and adding unique information for that location. A waymark is a physical location on the planet marked by coordinates (latitude/longitude) and contains unique information defined by its waymark category. An outdoor maze category, for example, could contain information like price of admission and days of operation, while a statue category may describe the artist's medium and date of dedication.

Wherigo.com is a toolset for creating and playing GPS-enabled adventures in the real world. GPS technology is use to guide individuals to physical locations and interact with virtual objects and characters.

Geocaching.com, **Waymarking.com** and **Wherigo.com** are all owned by Groundspeak so they all follow the same procedures and rules.

Sightseeking.com is a listing site for photos with clues. Finders are not given the coordinates of the location, and must find the location using the photo and clues.

Munzee.com is a scavenger hunt game where QR codes are found in the real world and captured using smartphones.

GeoCheckpointing.com is an outdoor activity where participants use a GPS device or a map to find control points called GeoCheckpoints. The goal of every GeoCheckpoint is to show you some interesting place. Some GeoCheckpoints are placed in a beautiful natural setting while others can be found in charming corners of cities. GeoCheckpoints contain a 3-letter code, which is used to log visits on the web site.

Letterboxing.org is a growing hobby that combines elements of hiking, treasure hunting and creative expression into an activity that the whole family can enjoy. Participants seek out hidden letterboxes by following clues that are posted on the Internet and then record their discovery in their personal journal with the help of a rubber stamp that's part of the letterbox. In addition, letterboxers have their own personal stamps which they use to stamp into the letterbox's log book.

PROCEDURES

I. HCRP Responsibilities

- A. The Department will appoint a Geocache Administrator who will act as the primary point of contact for the public on all geocaching matters in Howard County Department of Recreation and Parks managed properties, including parks, open space and facilities.
- B. The Geocache Administrator will establish a “Premium Membership” on Geocaching.com as well as any other geocache listing sites such as Terracaching.com and Opencaching.com, in order to research and monitor existing and new caches. The Administrator will establish working relationships with local caching user groups such as the Maryland Geocaching Society as well as the local volunteer cache publishers/reviewers for the listing websites.
- C. The Geocache Administrator will keep a master list of caches on HCRP properties. The master list will be stored within a GIS database.
- D. The “Master List” of caches on HCRP Property will contain the following:
 - Cache owner (CO) username
 - Cache owner name
 - Cache owner email
 - Name of Cache
 - Content and/or theme of cache
 - Location of Cache
 - Location verification (Y or N)
 - Cache type
 - Container type, if applicable
 - Website published
 - Comply email sent (Y or N)
 - Cache owner complied
 - Date complied
- E. The Geocache Administrator with assistance from the Park and Facility Managers will handle approvals for new and existing cache placement using the Geocache Placement Guidelines. Park and Facility Managers may restrict the number of caches in a site as well as designate suitable sites for cache placement. (See Section V.) This approval process may require an on-site visit with HCRP Staff and the cache owner.
- F. The Geocache Administrator will contact owners of new and existing caches on HCRP-managed properties to make them aware of this policy. In addition, the

Administrator will contact owners as to whether or not caches are approved or denied.

- G. The Geocache Administrator will disseminate the Master List of Cache information to Park and Facility Managers. This list will be initiated upon request and made available to County officials and authorities upon request.
- H. Upon receiving the Geocache Approval Request application, the Geocache Administrator must contact the cache owner within (30) business days to review the cache content/location.
- I. Any issues such as overuse of the cache location, environmental damage or complaints from the public should be reported by the Park or Facility Manager to the Geocache Administrator. An Incident Report must be completed and filed by the Park and Facility Managers for all incidents in violation of this policy. This information will be maintained in a file at HCRP Headquarters by the Geocache Administrator.
- J. Park Staff will immediately remove any cache containing inappropriate material or contraband. Park Staff will notify The Geocache Administrator of these actions and the Geocache Administrator will contact the Geocache owner of such action.

II. Applicant Responsibilities

- A. To seek approval for placement of any new or existing cache, the cache owner must submit a completed "Cache Approval Request Application" to the Geocache Administrator.
- B. To continue the arrangements for placement of a geocache, the geocacher must follow the approval process and guidelines established by HCRP. The Application/Approval Process and the Geocache Placement Guidelines are found in Sections III, IV and V.
- C. The geocache owner retains the responsibility for their geocache listings and must register the cache with Geocaching.com or another geocache listing website to create a public record of a geocache and its original content, location and other relevant information.
- D. The cache owner is obligated to keep their personal contact information and information associated with the content and location of the geocache current and accurate with HCRP.
- E. The cache owner must label the exterior of any approved cache container used to identify the object as a Geocache or other GPS based recreational activity. The

purpose of this is to avoid confusion or alarm if a cache is discovered accidentally.

- F. The applicant can be any age.

III. Application/Approval Process for an Existing Cache

- A. HCRP is aware of the large number of existing caches on HCRP managed property. Existing caches are subject to the guidelines set forth in this policy. In order for those caches to remain in Howard County parks, owners are requested to complete and submit a Geocache Approval Request Application within (6) months from HCRP policy notification. Once the application is reviewed, the cache owner will be contacted regarding the status of their existing cache. This approval process may require an onsite visit with HCRP staff and the cache owner. All existing cache owners found to be non-compliant with this request will have their cache removed.
- B. The applicant must review the HCRP GPS based Recreational Activity Policy and Geocache Placement Guidelines.
- C. If existing cache is in compliance, the cache owner must complete and submit the “Cache Approval Request Application” to the Geocache Administrator. All pertinent information must be included; name and type of cache, cache identification number, listing website, accurate GPS location, name and contact information of cache owner, and the original contents or theme. Applications containing missing information will be voided. When completing the application, the applicant must review and acknowledge acceptance of HCRP Geocache Placement Guidelines by signing the “Cache Approval Request Application.”
- D. If existing cache is not in compliance, the Geocache owner should contact the Geocache Administrator for guidance on how to bring the cache into compliance.
- E. Only caches available to the general public through the usual public listing websites will be approved. Caches that are private or commercial in nature or whose location information is only available to customers or participants of such organizations or businesses are prohibited on HCRP Property, unless they are created specifically by HCRP staff for department programs.
- F. HCRP staff may place caches in parks for programming purposes, so long as the cache is only on-site for the actual time of the program and the Park /Facility Manager approves the location in advance.
- G. Park or Facility Managers may place public and non-public caches in locations (parks and/or facilities) in which they supervise, for programming or marketing purposes. Locations of all caches should be forwarded to the Geocache Administrator for record purposes and follow the Application/Approval Process for a new cache procedure.

- H. The application is usually reviewed within (30) business days.
- I. Applications are taken and approved on a first come, first serve basis.
- J. If issues with the existing cache cannot be resolved to fit within the guidelines, the Geocache Administrator will request the geocache owner to archive the cache listing and remove the physical cache.

IV. Application/Approval Process for a New Cache

- A. The applicant must review the HCRP GPS base Recreational Activity Policy and Geocache Placement Guidelines before placing or attempting to publish a cache.
- B. The cache owner must complete and submit the “Cache Approval Request Application” to the Geocache Administrator. All pertinent information must be included; name and type of cache, cache identification number, listing website, accurate GPS location, name and contact information of cache owner, and the original contents or theme. Applications containing missing information will be voided. When completing the application, the applicant must review and acknowledge acceptance of HCRP Geocache Placement Guidelines by signing the “Cache Approval Request Application.”
- C. Only caches available to the general public through the usual public listing websites will be approved. Caches that are private or commercial in nature or whose location information is only available to customers or participants of such organizations or businesses are prohibited on HCRP properties, unless they are created specifically by HCRP staff for department programs.
- D. The application is usually reviewed within (30) business days. This approval process may require an onsite visit with HCRP staff and the cache owner.
- E. Applications are taken and approved on a first come, first serve basis.
- F. If the cache is approved by HCRP, the Geocache Administrator will notify the cache owner. The cache owner will submit their cache information to a listing website for publishing.
- G. If the cache request is denied, the Geocache Administrator will notify the cache owner and may suggest appropriate modifications to bring the cache into compliance.
- H. If a solution can be found to bring the cache into compliance, the cache owner will be notified by the Geocache Administrator. The Geocache owner will then be able to submit the approved cache request to the listing website reviewer for publishing.

- I. If a solution cannot be rectified, the Geocache owner must remove any physical parts of the cache and any listings prematurely put in place. See Attachment A. It is a flow chart to clarify the Application/Approval Process.

V. Geocache Placement Guidelines

- A. The Geocache Application process is basically a permit process to allow an otherwise prohibited activity on parkland – Title 19.205(17) prohibits “Storing material of any description on park property.” All other Parkland Rules and Regulations apply and should be adhered to.
- B. Do not use Polyvinyl Chloride (PVC) pipe, ammo cans or any other military-looking container that may cause alarm should an unsuspecting person happen upon discovering the cache. Any cache not of the recommended type of container will be removed.
- C. The cache owner must label the exterior of any approved cache container used to identify the object as a Geocache or other GPS based recreational activity. The purpose of this is to avoid confusion or alarm if a cache is discovered accidentally.
- D. Geocache placement will be approved only in areas designated for recreational public use. Areas unsuitable for geocache placement include:
 - Historic sites
 - Sport fields
 - Skate park
 - Portable restrooms
 - Facility restrooms
 - Buildings and Pavilions
 - Playgrounds
 - Stages
 - Bridges
 - Picnic buildings
 - Forest Conservation Area
 - Landscape beds

In addition, a cache may not be placed inside or within 100 feet of the following areas: wetlands, flood plains, ponds, rivers and lakes. Approved cache locations are at the discretion of the Park/Facility Manager.

- E. Do not dig any holes or disturb the surrounding environment.
- F. Do not place the cache in plain view. Attempt to conceal the cache to minimize the chances that a non-participant will spot it, which could lead to worry, theft or vandalism.
- G. The cache hunt must involve GPS use and accurate coordinates to the true cache location.

H. Geocachers are prohibited from entering designated properties occasionally, from October through February because of scheduled deer management. It is the geocachers responsibility to be aware of these closure dates, which are available online on the Howard County Department of Recreation and Park's main website, the Deer Management webpage and posted at the entry points of the affected properties.

- i. <http://www.howardcountymd.gov/deermanagement.htm>
- ii. <http://www.howardcountymd.gov/rap>

I. A cache location showing signs of excessive wear may result in the removal or request for relocation.

J. A cache location drawing unwanted attention or in a suspicious area will be removed. HCRP will contact the cache owner to suggest alternate locations or to arrange for a pick-up of cache content.

VI. Reporting incidents

Report **Geocache Placement Guidelines** violations or concerns to:

The Geocache Administrator
Howard County Department of Recreation and Parks
7120 Oakland Mills Road, Columbia, MD 21046
Or email to dpoholsky@howardcountymd.gov

VII. Suspend/Revoke Use

The HCRP retains the right to remove any geocache container deemed unsafe, inappropriate, causing unacceptable environmental damage or otherwise in violation of the guidelines defined in this policy. Cache owners will be contacted by the Geocache Administrator to arrange for pick-up of any removed cache materials. Any unclaimed cache materials will be destroyed after a period of 30 days from attempted contact of the owner. HCRP may also suspend or revoke privileges for placing or maintaining caches on HCRP managed properties and require that all caches from that owner be removed.

VII. Fee

There is no fee assessed by HCRP for approval of cache placement. However, if deemed necessary, the County reserves the right to charge a nominal fee for the placement of geocaches on HCRP managed property.

Attachment A: Flow Chart of GPS Based Recreational Activity Application Process.

Attachment A. So, you have a cache on Howard County Recreation and Parks managed property (or are planning a new one!)....

Follow the steps below – the word “cache” refers to all GPS based recreational activities conducted on HCRP managed properties. Just like a traffic light, Green arrows are good, Red is bad!

