

Geocaching and Our Parks

Come join in the hunt!

What is geocaching? The short answer...
Geocaching is an entertaining adventure game for GPS users.

Participating in a “cache” hunt is a great way to experience the outdoors with your friends and family.

The concept is simple: hide a cache (usually a small Tupperware container filled with trinkets) and to share the location on the internet. GPS users can download the coordinates to find the cache.

Once found, all the visitor is asked to do is to write about their journey in the log. They may also leave an item in trade for something from the cache.

It's free, it's fun, and it's addictive!

Stats

The popularity of Geocaching is reflected in its growth over the last five years:

- Worldwide there are over **212,395 active caches** in **218 countries**.
- Over **23,000 cachers** post logs online each week!
- There are currently over **7000 caches within 100 miles** of the Golden Gate Bridge
- The Bay Area has over **5000 registered geocachers**
- Geocachers of the Bay Area (the GBA) registered **500 members** in its first 8 months
- The average urban geocache gets 6-10 visits a month
- The average open-space geocache gets 15-30 visits a year



From the Logs:

“What a GREAT trail! I took Limekiln up (my first time) and loved it! Looking out over the quarry was neat, but even better was the serenity of the area. I love morning hikes when the sun is just getting up over the hills and lighting the far side of the mountains leaving the gorges shady and cool. It really is relaxing and calming...”

Kealia found “Limekiln Cache” (Traditional Cache)

A little History...

On May 1, 2000, the Clinton administration removed “Selective Availability” from the Global Positioning System. GPS receivers became accurate to within a few yards. This created the possibility of a game such as Geocaching.

On May 2nd, 2000, the first cache was hidden just outside of Portland, OR (a bronze plaque marks the spot today).

It was found the next day...

How It Works

A popular definition of Geocaching is:

“Using billions of dollars in military satellites to hunt Tupperware hidden in the woods.”

Hiding a Geocache

- The hider finds an interesting spot to hide the cache. This is usually a scenic point or unusual place along a trail worth sharing with others.
- The hider designs a cache to fit that spot, making use of natural camo or features that will hide it from a non-cacher. The cache should be a water-tight container and **clearly labeled as a Geocache** (stickers and stencils are available online). Cachers are discouraged from leaving containers that might alarm a passerby. The cache should also *contain a standard note describing Geocaching*.
- Caches should be placed close to existing roads, paths or game trails, and **Geocaches may NEVER be buried**.
- The hider creates a web page for the cache and submits it for review.
- A reviewer checks over the cache to be sure it follows the guidelines.
- Once reviewed, the cache is published and the hunt begins!



From the Logs:

“What a wonderful day, at some spots during the trek I could see downtown San Jose. My favorite stage was #2. As I sat by a tree to input the co-ords I heard a rustle off to the side. I looked up and there was a family of deer slowly moving through the area. One of the little fawns stopped to see what I was up to, stood there for the longest time moving his head this way and that, wiggling his little ears and just looking right in my eyes. It's one of those times you most likely will always remember.”

Summerandnana found “Assume Nothing #7” (Multi-cache)

Hunting a Geocache

- The cacher downloads the coordinates and checks the cache location against park maps, identifying a likely trail. Part of the fun of the hunt is the use of orienteering skills, selecting the right trails and spotting likely hiding places. When searching for a cache, an experienced cacher avoids the urge to begin bushwhacking when the compass arrow points into the woods. Instead, they are taught to look down the trail for the route the cache hider took when placing the cache.
- While searching, the cacher should be careful to “leave no trace”. It is important to leave the hide area as found so that the next cacher can enjoy the hunt as well.
- Once the cache is found, the finder may choose to take a trade item or to leave something behind. Suitable trade items are personal tokens, small toys

or coins. Cachers are not permitted to leave dangerous or illegal items, or food. When such items are found in a cache, they are removed and trashed out.

- Before leaving, cachers are encouraged to practice **CITO** (Cache In Trash Out). If there is any trash in the area, pick it up and pack it out!
- Upon returning home, a cacher will write a log online describing the hunt and report the condition of the cache and the hide area.



Geocachers often make use of natural camo that would be unnoticed by non-cachers. A well placed cache is nearly invisible, which adds to the appeal of the hunt.

Geocaching and the Environment

Geocachers are among the most environmentally conscientious users of our parks and open spaces.

- **Caches are placed according to strict guidelines and should never endanger habitat or wildlife.** Caches that are found to have problems are reported by finders, and the cache will be disabled until the issues are resolved.
- **Cachers will often carry a trash bag while caching and practice CITO** (Cache In Trash Out). A trail to a popular geocache should be virtually free of litter.
- **Cachers are encouraged to volunteer at local “trail days” events.** Whether it’s removing non-native plants or building trails, cachers are an enthusiastic labor pool. Many of these events are sponsored by Geocaching groups (and may even count as a “find”)!
- **The impact of geocaching activity on parks most closely resembles hiking,** certainly not as rough as mountain biking or equestrians. Cachers are encouraged to use existing trails and to place caches out of sight of passerby, but near enough to avoid creating “volunteer” trails. It does not deface park property, unlike paintballing.
- **The goal of hiding geocaches is to make them hard to see.**

From the logs:

“I looked around and got so disgusted with all the trash that I decided to pick up as much as I could. I didn't have a trash bag, so I just used some of the available trash. I filled up the trash can, but there was still plenty left. This would be a good spot for a CITO event.”

STPRon found “Marsh View Parking”



The CITO Program

<http://www.cacheintrashout.org/>

In April of 2003, geocachers celebrated the First International Cache In Trash Out Day. The first year with short notice, geocachers around the world organized 67 cleanup events in 5 countries and 28 States. There were 1180 unique logs posted showing participation in these events, and hundreds more acted locally in recognition of this important day. The events were such a huge success that Groundspeak committed to carrying on the tradition.

In 2004 the event was an even greater success, geocachers from around the world held more than 160 clean up events in 10 countries and 41 US states!

Cache In Trash Out Day is made possible each year by a partnership between Groundspeak and the entire Geocaching community with support from our sponsors, businesses and organizations everywhere.

Benefits of Geocaching



From the Logs:

"Nice hike on a rainy day. The nature trail was quite overgrown, and the creek was a raging torrent. Thanks for showing us this place and teaching us a new word...riparian. Now, how to work that one into everyday conversation."

Mjp303 found "Swiss Family Robinson" (Traditional Cache)

Family friendly activity

Geocaching is something the whole family can enjoy! Kids can be enticed away from video games and TV by a "treasure hunt".

Young children are often less than excited about a "deathmarch" up to a scenic vista. But they will hike for miles without complaining to trade trinkets in a cache. Young techies enjoy the high tech gadgets. Families and co-workers can form caching teams and compete with their friends.

Caching is a quiet, relaxed, and sometimes stealthy activity that is minimally disturbing to other park users and wildlife.

Appeals to a broad cross-section of population

Geocaching cuts across all segments of the population.

It is essentially a free activity so it draws from all income levels.

It appeals to men and women of all ages.

It will draw in segments of the population that might not otherwise visit the park.

It is popular with schools, scouts and other organizations.

Brings people to parks

Cachers are encouraged by the hides to visit the parks, without any additional promotional expenditure. As cachers make repeat visits to find new caches, they support the parks through their user and parking fees.

Caching provides additional eyes to watch for hazardous conditions, fires, injured persons, or illegal activities. (Having a GPS locator can be very useful in reporting emergencies or reporting the precise location of problem areas.)

A new source of park supporters & volunteers

Cachers can be recruited for volunteer programs, individually or via geocache organizations. "Trail Days" can be promoted as events on Geocaching.com for added exposure, without incurring additional costs. Cachers value our parks and support park funding and improvements.



From the Logs:

"It actually was a lot of fun (I don't usually say that about shoveling piles of dirt). Our trail looks great - I can't wait to hike up the newly opened portion, from start to finish...I'm looking forward to the next event.. Didn't sammydee say that the next "Trail Days" is in a couple of weeks at Santa Teresa?"

mfc61 found "Trail Days: Almaden Quicksilver" (CITO Event Cache)

It's Educational

Geocaching teaches useful skills, such as the use of a compass and map reading. It brings kids into contact with nature and builds a lifelong appreciation for our parks and open spaces.

Geocaching can be combined with programs like PEAK (Promoting Environmental Awareness in Kids) to involve kids in new ways.

Caches are often placed to explain key features in parks. They can highlight historical facts, natural history and scenic points that might be otherwise missed. Parks can create geocache "trails" to create guided tours, or introduce new routes and trailheads.

Helps eliminate trash

The practice of CITO not only lessens the impact of geocachers, but mitigates litter problems from other users as well. Parks can encourage this practice by placing "CITO Cans" (film canisters with plastic grocery bags) in caches for others to take an use.

It's the "next big thing"!

Geocaching is a hot topic right now, and can be used to capture the public's attention.

It has been featured in most regional newspapers in the SF Bay Area (often on the cover page). Local and national magazines have reported on it, and a segment on Geocaching has been aired repeatedly on "Bay Area Backroads".

Geocaching classes have recently been among the most popular offerings at all Bay Area REI stores. REI has also partnered with

Geocaching.com as a sponsor, as have corporations like Jeep and Magellan.

Geocaching has been enthusiastically embraced by the Boy Scouts, and is being used to teach concepts from science to geography in schools.

Around the country, people are being reintroduced to the outdoors through this game.



From the Logs:

"We pulled up right at 2:00pm to find geo-clause(touchstone) and Kealia checking out the trash dump. We promptly broke out the CITO bags and Kealia doled out gloves and we set about cleaning up the site. Soon, workerofwood, Nazgul, Motorbug and Digitalfish showed up and we had many hands picking up trash. Before long, it was all picked up (the people who previously DNF'd this cache recently will be amazed)."

Marky found "Christmas Surprise" (Traditional Cache)

Common Concerns & Misconceptions

Geocaching is an unregulated sport with no official governing organization.

While it is true that anyone can place a geocache and post coordinates online, nearly all participants in the sport use the listings at Groundspeak (Geocaching.com).

Groundspeak uses a network of volunteer reviewers to enforce guidelines and respond to issues. Caches that violate the guidelines are disabled, and if the issues cannot be resolved, they are removed and “archived”.

Local geocaching enthusiast groups have sprung up around the country and have entered into dialog with local parks authorities. These represent the most active geocachers in their areas and are excellent partners in dealing with issues.

Since geocaches obviously cannot be hidden in the middle of a trail, they are usually placed off the trail.

Going off-trail is against park rules in some districts. Cachers do not want to see “volunteer trails” formed any more than you do. Volunteer trails leading to a cache are likely to expose the cache to curious hikers, leading to its disappearance. A cache hunt that results in a case of poison oak, or leaves a cacher picking stickers out of their socks is NOT popular and will be reflected in the logs.

Experienced cachers try to hide in areas that can support their activity, using existing game trails or rocky areas for travel.



Can you see it?

Abandoning personal property on public lands could be considered littering.

By definition, geocaches are not really abandoned because they are visited regularly. If for whatever reason they fall into disrepair, they are usually removed by the next finder.

Geocachers do their best to keep the caches out of sight. Caches are usually camouflaged and hidden so as to be unnoticed by a non-cacher, even when they are within reach of the cache.

Again, the goal of the hide is NOT to be seen!

In a post 9/11 world, finding suspicious hidden containers could cause alarm.

Cachers are encouraged to clearly label the hide as an “Official Geocache Game-piece”. A “Stash-Note” is usually included in the cache explaining Geocaching to the uninitiated.

Cachers avoid using materials that could be easily mistaken for something sinister (and finders are encouraged to comment on the suitability and appearance of a hide). Park personnel should be aware of what is hidden in the parks so they can respond appropriately if a cache is accidentally discovered. This is a key reason cachers wish to stay above-board in their park placements.

Park officials are worried about people trampling sensitive habitats or damaging historical sites while hiding or searching for geocaches.

Cachers invite input from the parks on areas that should be avoided. Notice can be given in online public forums, and through the reviewers.

Finders will often comment in their logs if the cache appears to be having a detrimental impact on the area, and the cache can be removed.

Park officials are concerned about the safety of people involved in geocaching.

Cachers are really no more likely to be injured while using the parks than other users. They should in fact be more aware of their surroundings as they search for a cache.

Caches are rated for difficulty so that no-one need attempt a hunt beyond their comfort level.

Caching in parks is often a group activity, so cachers benefit from one another's experience.

Cachers develop advanced map and navigation skills, and a GPS is added insurance that they will not easily get lost.



From the Logs:

"Camp Ta-Ki-Ma thanks workerofwood (representing REI), mjp303, and Team Nazgul for introducing geocaching to our Webelos scouts. They had a lot of fun finding caches with these experienced cachers. Thank you, mjp303, for setting up this special cache "Sky's the Limit", the theme of our camp this year."

Eagle81 found "Sky's the Limit" (Traditional Cache)

Developing Voluntary Guidelines

It is in everyone's best interest to avoid having restrictive regulations imposed. These common sense guidelines will minimize the impact to the park and are in line with already established rules for caching:

Be SAFE

- Hike in a safe manner to avoid triggering emergency rescue efforts.
- While rattlesnakes, ticks, Hanta virus-infected rodents, thistles, and poison oak are a hazard to all park users, geocachers are especially vulnerable if they use their hands to search through plants, rocks, and ground holes for geocaches. Think before you reach.
- Avoid hiding caches in animal holes or under rock piles, as those are prime hiding places for rattlesnakes.

Obey the RULES

- Never go geocaching in the park after posted hours. Not only is it against the rules, but night is when mountain lions are on the hunt.
- Caches may NEVER be buried, nor may searchers dig in an attempt to find them. (Geocaching.com will not knowingly list buried caches.)
- Caches should be clearly labeled, so they are not mistaken for trash or worse.
- Parks are often surrounded by private property. They may also have restricted areas where public access is not allowed. Geocachers should take care to avoid these areas by consulting the park map. When in doubt, ask.

Respect Wildlife, Park Resources and the Environment

- Don't put anything edible or anything that smells like food in the cache. Don't use plastic containers that smell like food. Rodents can chew through plastic containers. Wild pigs will root through fields, digging them up, which can reveal or bury geocaches. Pigs have strong jaws, which can break through containers. People hiding geocaches should take care to make the caches animal-proof, so that wild animals are not likely to get into them and ingest the contents, which can be harmful to them.
- Know about and avoid environmentally sensitive areas.
- Avoid historical structures that are not open to the public. Not only are they valuable and delicate historical treasures that can be damaged by trespassers, they can be hazardous. They may contain sharp objects, rusty nails, and broken glass. They may not be structurally stable. They often harbor disease-carrying rodents, which can attract rattlesnakes.
- Maintain your caches by visiting regularly. Note the impact on surrounding areas and reposition or remove the cache if needed.

Tread Lightly

- Always carry a park map. While a simple GPS unit can tell you where a cache is located, it may not necessarily tell you the best, the safest, or the most legal way to get there. To do that requires a map. Stay on established trails to reach the caches. Plan ahead. Before heading out, look up the geocache coordinates on a map or online mapping site and plan your route. Don't bushwhack a shortcut or create illegal trails.

Some Practical Ideas to get you Started

Get Informed

- Sign up online for a free account at Geocaching.com. This will allow you to view what is going on in the park, get notification of all cache activity and see logs from ALL users. How many activities provide that kind of visibility?
- Ask the caching community to come present geocaching to your staff and volunteers. We would be happy to show you what it is about, and welcome the chance to begin building relationships.

Get involved

- Place a cache. Start with something that will offer a direct benefit. Put a CITO-themed cache at a major trailhead or visitor center. Fill it with CITO canisters*. Instruct cachers, through the cache page description, to stop by and pick one up before heading into the park. You will meet the geocache community this way and be able to see the level of activity. Then watch the litter disappear.
As an alternative, pick a messy “party spot” in the park and place a CITO cache there. Point out the problem area and let cachers help keep it clean.
- Place a trailhead cache to mark a new trail.
- Hold a “trail-days” event for cachers.

You can ask the local geocacher community for assistance. They know how it works and can help assure a successful entry into the game!

* A CITO canister is simply an old plastic film can (available free from any developer) containing a plastic grocery bag and a latex glove. Label it with a message from the park: “The Park District encourages Geocachers to practice CITO! Enjoy your visit!”. These can be mass produced for free, and the containers can be recycled by asking the cachers to drop empties back at the cache on their way out.

Communication

Questions about Geocaching can be answered through one of the following:

- Talk to cachers you encounter on the trails.
- Contact the Owner- the cache should be labeled with the hider's contact information.
- Contact the Listing site- Geocaching.com can put you in touch with the local reviewer.
- Contact the local Geocacher Organization:
 - Bay Area www.theGBA.net (forums are provided for park personnel to communicate with local cachers)
 - Sacramento Area <http://www.rcgds.net>
 - North State <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nuts>

Links

- www.geocaching.com the primary listing body for Geocaching in the world
- www.cacheintrashout.org the home of the CITO program
- <http://www.geocaching.com/about/guidelines.aspx> the guidelines for listing a geocache

How is Geocaching being handled by other parks departments?

- Greenfield (WI) Parks and Recreation (*an example of a parks department that has registered as a user at GC.com and sponsors caching events*)
http://www.geocaching.com/seek/cache_details.aspx?guid=462fea40-5710-439a-b210-b230304fce59
- Official Geocache Day in Nevada
http://www.travelnevada.com/news_feature_detail.asp?PressID=347
- Virginia <http://www.virginia.org/site/features.asp?FeatureID=193>
- Arkansas State Parks <http://www.arkansasstateparks.com/things/geocache>
- Connecticut Dept of Environmental Protection (*letterboxing is an earlier game that parallels Geocaching, without a GPS*)
<http://www.dep.state.ct.us/burnatr/forestry/centen/letterbox.htm>
- West Virginia State Parks & Forests
<http://www.wvstateparks.com/recreation/geocache.htm>

Join Us!

Land Managers are eligible for a free Premium account at Geocaching.com.

You can easily view activity in the park, and receive instant notification of new caches. Use the account to reach out to the caching community: Sponsor an event, hide a cache, bring people into the park! Many local cachers are already involved with park volunteer groups and would be glad to help.

For more information, please write the Geocachers of the Bay Area at **info@thegba.net**