



Behind The Scenes Of Vermont State Parks: An Interview With Nick Caputo, FPR State Parks Regional Ranger Supervisor

Each year in the spring, Vermont's four Regional Ranger Supervisors interview, hire and train hundreds of seasonal employees who will staff Vermont's 52 state parks for the season. Once the parks open, these same four will ensure that the parks are operating smoothly. "We do everything," Nick Caputo shares. "We order all of the operational supplies necessary to run the parks. We field complaints that come in from customers who may have had an issue at a particular park, or a bad experience. It's our job to

address any customer issues with park staff, to ensure that they are providing the best possible experience for our visitors. We make sure each park office is stocked with merchandise and brochures, and that concession stands are operating smoothly and offering products that provide a benefit for our guests."

In addition to supervising seasonal staff and ensuring a smooth and pleasant visitor experience, Caputo and his colleagues oversee improvement projects within the parks, inspect them for safety hazards and meet with day use visitors, campers and other park guests. "There really aren't a lot of tasks that fall outside of our job description," explains Caputo. "I address nuisance wildlife when it presents a danger to visitors. I am a certified playground safety inspector. If there is something that is related to the operation of a park, or that impacts a visitor's experience, it's part of my job to know about it and address it."

One of the projects that Caputo has been spearheading is an effort to get both locally-produced and healthier options into parks concessions stands. "It's been an experiment," he shares. "One of the best things for the parks is to be a contributing member of the community that the park is located in. We've been working with local businesses to get their products into the concessions stands, rather than competing for business. We've also been working to include healthy options, which can address a slew of societal issues like poor eating habits and childhood obesity. Ultimately we go with what there is demand for, and we try to keep costs down, but there is a lot of room within those guidelines to provide healthy choices."

Caputo spends his summers splitting time between administrative duties in the office, and travel between all of the parks from the summit of Mount Mansfield east and from the town of Barre north. "I usually spend about four days a week in the field and one day a week in the office. My main role is supporting the staff."

Working with seasonal staff is not always an easy task. "It is very challenging because of the turnover. It's sometimes difficult to maintain consistency at a park from year to year, or to build upon successes of previous seasons, due to the seasonal nature of the parks jobs. People find other work, they move around, there is no guarantee that an exceptional employee will return to run a park the following season."

I ask Caputo to talk about other difficulties that he addresses during the field season. "There can be some tension between conservation and public access," he replies. "First and foremost we are stewards of the land – it is our job to protect state parks so that they are available for future use. It is also our responsibility to provide access today. Whenever there are multiple stakeholder groups involved, these are not the kind of decisions that I make on my own. Land use decisions come from a thoughtful and thorough process. Everyone has to be heard. We seek input from knowledgeable people, user groups, anyone involved really. What comes out hopefully is a balance that addresses the perspectives of all of the groups involved."

Nick Caputo says that despite the challenges, he loves his job. "I've been in this position for ten years," he shares. "I came to this job after being a seasonal park ranger myself for almost as long. I love getting out into the parks and meeting the people who use our parks. I enjoy the energy and enthusiasm that the seasonal staffs bring with them. I like getting out of the office and working outside too."

"Keeping parks available for the public is important." Caputo says. "It takes a lot of coordination though. I wish I could show people how much behind the scenes team effort and dedication goes into making sure people have the best experiences at our state parks. I wish they could see how much coordination and logistical support is required. I think it would make the public understand how important it is to all of us that they have a good experience and enjoy our parks."

On a final note, I ask Caputo if there is anything else he would like to share. “If you have kids, check out the new playground that is going to be installed at Boulder Beach,” he replies. “It’s going to be awesome!”