



USC sophomores Bonnie, Amanda and Michele find a perfect sunbathing location during low tide at the Saluda River rapids Sunday. SCE&G officials warn that the rocks are often slippery and unstable, but that didn't seem to bother these students.

Greg Rickabaugh/The Gamecock

Taking time off Saluda River offers nature for landlocked students

By GREG RICKABAUGH
Staff Writer

Seniors Jonathan Burnett and Bo Mueller can be found three times a week hanging out at the rapids behind Riverbanks Zoo.

To escape the tremendous stress caused by long classes and overcrowded parking, the two USC friends drive just 10 minutes to what they consider paradise.

"It's just a good place to come and get away from Columbia," Burnett said about the Lower Saluda River, often referred to as "the rapids."

While they admit it's not the safest hang-out, the two take their chances and climb down the rocky banks with a cooler in one hand and a towel in the other. They don't wear their nicest clothes, and they often just wade before retreating from the freezing water that races along the rapids.

To them, it seems like a hideaway at times. But when the weekend kicks in, USC students join other crowds in fishing, kayaking, innertubing, swimming, sunbathing and other activities along the river.

USC's Mountaineering and Whitewater Club uses the Saluda River as a huge resource for canoeing, kayaking and rafting.

Club members even plan midnight kayaking excursions under a full moon.

Other students such as sophomore Milton Bensten use the rocky banks as a picnic area.

"We got food from the Grand Marketplace and brought it in our bookbag," Bensten said Sunday while catching some rays with his girlfriend, Lynne Snider.

The couple later ventured into the water for a two-minute dip.

"The main thing is getting away after a busy week," Bensten said.

Senior John Kehl fishes the river on occasion. Striped bass are a popular catch, and many say they are good eating.

But kayaking is Kehl's main sport on the river.

"It's not something to just fiddle around with because you can get hurt," Kehl said.

Zoo officials could not agree more.

Use of the river is discouraged in fact by zoo personnel, who have witnessed many drownings, alcohol-related injuries and destruction of the property. The zoo parking lot is one of a few access points to the area, and zoo personnel must now deal with river-goers filling their lots.

Mary Leverette is the zoo's director of public services.

"Over the past few years, there has been increasingly disruptive behavior," she said. "There is a particular problem with alcohol abuse and with drug abuse down there."

Beer and soda cans are scattered throughout the trails leading down to the river, and zoo officials are left to clean up the mess. In the past few years, the zoo has added security guards who turn non-zoo patrons away from the access area.

While zoo officials discourage people from going down to the river, a S.C. Electric & Gas official would like to remind people of the drownings and life-threatening conditions on the river.

SCE&G spokesman Bill Lide has a tip for newcomers to the area: The rapids might be attractive, but they are dangerous.

"It's a very serious and life-threatening risk to go wandering on the rocks," Lide said, adding the rocks are slippery and not always stable.

Because the river is located downstream from a hydroelectric plant, the water level is manually fluctuated. In other words, five minutes could put a just visible rock deeply under water.

SCE&G, who owns most of the land on the outerbanks of the Lower Saluda River,

has posted warning signs: HORN SIGNAL AND FLASHING LIGHTS INDICATE RISING WATER.

Lide said there is nothing SCE&G can do to prevent people from using the area, but he does warn river-goers to be extremely sensitive to the lights and the sirens.

"When the lights go off and siren sounds, we recommend going quickly off to the safety of the banks," Lide said.

USC student Jonathan Burnett can relate.

"I have slipped and fell on my butt plenty of times, especially when the siren goes off," Burnette said.

But as the temperature remains hot and classes remain stressful, Burnette and his friends will continue to drive 10 minutes to their off-campus paradise.

Access to the river varies. Take the Greystone Boulevard/Riverbanks Zoo exit off I-126. Turn left at the stop sign. A sign will point to Candy Lane. Take that right and drive about a quarter mile and park along the side. There are a number of trails along the railroad tracks leading down to the river.

Also, for information about canoeing or kayaking trips on the rapids, call the River Running Outdoor Center at 771-0353.

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