Cuyahoga Valley National Park, Kent State and Cleveland Metroparks launch learning app

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Rick Ferdig, Ph.D., Summit Professor of Learning Technologies at Kent State University and lead investigator on a National Science Foundation grant, partnered with the Cuyahoga Valley National Park and Cleveland Metroparks to develop a new learning app that is now live and freely available on iTunes. Credit: Kent State University

Educators, scientists, and technologists from the Cuyahoga Valley National Park, Kent State University and Cleveland Metroparks have partnered to develop a new learning app that is now live and freely available on iTunes. The app, called ParkApps, features a number of different resources aimed at educating park visitors as they run, hike and bike through the parks.

The project was funded by the National Science Foundation's Advancing Informal STEM Learning initiative. The goals of the project are to test the feasibility of using such devices in parks while also studying the impact of mobile devices on informal science learning.

Like other apps that have been built for local, state and national parks, ParkApps includes a digital map with points of interest where users learn about the history and ecology of the parks. However, the team pushed beyond traditional map delivery to include opportunities for interactive learning. For instance, in 'Adventure Tracks,' visitors can explore topics like wildflowers, geology or marsh habitats while they hike the trails. The user's mobile device alerts them to places along the path to stop and engage with the environment. Once tracks are completed, users earn digital badges as a reward for their effort.

"When Kent State University first approached us about this project, we were very excited to participate," said Jennie Vasarhelyi, Chief of Interpretation, Education and Visitor Services at Cuyahoga Valley National Park. "We emphasize park activities that encourage visitors to engage with and learn about park resources. This project provides a new way to promote engagement that we think visitors will enjoy."

Other features include 'Learn As You Go,' where visitors can find hidden facts as they explore trails, and 'My ParkApps,' where visitors

and scientists can create their own maps. Users who decide to create a login for the app will also have free access to an accompanying website where they can see their progress, create new points, and see a record of their hikes in the park.

Future iterations of the tool will include a citizen science component and an identification feature where visitors can get help identifying plants, trees, and animals. ParkApps is only available for Apple IOS devices for now; an Android version will follow later this summer. Expanded content for the app is also in development.

"This is a great example of using technology to get people back into nature and to enhance their experience in the process," said Rick Ferdig, Ph.D., Summit Professor of Learning Technologies at Kent State and lead investigator on the grant. "This partnership has allowed us to bring together park interpreters, scientists and technologists to build our understanding of informal science learning at multiple parks."

"Cleveland Metroparks is extremely excited to partner in this important project with Kent State University and the Cuyahoga Valley National Park," said Cleveland Metroparks Chief Executive Officer Brian Zimmerman. "This collaboration uses current technology to help increase our visitor engagement, while supporting our mission of conservation, education and recreation."

 More information: parkapps.kent.edu/

Provided by Kent State University