

**Deeply Rooted: The Story of Congaree National Park**

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**Supplemental Senior Thesis Report**

## **Abstract**

This photo-essay book was written to fulfill requirements for completion of a senior thesis project to graduate with honors from the South Carolina Honors College. Its purpose is to promote the enjoyment and preservation of the Congaree National Park by educating the public on the historical and ecological significance of the land and the many activities it has to offer. Despite its proximity to downtown Columbia, there remains a lack of public awareness about the park and the amazing activities and opportunities it has to offer. I have compiled information and pictures that will best depict the unique qualities of the area. This project was a culmination of research, photography, hiking, and wildlife identification resulting in the publication of a photo-essay book on the Congaree National Park. The book describes specific areas of the park, as well as, the historical, cultural, and natural significance; includes a nature guide for common invasive species and native plant and animal species; and discusses management, volunteering, and recreational activities. This book, which will be available to University of South Carolina students and local residents, will serve as a gateway to establish background understanding of the importance of the land, as well as motivate individuals to visit the Congaree National Park.

## Thesis Summary

Three and a half years ago, I was sitting in my very first meeting with an academic advisor as an incoming freshman at the University of South Carolina. He told me I needed to choose an elective for the upcoming fall semester and gave me a list of options. The one that immediately caught my attention was a public engagement course on the natural history of the Congaree National Park. I had never heard of the Congaree National Park prior to this moment, but as an outdoor enthusiast and with previous involvement in an environmental science program in high school, I thought this sounded like a class I would enjoy. My senior thesis director, Dr. John Grego, was the professor, and took us on trips to several areas within the park, where he taught us about the natural history and ecology of the land. As a final project for that class I worked with two other classmates to digitally catalog over 15 years of wildlife sighting logs for the National Park Service. I thoroughly enjoyed that class, and for my senior thesis decided it would be a great topic to return to. The idea for a photo-essay book came from a senior thesis I completed in high school, in which I designed a similar book focusing on a small section of the C&O Canal National Historical Park.

This project was a culmination of research, photography, wildlife identification, and writing. It involved extensive research both through online National Park Service sources, as well as at the South Caroliniana Library. The Congaree National Park website and the Congaree Foundations Document, both available from the National Park Service, were helpful in finding information on park statistics and descriptions, natural significance of the land, management of the park, and activities. At the South Caroliniana Library I was able to find several historical documents on the grassroots campaign to protect the Congaree National Park land, including legislation, newspaper clippings, journal entries, and articles from Harry Hampton's "Woods and Waters" section of The State newspaper. The project also got me actively involved and engaged with the Congaree National Park. For the photography aspect of the book, I made numerous visits to the park to explore different sections and trails, both upland and bottomland. Using a Nikon D camera, I photographed the Upper and Lower Boardwalk Trails, Weston Lake and the Weston Lake Loop Trail, multiple sections of Cedar Creek, Sims and Bluff Trails, Kingsnake Trail, Bates Ferry Trail, and the Congaree River. I would have liked to hike all of the trails, but unfortunately time and conditions did not permit, since most of my photography took place in the winter and spring seasons. All pictures in the book are original, except for many of the nature guide animals and plants, which were provided by sources including the USDA, Friends of Congaree Swamp, and the National Park Service. I was challenged, however, in native

species identification for some of my own photographs, including water tupelo, broadheaded skink, loblolly pine, bald cypress, dwarf palmetto, and American beech. Taking pictures was my favorite part of the project, as it allowed me to immerse myself in nature, practice my photography skills, and become more comfortable editing shots. The photographs published in the book are only a small fraction of the hundreds that I took. After the research and photography came the most difficult part: writing and formatting the pages. This by far took the largest amount of time and effort, and although it was difficult, I enjoyed being able to express my creativity through the design of each page. My biggest challenges included incorporating pictures and text in an aesthetically pleasing manner, maintaining consistency throughout the book, and finding an appropriate balance of information. Since the book is geared toward an audience of individuals relatively unfamiliar with the Congaree National Park, including college students and local residents, I wanted to keep the pages interesting and engaging, rather than overloaded with details.

Ultimately, I am very pleased with the final outcome of the book, including the quality of information and photographs, as well as the layout of the pages. Although the purpose of the project is to educate the public, I too learned a great deal about the Congaree National Park throughout the process. The written aspect of the book challenged my research skills and gave me practice with informative writing. I also gained valuable photography experience, with adjusting camera settings, shooting during overcast days and poor lighting, and editing photographs to produce the best pictures. Most importantly, I really enjoyed creating this book, and I am very glad that I undertook this project for my senior thesis.

## Bibliography

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