

Future of Shuckstack Lookout Tower Uncertain

The Carolina Mountain Club recently introduced the incorporation of a new challenge program, the Lookout Tower Challenge (LTC), encouraging hikers to reach 24 lookout towers throughout western North Carolina. Already, the future of several of these towers is in jeopardy, including the Shuckstack Lookout.

Not used for fire detection since the 1960s, the Shuckstack fire tower in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park served the function of hosting equipment and repeater antennae for National Park Service radio communication system. Recently, the NPS removed their equipment from the roof and cab of the lookout, effectively ending the tower's administrative usefulness by the park.

Those who have visited the Shuckstack Lookout, located near Fontana Dam and just off of the Appalachian Trail, are well aware of its dismal condition requiring a harrowing climb to the top to enjoy the views. Missing hand railings, rotten wooden stairs, loose bolts, and a damaged and graffitied cab are evidence of the tower's deteriorating condition and desperate need for rehabilitation.

The Great Smoky Mountains NP recently issued a statement reading:

since the use of Shuckstack as part of the radio system has been discontinued, park management will need to make a decision about the need for and future of this tower"

Those who hiked the Smokies prior to the mid-1980s may remember over a dozen lookout towers within the national park that once afforded hikers breathtaking views of the surrounding mountains. Since then, the NPS has removed all but five fire towers within the park - those that they kept were used specifically for radio communications or air quality monitoring. With the discontinuation of Shuckstack's use for radio communications combined with its condition of disrepair and safety concerns, the tower may face the same fate as others in the park: access restriction or removal in its entirety.

Along with the park itself, the Shuckstack Lookout turns 75 years old in 2009. It is a PWA/CCC built structure and stood as a sentinel to protect the Great Smoky Mountains National Park where our love to hike and explore runs deep. Its value as a historic structure is complimented by its use for public recreation, allowing hikers to enjoy panoramic views of Fontana Lake, the Nantahala National Forest, and the rugged Great Smoky Mountains. The tower also stands as a prominent landmark on the Appalachian Trail.

Those who wish to contribute to the preservation of the Shuckstack

Lookout Tower are encouraged to write letters to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park voicing your desire to not only keep the tower for the enjoyment of future hikers, but to work towards its restoration and permanent preservation. Those interested in writing letters should include their personal stories regarding the tower - including those relating to the individual value it holds while making clear your desire to retain and restore the lookout. All letters are read and most will receive a response from the NPS. The magnitude of input will weigh heavily on the determination of tower's future. These letters should be addressed to:

Dale Ditmanson
Great Smoky Mountains National Park
107 Park Headquarters Rd.
Gatlinburg, TN 37738

Peter J. Barr
Director, NC Chapter of Forest Fire Lookout Association