On Thursday, January 25th I interviewed Rachel Eckman of Bald Eagle State Park over the phone. Eckman is currently the Assistant Park Manager at Bald Eagle and has been in that position for eight months. She is a Penn State graduate, also from the RPTM program so it was cool to hear from someone who went through the same classes I did working in the field as a professional. Bald Eagle is a nearly 6,000 acre state park in Centre County, PA. Three towns have land in Bald Eagle, which is centered around a lake. The park offers many recreation opportunities including hiking and walking, swimming and boating, camping, and even pavilion space for special events. Balancing visitor use and enjoyment with conserving the parks resources is a challenge that Eckman works on every day.

Bald Eagle has many resources that Eckman is responsible for managing. Primarily Bald Eagle has hundreds of acres of land full of forest, trails, and grassy areas. Additionally, the lake in the middle of the park is another resource that is a huge attraction for visitors. Camping areas, both rustic and with full electric hookup for RVs are another major attraction that require management attention from Eckman. Aside from the natural resources that the park has to offer, the infrastructure resources of the park is a huge part of Eckman’s management. This includes the marinas and docks, the buildings, restrooms, and pavilions. Bald Eagle offers more than just
natural resources, but also man made structures built with the goal of attracting more people into
the park and getting them outdoors.

As Assistant Park Manager, Eckman has many duties to help the park run smoothly. She
oversees the daily operations of the park as well as its employees. Bald Eagle has three rangers
and a clerk, as well as a staff that runs the marina. One of Bald Eagle’s biggest attractions, it's
camping areas, are another aspect that Eckman manages. She currently works under the Park
Manager, Mike Winters, but nonetheless her position has her responsible for managing the
park’s resources to ensure that not only do Park visitors have a good experience, but also so that
those resources are not destroyed.

Bald Eagle State Park sees visitors for many different activities and reasons. Most visitors
that Eckman sees in the park are there for the day, especially during the summer because of the
popularity of swimming and boating on the lake. Aside from the day visitors, there is a large
population of overnight campers. These campers could be at rustic campsites sleeping in tents, or
they could have driven an RV to the park, in which case they stay at full hookup camping sites
with electricity and other amenities. Rustic and modern campsites combined, there are about 200
spots for visitors to stay at. Eckman explained that game day weekends in the fall are usually
fully booked. As well as much of the summer. High camping use could be potentially damaging
to the area, but since it is all contained into pre established spots, it is mostly contained.

There are many trends that Eckman sees in her jobs when it comes to managing this
recreation area. The first is both historic as well as ongoing. She told me that the park’s mission
statement is centered around conservation, so they have an interest to recycle, be more organic,
and be green in general. One example of actions requiring management action taken to promote

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this goal of conservation that Eckman shared with me was how campers in rustic campgrounds were cutting down trees for firewood, despite being given firewood. The action she took was issuing citations to the offenders. She shared that typically they like to lean more on the side of education, but in this case someone had cut down sixteen trees, so direct management was required. One trend that did come as a surprise was the potential advent of wifi on site at the parks. Eckman says that people usually feel strongly one way or the other, on the one hand people come to parks to disconnect, but on the other hand it would attract a larger and younger crowd. On a similar vein, the park is currently looking into getting Tesla charging ports in the parking lots, in order to encourage electric car owners to come to the park. Clearly, technology has lead to a whole new batch of trends that Eckman, as a manager must learn how to incorporate into the park. One technological trend that Eckman shared with me that I found interesting was Pokemon Go. When the virtual geocaching-esque app was at its peak, she said that tons of people were coming into the park and causing crowding in very specific areas. This crowding caused issues such as maintenance having trouble mowing grass. No management action was taken, the trend simply passed as quick as it came. A future trend that Eckman is trying to get Bald Eagle on top of is an increase in RV users wanting to camp at the park. To accommodate for this, they are adding more full hookup sites to the campgrounds for RVs, hoping that it will increase visitation but also keep it in a confined area.

Eckman shared with me that ADA knowledge, learned from Dr. Dattilo’s class RPTM 277 is hugely relevant as a current and future trend. She explained that they are trying to build more accessible facilities, and that this makes the park open to all types of people. Aside from RPTM 277, Eckman also noted that while at Penn State she took an arena management class
which she finds very useful as she is not just a manager of forest, but also pavilions and buildings for park visitors. Additionally, she points to plant and animal identification courses as being very helpful for her work, as visitors ask lots of questions and it is good to be knowledgeable. The skills that Eckman gained while at Penn State and in her internships following college prepared her well for her current position as Assistant Park Manager. She did mention, however, that people management is something she wished she had learned more about. Eckman explained that managing people is something that is hard to teach, so experience was really key for her learning this in the beginning of her career.

Eckman offered me some great advice as I get ready to enter this field as a professional. First, she spoke very highly of internships, especially in addition to the required one for the RPTM program. As mentioned previously, internship experience was key to her developing skills such as people management. Plus, she pointed out how internships can help you narrow down what you do and do not want to do for work after college. Lastly, she pushed the importance of building professional relationships and networking and how that can benefit you later in your career.

Speaking with Eckman was especially impactful for me because she is a graduate of Penn State RPTM. Being able to talk about specific classes and professors made what she had to say very relevant, and I learned a lot from our phone call. I see the value in her advice and will definitely be taking advantage of the resources I have at Penn State to make sure that I do some amazing internships, meet the right people, and gain valuable experience.