

Nation

**Scarred leaves:**

Jim Renfro, the park's air quality manager, points out evidence of ozone pollution's effect on sensitive species such as black cherry and milkweed.

Smoky air gets easier to breathe

National park sees less pollution, 'and we want to stay on that path'

Great Smoky Mountains National Park in the southern Appalachians took its name from the natural bluish mist that often obscures its tall peaks and hangs over its valleys.

In recent decades, air pollution and haze made the name even more apt. The 521,000-acre park straddling the North Carolina-Tennessee border had some of the worst air pollution in the East.

Air quality has improved in recent years, though the haze remains.

Last year, the National Park Service reported that air quality has either improved or stabilized at about two-thirds of 50 parks that monitor pollution.

Even with recent improvements, average visibility in Great Smoky Mountains National Park is about 25 miles, when it should be 113 miles, says Jim Renfro, the park's air quality manager.

"This is one of the haziest parks in the country," Renfro says. "The No. 1 reason people come to these parks is to view the scenery. They want to be able to see these mountains, to see the ridges and forests and valleys and sunsets and sunrises."

At Great Smoky Mountains National

Park, Renfro says, "air quality is improving across all areas since the late 1990s. That's great news, and we want to stay on that path."

From 2003 to 2005, for example, the park exceeded ozone standards an average of seven days a year. This year, the park has had eight bad ozone days. During the 1990s, ozone pollution exceeded legal limits about 19 days a year. The drop is due primarily to tougher pollution controls on power plants, Renfro says.



Listen as air quality manager

Jim Renfro describes problems facing Great Smoky Mountains National Park and the progress made in addressing them in an audio-photo gallery at usatoday.com

tive trees, more than 5,000 species of plants and large populations of birds, mammals and fish.

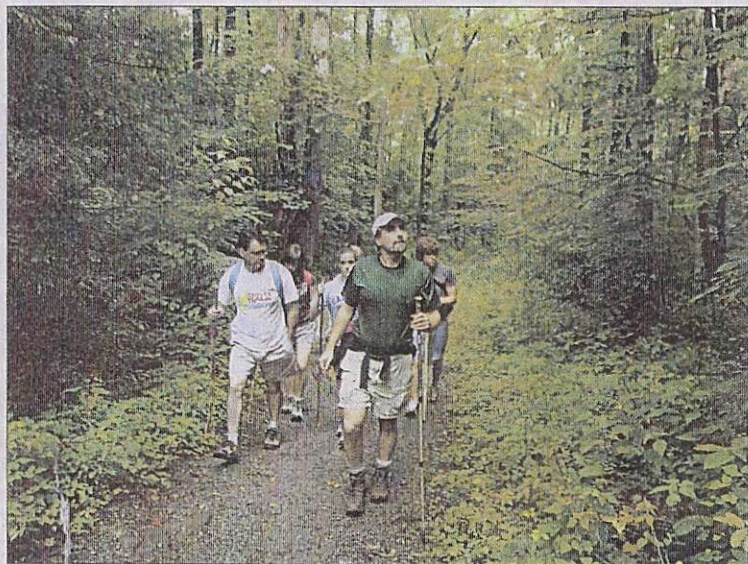
Renfro showed what ozone pollution does to sensitive plants such as milkweed and black cherry: Dark spots on the leaves are evidence of damaged tissues and slowed growth.

"If it's doing this kind of damage to leaves, what's it doing to our lungs?" he says.



On wilderness's doorstep: Gatlinburg, Tenn., sits just outside Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Air quality in the park had been dete-

riorating for decades but has improved in recent years, though average visibility is still only a fraction of what park officials say it should be.



Ground level: Erik Plakanis leads the Besecker family of Dallas, Pa., on a hike in the park. Plakanis' nature guide service, A Walk in the Woods, discourages people from hiking at higher elevations on bad ozone days.

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