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Bright Future for Coffee County Lake



Many anglers enjoy fishing in “county lakes,” which are actually part of Alabama’s State Lake System. The State Lake System has long operated on a set formula: the Alabama Department of Conservation’s Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division owned the lake and adjacent property, and a lake manager was contracted to operate the facility. A new formula is emerging, however, that relies on partnerships to improve these facilities in ways the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division could never do alone. Coffee County Lake is the latest example of innovative collaboration that is providing quality recreation for Alabama’s citizens.

A Little History

Alabama is blessed with numerous rivers, streams, and reservoirs. Anglers have plenty of public waters to fish, but these public waters are not distributed evenly around the state. During the late 1940s and 1950s, the Alabama Game and Fish Division (now known as the Alabama Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division) began construction of a system of public fishing lakes (now known as state lakes) to provide

angler opportunities in rural areas that were not close to natural bodies of water. Today, the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division (WFF) operates 23 of these state lakes in 20 counties across Alabama.

Alabama State Public Fishing Lakes are routinely limed, fertilized, and managed intensively for bass, bream and catfish. The original design for operations of these lakes was to hire a lake manager under contract. The lake manager was responsible for the building and grounds up-keep, fertilizing the lake, and selling concessions from the store. The lake managers received no salary. Their income was generated by permit and concession sales to customers at the lake.

State lakes were operated in this manner for over 60 years. Then the city of Ozark saw a golden opportunity at nearby Dale County Lake, and entered into a partnership with the Alabama Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division. The partnership has been mutually beneficial. Ozark constructed a 3-mile walking trail around the entire lake, and a picnic pavilion was returned to operation. The lake is now one of Ozark’s most popular destinations for local residents and visitors alike.

In 2007, the town of Sylvania saw a similar opportunity at DeKalb County Lake. Sylvania also partnered with WFF, and this has been a win-win situation for everyone. Sylvania acquired a new public park complete with an intensively managed 120-acre fishing lake, and WFF found a

lake manager with plenty of resources and manpower to maintain the building and grounds in excellent condition.

Revitalizing Coffee Co. Lake

In 2009, the city of Elba was the latest to see an opportunity when a lake manager vacancy occurred at Coffee County Lake. This 80-acre lake was one of the first state lakes, opened for fishing in 1951, and had a rich history of providing angling opportunities for local residents. By the early 1990s the lake was attracting nearly 7,000 anglers per year and providing over 10,000 pounds of fish per year. However, a series of floods caused washouts and gullies in the upper watershed that resulted in the lake staying very muddy.

This situation was remedied through the cooperation of landowners and the Coffee County Natural Resources Conservation Service. In spite of this work and other efforts to enhance the fish population, angler use of the lake fell dramatically. Between 2003 and 2005, Coffee County Lake averaged fewer than 4,000 anglers per year.


During the winter and spring of 2006 the Alabama Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division drained, renovated, and re-stocked the lake with largemouth bass, bluegill, shellcracker, and channel catfish. Improvements were made to the drain tower and facilities, and fish habitat structures were added. The city of Elba made many improvements to the buildings and the land surrounding the lake, and held a grand lake opening day on July 4, 2009.

Since Coffee County Lake re-opened in 2009, the fishing has been excellent, and the grounds surrounding the lake have been kept immaculate. The lake still has a concession building that sells fishing permits, boat launch or rental permits, bait, tackle and snacks. As with other state lakes, a daily permit is required for anglers over 12 years old, and a valid fishing license is required for resident anglers between 16

and 64 years old and non-resident anglers 16 and older.

A Bright Future

The future looks bright for Coffee County Lake. Ricky Mularz, Director for the Elba Department of Parks and Recreation, stated, “We are excited to partner with the Alabama Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries and have high hopes of making the Coffee County Lake one that will re-energize the sport of freshwater fishing in this area. Many of our goals are long range in nature, but we are confident that with the help of the state we will one day have something to offer everyone in southeast Alabama.”

Elba plans to develop a campground complete with water and electrical hookups, as well as a large open-air pavilion that will be available by reservation for group meetings or family outings. Elba is committed to providing a clean, safe, family-friendly atmosphere for a new recreational facility. Alabama Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division remains committed to providing quality angling opportunities for the public. 

For More Information

Coffee County Lake is located approximately 5 miles northwest of Elba on Coffee County Road 355. The lake is typically opened for daylight hours Wednesday through Sunday, but may be closed for part of December and January. For hours of operation, call the Elba Parks and Recreation Office at 334-897-6833. Questions pertaining to the lake or the fish population should be directed to the Enterprise District Fisheries Office at 334-347-9467.