

Geocaching club will introduce Hazleton to high-tech treasure hunt

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A metal box called a geocache contains surprises for whoever finds it in the woods using GPS tracking devices. In the Hazleton area, a club is starting for people who want to participate in the high-tech scavenger hunt called geocaching.

John M. Smith of Butler Township is among the millions lured by the mystery, the quest and the gadgetry of modern treasure hunts.

He is a geocacher.

Following latitude and longitude coordinates entered into their global positioning devices, geocachers like Smith track down containers - the cache - that others have hidden.

Containers could be the size of a dime, a film case or a 5-gallon bucket. Inside is a logbook for finders to sign and gifts to take away.

The caches contain trinkets, but the real treasure is spending time with family and friends outdoors. Geocachers get exercise walking to caches, and they also exercise their minds solving

puzzles that are sometimes part of the hunt.

Smith invites others to try the activity by joining The Greater Hazleton Geocaching Society that he is organizing. The group plans its first gathering at 6 p.m. July 26 at Hazle Township Community Park, the hiding place of several geocaches.

"We'll be having monthly meetings, cache days and historic trips when we get rolling," Smith said.

As of last week, 284 geocaches were hidden within 10 miles of Hazleton, according to geocaching.com, the website for people who participate in the activity.

Around the world more than 5 million people have signed up as geocachers, and they have concealed 1.4 million caches.

The website lists the longitude and latitude coordinates that will lead searchers to a cache. A rating from 1 to 5 tells them how strenuous the walk will be. Notes might say whether the site is accessible by bicycle or quad or list features such as a steep climb or poison ivy on the route. Geocachers are told if they need to bring tools. For example, they might need a pen to sign the log book.

After returning from their search, they can record details of their quest on the website.

To find some caches, players have to solve puzzles to obtain the GPS coordinates or other clues. Even the coordinates take them only so close, perhaps within six to 20 feet of the cache. Then they have to scour the area to find the hiding place.

"Sometimes it is under rocks or branches. Sometimes you just want to pull your hair out," Smith said.

He doesn't know how people who search at night find anything, but they do. "I pull my hair out during the day."

When players remove a trinket from a cache, etiquette requires them to leave behind something of

equal value.

Some players place travel bugs that look like dog tags inside caches. The bugs contain an identification number. Finders can remove the bug, place it in another cache later and go online to record the bug's travels.

Other players place geocoins in their cache and set goals for their coins.

For example, a player called Butterfly Lady placed coin in a cache on New Zealand's North Island on Dec. 30, 2009. She wants players to take the coin to gardens and caches where wildflowers grow.

Since then, the coin has been to California, the United Kingdom and Spain. More recently, it was spotted in Sweden.

Carly Hitzfeld started using GPS devices while doing outdoor research in college to document wildlife and other sightings along trails.

Then she and other workers at Nescopeck State Park discovered geocaching and began teaching the activity to visitors at the park.

"The goal is to give people an experience to try something new without having to put that money into it and find out it is something they don't like," Hitzfeld said.

One of the sessions at which beginners can learn about geocaching is offered at the park on Saturday from 2 to 4 p.m.

Participants can telephone 570-403-2006 to register. The park loans GPS devices to participants on first-come, first-served basis.

Introductory sessions let people practice with equipment.

Geocaching.com offers reviews of GPS devices from \$47 to \$378. Smith said owners of smartphones can become geocachers after buying a \$10 application.

Anyone who can't wait to try geocaching can start today, when naturalists at the Susquehanna Riverlands will lead a geocaching class from 1:30 to 3 p.m.

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