

ENCHANTED ROCK

## Keeper of the dome



### Cochran takes reins at iconic landmark

By Ken Esten Cooke

**R**ainy weekdays at Enchanted Rock State Natural Area allow the staff to catch their breath and catch up on the myriad maintenance and day-to-day duties. New park superintendent Doug Cochran still had a full “to-do” list during Monday’s showers, but took time out to talk about his first four months

on the job.

Cochran came to the job after 15 years as the City of Victoria’s parks director. He also had done municipal parks department work in College Station, the home of his alma mater, Texas A&M University, where he earned a bachelor’s degree in parks and recreation studies.

“I still can’t believe I’m here,” he said. “I worked 15 years in Victoria, but I wasn’t ready to retire and this job came open. The people in Fredericksburg are so genuine and welcoming.”

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**NOW LEADING** one of Texas Parks and Wildlife Department’s top five most-visited parks, Doug Cochran sees challenges and opportunities in managing Enchanted Rock State Natural Area’s 1,600-plus acres, which includes the iconic, 640-acre granite dome outcropping. — Standard-Radio Post/Ken Esten Cooke

## Enchanted Rock

Cont. from A/B1

Cochran, who lives just 45 seconds from the park’s entrance, said he is looking at all aspects of the park, to improve the visitor experience for one of the state’s top five destinations in the entire Texas Parks and Wildlife Department System.

“We’ve got a wonderful staff,” he said of his staff of 10, adding that they are currently understaffed by about one third. “They love what they do and working with people.”

To help the staff work more efficiently, Cochran said they are looking at short-term improvements to trails, signage and water projects. Long-term, Cochran wants to improve the park’s visibility in both gateway cities, Fredericksburg and Llano.

“We want to be good partners. Fredericksburg and Llano are so important to us,” he said. “It’s important that we get to civic groups or local schools and make presentations for science or history teachers. When students can hear from a park ranger, it can help them better learn about geology or our ecosystems.”

#### Challenges

Cochran said he prefers to look at all the SNA’s “prob-

lems” as challenges.

Being a top five destination park means finding a balance between supporting all those visitors while protecting the natural and cultural resources. Enchanted Rock, he said, has unique features not found at other parks, such as the vernal pools that top the massive granite dome.

“We’ve got an important heritage here, too,” he added, “dating back to prehistoric times and with the Native Americans that inhabited this area.”

Not the least of his challenges is the safety of the hundreds of thousands of visitors. Yet, on busy weekends, the most difficult “challenge” can be simply getting into the park.

“I’ve visited with the Texas Department of Transportation about the RM 965 situation near the entrance,” he said, of the two-lane road which often backs up with cars waiting sometimes hours to turn into the park’s entrance. “TxDOT has its own budget issues, so our staff tries to find creative ways to park inside the park temporarily, just to get them off the road. It scares us to think about cars coming over

### DOUG COCHRAN

- Bachelor’s degree in parks and recreation from Texas A&M University, 1982;
- Municipal parks work with College Station and served 15 years as Director of Parks and Recreation in Victoria;
- He and wife Theresa have two children, a son, also an A&M graduate, working as a project manager, and a daughter, who is a student at the University of Texas.

a rise at 55 miles per hour, then seeing cars stopped on the highway.”

In his first four months, the staff has presented a plan to TPWD management that cut the park’s water usage by 54 percent. “That’s huge for us. When we only have a 44,000-gallon water tank and there are 3,000 to 4,000 people here on peak weekends, it’s a challenge to manage that precious resource,” he said.

Another issue he is looking at is closing “social trails” made by visitors who may not realize what damage they are doing by going off the trails.

“It takes time and volunteers,” he said.

Developing a comprehensive volunteer program is also a high priority.

“We need volunteers,” he

said. “Some may not wish to lead tours, but they could help in the office. Others could lead interpretive tours or serve as docents on Saturdays and Sundays. Helping us clean up or park cars lets our full-time staff focus on other duties.”

Other long-term projects include a remodel of the park headquarters, and expanding its store. The park currently sells about \$90,000 in merchandise annually, which helps TPWD, but Cochran said he could imagine doubling or tripling that if the headquarters building was larger.

Lastly, Cochran and the staff are planning upcoming events, such as a “Rock Stars” astronomy program on Nov. 22-23 with a planetary geologist. The park also will host

Christmas activities on Dec. 14 with a hayride, hot chocolate and cookies for visitors.

#### ‘Friends’

Friends of Enchanted Rock group helps raise funds for trail improvements, interpretive displays and more. The group’s president Melissa Mial said the group has enjoyed working with Cochran since his arrival in July.

“Doug has an appreciation for Enchanted Rock SNA’s unique beauty that is already evident in his management approach,” Mial said. “Under his management, the park has already begun offering programs to enhance visitor enjoyment, such as regularly scheduled night sky viewings.” Mial said that Cochran understands, and has embraced, the park’s environmental sensitivity.

“Perhaps most importantly, Doug has a keen understanding of the challenges he faces to protect Enchanted Rock’s unique natural resources while still offering over 250,000 visitors a year the chance to experience it,” she said. “It’s a tough job and we are thrilled to have someone with Doug’s energy and skill on board to tackle it.”