



Columbia Parks and Recreation Department

Geocaching/Letterboxing Policy

Policy:

The Columbia Parks & Recreation Department permits Geocaching and Letterboxing in keeping with its mission to preserve and interpret Columbia's heritage and to provide opportunities for safe recreational activities. The purpose of this policy is to establish management guidelines for geocaching and letterboxing, so as to minimize impact on the parks, recreational facilities, and natural and cultural resources managed by the Department.

For purposes of this policy and the permit, the following definitions will be used.

Definitions:

- Geocaching - Geocaching (pronounced gee-o-cashing) is a high-tech treasure hunting game for GPS (Global Positioning Systems) users. The basic idea is to have individuals/organizations place containers (referred to as geocaches) all over the world and share the latitude and longitude coordinates of these caches on the Internet. GPS users can then use the location coordinates to get within several or more feet of the cache location depending on the accuracy and range of the GPS model used. Once near the location, they must search the area to find the caches. Some geocaches also include direction and hints (sometimes encrypted) to help users find the cache. Most geocaches contain inexpensive trinkets. Once found, if the user takes a trinket, they should leave another of equal value in its place. Geocachers should record their find both in the cache logbook and on <http://www.geocaching.com>.
- Letterboxing – Letterboxing is an artistic type of hide-and-seek which involves the exchange of rubber stamp images (rather than trinkets) and uses a variety of clues rather than latitude-longitude coordinates. The basic idea is for individuals/organizations to hide a container (referred to as a letterbox) with a logbook and a rubber stamp (both often hand-made), write clues to the location and enter the clues on the Internet. Clues may be simple directions or include maps, compass bearings, riddles, puzzles, ciphers, and more. Letterboxers can then obtain these clues and attempt to locate the box. Unlike GPS coordinates, most letterbox clues, when correctly interpreted, lead seekers directly to the box's exact location. Seekers bring with them a personal logbook, a rubber stamp (usually hand-carved), an inkpad and a pen/pencil. Once found, the seekers use the rubber stamp in the box to stamp their personal logbook (like getting a passport stamped) then stamp their own stamp into the box's logbook (like signing a guestbook). Nothing is to be removed from the letterbox with one exception: sometimes the box will include trinkets clearly labeled as prizes for the first few finders to take. Unlike geocaches, the finders should not add contents to the box. Seekers should

record a note in the logbook and then contact the placer via the appropriate letterboxing website. The two best known websites are www.letterboxing.org and www.atlasquest.com. Local users may also use www.midmoleletterboxing.blogspot.com

- Treasure Container – Since geocaching and letterboxing have noticeable differences, where appropriate the generic term “treasure container,” or simply “container,” may be used in this policy instead of “cache” or “box” especially when referring to policies or terms that apply to both geocaches and letterboxes. Containers may be ammo boxes, plastic food storage boxes, Ziploc bags, waterproof plastic buckets with lids, or other containers usually designed to be water-resistant to help protect the contents. Most geocaches and letterboxes contain logbooks. Geocaches also usually include a pen/pencil. Letterboxers are usually expected to bring their own pens/pencils. Geocaches usually contain trinkets to trade; letterboxes contain a rubber stamp that stays with the box. Most letterboxes require you to bring your own ink.
- Hybrid – It is important to note that geocaching and letterboxing use separate websites and usually appeal to two different groups of people, but occasionally a container will be planted in which both GPS coordinates and written clues are posted. These containers must contain a rubber stamp that remains with the box and may or may not have trinkets to be traded.
- Trailname / User nickname – Part of the mystique of both geocaching and letterboxing is that people tend to choose a trail name or nickname (similar in nature to a trucker’s CB “handle”) rather than using their real name when creating an account on the respective activity websites.
- Multi-cache/ / Power trail - (a geocaching term). There are several variations of multicaches. The most common is where multiple geocaches are located from information received from the previous container. Another popular variant is a series of multiple waypoints, each of which provide partial coordinates for the final cache location. A third variant, sometimes called a Power Trail, is when several caches are designed to be found as a group. Most multi-caches are specified as such on the Internet.
- Series / bonus box(es) – (a letterboxing term) for the purposes of this policy a series includes two or more letterboxes placed by the same person or group within a single area and designed to be obtained on the same hunt. Clues may be posted individually or obtained from information from the previous box in which case they are referred to as bonus boxes. Bonus boxes may or may not be advertised on the Internet.
- Offset cache – (a geocaching term) GPS coordinates that do not specify the actual location of the cache but instead direct the visitor to a location to find a number stamped/written in or on an item at the location or once at the location, the user will continue the search according to instructions on the initial information received from geocaching.com.
- Virtual cache / virtual letterbox - A virtual cache means there is no physical geocache container. It's the location that is the cache itself. Nothing is normally traded, except photos and experiences. The geocaching website no longer permits

new virtual caches, though existing ones have been grand-fathered in. A virtual letterbox may be a physical location without a container or may be an internet site. Once proof of finding the virtual letterbox is submitted to the placer, stamped images may be traded by e-mail or postal mail.

- Earthcache – a type of virtual cache approved by the Geological Society of America that features geological points of interest. Seekers must locate a site then complete some form of activity usually educational in nature, such as research answers to a question, providing photos, or conduct a field study in order to log the cache. The Earthcache submittal form and guidelines can be found at <http://www.earthcache.org>
- Event Caches/ Letterbox Gatherings –Event caches are gatherings open to all geocachers and organized by geocachers. Letterbox Gathering are gatherings organized by letterboxers for letterboxers. Both type of events may include the hiding and seeking of treasure containers (placed on either a temporary or long-term basis) for people to find. Other events are more social such as gathering for a picnic, and might not include any hide-or-peek. A geocacher can claim the event as “found” by attending the event then logging their “find” on the website. A Letterbox Gathering may have a special “event stamp” to collect available only by attending the event. Special rules apply for sponsoring events in Columbia city parks. Please contact the Department for more details.

Guidelines:

1. Any visitor wishing to place a treasure container on park property is required to complete and have approved an Official Geocaching / Letterboxing Placement Permit. Following an approved [permit](http://www.geocaching.com), the container may be placed and registered at <http://www.geocaching.com>, www.letterboxing.org, www.atlasquest.com or other website.
2. Authority to approve the permits has been delegated to the Director of Parks and Recreation or their designee.
3. Treasure containers are not to be placed in recreational areas such as golf courses, athletic fields, swimming areas or in sensitive archaeological, historical, or ecological areas, such as historical buildings and parks, caves, or locations that contain rare or endangered plant species.
4. Treasure containers are not to be placed in areas that require digging or disturbing the soil to place the container or in landscaped areas that would require visitors to trample plants in order to access the container.
5. Containers are not to be placed in areas that could potentially cause danger to visitors trying to locate the container, i.e. climbing on cliffs/bluffs, underwater or in potential flood areas, in trees, etc.
6. Containers are not to be placed in areas likely to cause public concern. These areas include most bridges, shelters, playgrounds, and other areas where the public gathers.
7. Prescribed burn areas are to be monitored for consideration of placement. If the desired location is in an area that is scheduled to be burned within twelve months

of the date of request, the area is to be considered off limits for the placement of the container. Areas that are impacted include portions of the Grindstone Nature Area, Forum Nature Area and trail head sections on the MKT, Grindstone, and Bear Creek Trails.

8. The Director of Parks and Recreation or designee is required to inform the applicant of any areas that have been recognized as off limits for placing containers.
9. If any park staff determines that the location of a container poses a risk to park visitors, the owner is to be contacted and asked that the container be moved to a safer location. All information regarding the risk is to be recorded on the original permit. If the owner relocates the container, a new permit is to be generated.
10. Multi-caches and letterbox series are limited to five total sites, yet treated as one geocache or letterbox and require only one permit.
11. If at any time the terms of a permit are violated, the Department has the authority to void the permit, remove the container from its location, attempt to notify the owner, and indicate on <http://www.geocaching.com> or on <http://www.midmoleletterboxing.blogspot.com> that the container has been removed. Justification for these actions is to be recorded on the permit.
12. If a non-permitted treasure container is discovered, the facility is to remove the container, retain it at the park office for 30 days and, if possible, attempt to notify the owner of their actions. If contact is not made, the container is to be considered abandoned property. The property is to be retained in the event the owner comes to claim it at a later date.
13. A treasure container owner may obtain multiple permits per person per park at a time, but the number may be limited at the discretion of the Department Director or designee according to the potential or actual impact on the various parks and sites.
14. Placement of treasure containers along the MKT Trail, Bear Creek Trail, and Grindstone Trail will be at the discretion of the Department. The number is to be limited according to the individual sections of the trail. Caution needs to be given to the treasure container owners regarding placing the containers on adjacent private property.
15. Permits are valid for 12 months from the approved date. Treasure container owners must apply for a renewal each year. If the Department determines that the container is still in compliance with all the above policies, and no changes need to be made to personal information and no negative impact has resulted in the form of new trails, damage to the surroundings or other negative factors, the renewal may be approved by noting a renewal date on the current permit, and the container may remain in the same location. If personal contact information needs to be updated, a new permit must be approved. If negative impact is determined, the container must be removed or relocated. If relocated, the treasure container owner must apply for a new permit.

16. Virtual caches, virtual letterboxes and earthcaches do not need an approved permit from the Department, though it is recommended that the Department is notified of the virtual location.
17. Event caches and Letterbox Gatherings that place treasure containers on a temporary basis may apply for a temporary permit that expires one month after the event date. All containers must be removed within a reasonable amount of time (one month) following the event. If the event organizers wish the containers to remain on a long-term basis, then the organizers must apply for a regular permit. Temporary treasure containers do not count toward any maximum number of containers the Department may set for a particular area.

Procedures:

1. Before placing a treasure container on property managed by the Columbia Parks & Recreation Department, potential placers must complete an [Official Geocaching/Letterboxing Placement Permit](#) and submit to the Parks and Recreation Department, 1 S. 7th Street, Columbia, Missouri 65201. The P&R Director or designee is to review the permit, desired location, and the actual container and contents for policy compliance.
2. The treasure containers must display the words "Official Geocache" or "Official Letterbox" clearly on the outside of the container.
3. The container must be family friendly. This means it must not contain food, alcohol, firearms, drugs, dangerous items or adult items. It must also not be placed to advertise any commercial business or, religious or political organization or viewpoints.
4. An explanation of the geocaching or letterboxing activity is to be included in the container. It is recommended that this linked [finder note](#) or something similar be used. Note that there are different notes for geocaches and letterboxes to reflect the differences in the activities. Please use only one, but not both, unless you have a hybrid box.
5. Once the container is placed, the applicant is to return to the P&R Department to record the exact location information for completion of the permit. A park map indicating the exact container locations will be kept in the file with the permits.
6. The Department has the option of taking photographs of the container or asking the container owner to provide photograph(s) of the container and attaching it to the permit. It is recommended that the container owner bring or email a digital photo to help Department officials determine the exact hiding location of the container.
7. After the permit has been completed the P&R Director or designee will approve or deny the permit. For approval, the following items need to be reviewed for policy compliance:
 - Container is not located in recreational areas, such as golf courses, athletic fields, swimming areas, sensitive archaeological, historical or ecological areas, or in areas likely to cause public concern.
 - Container is not located in a landscaped area that would require visitors to damage plants in order to access the container.

- No damage or disturbance of the ground will result from placement of this container.
- The container is not located in a an area scheduled to be burned during the duration of the permit.
- The container is not in an area that might cause potential danger to park visitors, i.e., climbing on cliffs/bluffs, under water or in potential flood areas, in trees, etc.
- Text for the container has been reviewed and it is accurate and complies with Columbia Parks and Recreation Geocaching/Letterboxing Policy.

Non-compliance of policy requirements will result in denial of the permit.

8. The original copy of the completed [permit](#) is to remain on file at the P&R Department. A copy of the permit, approved or denied, is to be given to the cache owner. If the permit is denied, the justification is to be recorded on the permit.
9. Once approved, the treasure container owner is to monitor and maintain the site monthly.

**This container has
been placed here with
permission of the
Columbia
Parks and Recreation
Department**

**OFFICIAL
LETTERBOX
--PLEASE READ--**

**Congratulations, you've found
AN OFFICIAL LETTERBOX!
Intentionally or not!**

This container is a letterbox. Letterboxing is an artistic form of hide-and-seek involving exchange of rubber stamp images. Individuals / organizations place containers each with a logbook and a rubber stamp all over the world and share the locations via clues posted on the Internet. Seekers bring with them a personal logbook, their own rubber stamp (usually hand-carved), an inkpad and a pen/pencil, then use the clues to find the box. Once found, seekers use the rubber stamp in the box to stamp their personal logbook then stamp their own stamp into the box's logbook.

**IF YOU FOUND THIS
CONTAINER BY ACCIDENT:**
Great! You are welcome to join us! We ask only that you follow these few rules:

Letterboxing Rules:

- Please do not move or vandalize the container. The real treasure is just finding the container and sharing your thoughts with everyone else who finds it.

- Feel free to look but do not take anything, especially the rubber stamp. Return ALL contents back to the box. If you brought a pen, write about your visit in the logbook, stamp the logbook (or draw an image if you do not have a rubber stamp), and contact the placer via the website: www.letterboxing.org.

- If you found this container by accident, it is possible someone else may also do so, which increases the chances that it may be vandalized. Therefore, please be discrete when re-hiding AND re-hide well in the same location that you found it (preferably so that no part of the container is visible).

Letterboxing is open to everyone with a sense of adventure. **More information is available at www.letterboxing.org.**

If this container needs to be removed for any reason, please let us know. We apologize, and we will be happy to move it.

For a different kind of high-tech treasure hunt, see also www.geocaching.com.

**This container has
been placed here with
permission of the
Columbia
Parks and Recreation
Department**

**OFFICIAL
GEOCACHE
--PLEASE READ--**

**Congratulations, you've found
AN OFFICIAL GEOCACHE!
Intentionally or not!**

This container is a geocache (pronounced geo-cash). Geocaching is a high-tech treasure hunting game for GPS (Global Positioning Systems) users. Individuals / organizations place containers such as this one all over the world and share the latitude and longitude coordinates of these caches on the Internet. GPS users then use the coordinates to search an area to find the caches.

**IF YOU FOUND THIS
CONTAINER BY ACCIDENT:**
Great! You are welcome to join us! We ask only that you follow these few rules:

Geocaching Rules:

- Please do not move or vandalize the container. The real treasure is just finding the container and sharing your thoughts with everyone else who finds it.

- Most geocaches have trinkets. If you take a trinket from the cache, you must leave something of equal or greater value for the cache, and you must write about your visit in the logbook and on the website: www.geocaching.com.

- If you found this container by accident, it is possible someone else may also do so, which increases the chances that it may be vandalized. Therefore, please be discrete when re-hiding AND re-hide well in the same location that you found it (preferably so that no part of the container is visible).

Geocaching is open to everyone with a sense of adventure. **More information is available at www.geocaching.com.**

If this container needs to be removed for any reason, please let us know. We apologize, and we will be happy to move it.

For a different, artistic form of treasure hunt involving exchange of rubber stamp artistry, see also www.letterboxing.org.