

Don't be a Muggle*

By Ellie Mencer

Combine a GPS, treasure hunt, and travel and you have the makings of the latest high-tech/low-tech, outdoor fun that you can enjoy alone or with friends and family.

Interesting Statistics¹:

- Since September of 2000, geocaching has grown from 75 geocaches to over 730,000 active geocaches worldwide.
- We estimate that there are between 2 and 3 million active geocaching participants around the world.
- According to the website, www.geocaching.com, there are presently more than 1200 caches within 25 miles of Havre de Grace and Aberdeen.

Okay, have we piqued your curiosity?

A simple definition of geocaching (pronounced geo-cashing) is a treasure hunt, using a GPS (Global Positioning System) to locate the 'cache.' It's obviously an outdoor sport, making it more beneficial than playing with Wii™.

Weatherproof containers (caches) are hidden with permission of the property owners (parks, cities, etc.). They can be very small (micro-caches) or quite large, like a trunk! They are not to be buried. The location's coordinates (waypoint) are entered at a website such as geocaching.com.

Participants (players) go to the website and decide where they might want to search for a cache. As noted above, you have plenty of choices within 25 miles of Aberdeen and Havre de Grace to get you started.

Once the cache is found, there are a few rules.

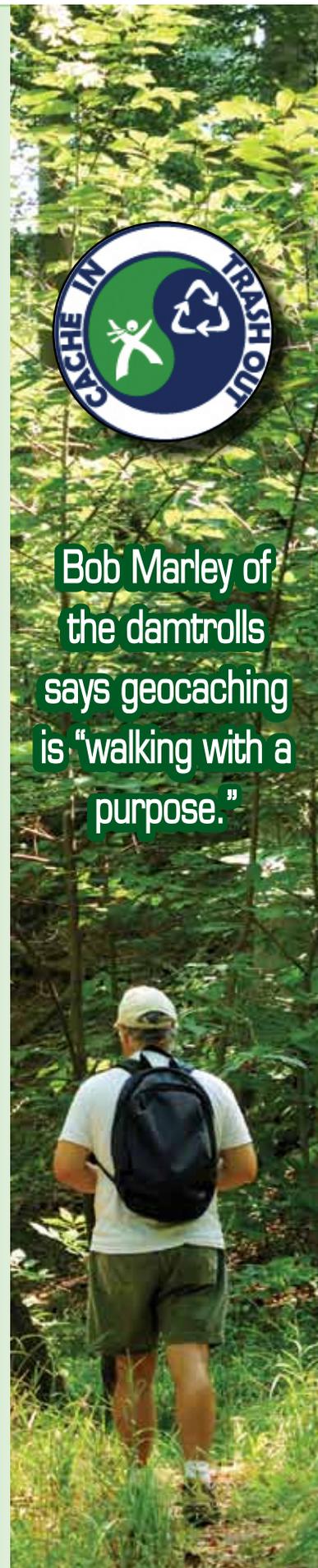
- If you take something, leave something of equal or greater value.
- Write about your find in the cache logbook
- Remember the slogan, CITO - **Cache In Trash Out**. Geocachers are dedicated to cleaning up parks and other cache-friendly places around the world. Leave no footprint as you enjoy your new sport.
- Log your 'find' at the website to show you found it.

While logging in to the website, you can read other geocachers' comments or leave your own report about the 'find.' Another resource is to join the Maryland Geocaching Society (www.mdgps.org) for some great information from newbies, as well as seasoned geocachers, and learn of a number of geocaching events.

Now, there are several types of caches. The **traditional cache** will have at least a container and a logbook for you to sign. A **multi-cache** may involve two or more locations. Hints are found in the initial cache and a physical cache container is at the final location. A **puzzle cache** involves puzzles that you must solve to determine the final coordinates of the cache. This can be much more difficult, but lots of fun. And there are **event caches** organized by local groups.



Bob Marley of the damtrolls says geocaching is "walking with a purpose."



On the website, the cache description will also let you know if it's difficult terrain or an easy walk, difficult to find or practically sitting right in front of you. Other information may include whether it's a great cache for a family search and even mention amenities in the area.

John Marley described a unique characteristic of geocaching. I asked him if, when he traveled, he could also place a cache there. He reminded me that you have to be able to maintain your cache. In other words, you need to be sure it's at the location described and that whatever you have in it is still there. So you generally place them close to where you live. But the important key is that by placing them locally, "Locals give the rest of the world what's interesting in their area." He explains that if you enjoy history, you'll probably create caches that relate to the areas past. Favorite parks, views, buildings, are shared by where you place your cache.

Of course, caches are as varied as the personalities of the folks who hide them.

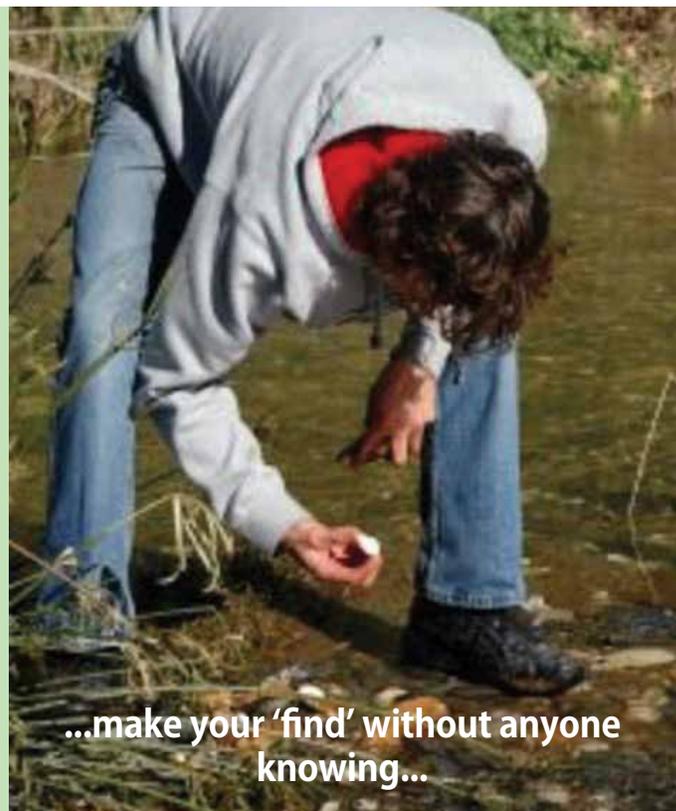
Geocaching is fun for everyone – young or old. You choose the difficulty in terrain and start walking! If you do an internet search for "geocache," you'll find a number of great sites offering information and articles. But in the end, just pick a waypoint (location) and get moving.

Want an easy way to start?

John mentioned that there are about 19-20 caches in the Susquehanna State Park area. What a great place to give it a trial run if you've never done it before. And the North Park Trail in Havre de Grace has at least three. There looks to be about 10 in the downtown Aberdeen area between Route 40 and I-95. That's a few examples to get you started.

Another unique way to enjoy this new sport for the first time is the **Geocache Trail**. The Maryland Municipal League has created a Geocache Trail to promote awareness of and visits to Maryland's cities and towns, with the goal of helping to stimulate economic development in Maryland's municipalities. The trail is comprised of 78 city/town caches located in the 11 MML Districts (regions) throughout the state. A collectible, highly coveted geocoin will be given to the first 500 geocachers who locate a minimum of 22 city/town caches, 2 in each district throughout the state. To be eligible for the coin, geocachers must pick up a passport at any participating visitor center. You can receive details at our local Havre de Grace Visitors Center or go to geocaching.com and search for "21078" and scroll down the first page to information about the Maryland Municipal League. www.mdmunicipal.org/programs/geocache.cfm

John Marley shared one last though, "Part of the fun of this sport



is that you try to make your 'find' without anyone knowing what you're doing. You don't want another hunter to notice you as you find the cache. This adds a bit more intrigue to the game. And never give the cache away to someone else." (That would be like telling someone the end of the movie before they've seen it.)

OK, check the website: geocaching.com and print out a few caches you might like to begin your search. Get a GPS and grab your family, and a friend or two, and head out to see what you might find. Along the way you'll enjoy the fresh air, the camaraderie, and the thrill of, hopefully, making your first 'find.' The website also has information on GPS units, how to use your mobile phone if it has GPS available, and what to take with you when you head out on the trail.

Beware the addiction factor! There are folks who enjoy this sport now and then when they have time to get outdoors. There are others who jump the moment they see a new cache listed for their area on the website. John Marley keeps his GPS filled with waypoints and information for caches near work, near relatives' homes, or in a park he wants to visit. Then when he has a half hour to spare, he'll check his GPS and find one close to where he is at the moment.

I have to admit, talking with John reminded me of the many weeks I spent tent camping. The folks I met along the way, the campfire fun, and the shared stories. Maybe I'll see you along the path. Good hunting!

✦ **Oh, yes. "Muggle" is a non-geocacher. The term is based on "Muggle" from the Harry Potter series, where a muggle was a non-magical person. So don't be a Muggle, check out your local Visitor Center or visit www.Geocaching.com today and start having fun tomorrow!**

¹ E-mailed to us from Shauna Maggs of Groundspeak.com