

Building a Constituency for State Parks: The Missouri Experience

At a time of ever more constrained finances and increasing demands on state parks, the support of a constituency with a statewide focus on the health and integrity of a park system as a whole can be critical. This paper assesses Missouri's experience with constituency groups, including, in the past two decades, a citizen organization devoted solely to state parks and historic sites, the Missouri Parks Association.

Missouri has been called "determinedly average" by one pundit and "the forty-something state" by the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* in a series of articles about its low tax effort and poor funding of education, welfare, and other public services in comparison with other states. Yet it has long been recognized as a leader among the states in natural resource conservation. Today, the state has two highly respected resource agencies, but historically it won regard largely for its pace-setting, highly professional conservation department. Led since 1937 by a bipartisan commission, the department has been supported from its very inception by a strong citizen constituency group, the Conservation Federation of Missouri, and generously funded since 1976 by a dedicated sales tax of one-eighth of a cent that was written into the constitution

after a citizen-led initiative petition.

State parks, however, are a separate matter. The earliest parks had been acquired beginning in 1924 by a legislative diversion of 25% of hunting and fishing license fees, so upsetting sportsmen that when they organized in 1936 "to take fish and game out of politics" they provided for a conservation commission with responsibility for fish, game, and forests, but not parks. Parks, led thereafter by a park board, subsisted on meager public funding and grew modestly through the generosity of individuals and agencies who contributed more than 60% of park units and acreage over the years. Missouri's system, which includes historic sites as well as natural parks in the mold of the National Park System, attained high quality in its representation of the natural and cultural diversity of

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the state, but it has been only middling among the states in number of units and acreage, and, until recently, ranked very low in funding per capita.

When state government was reorganized in 1972, the more powerful conservation department, with its strong citizen allies, resisted being swallowed by a super environmental agency, so Missouri ended up with two agencies—the original conservation department and a new department of natural resources for state parks, air and water quality, and other environmental functions. Despite the ferment of reorganization, the 1970s were relatively good years for parks, with dynamic young leadership that was creative in utilizing matching funds from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund to augment the system.

The crisis came in the early '80s when federal funding dried up and recession and inflation forced recisions in state support, leaving parks with a \$7.7 million budget for 1982 that was only half what it had been in the late '70s. To many legislators and others, an obvious solution was to transfer parks to the conservation department, now well funded with its new dedicated tax, but citizens who had worked so hard for the conservation sales tax in 1976 were opposed to such a raid. Park officials were also concerned about dilution of the more preservationist mission and land management philosophy of the parks, and about what would happen to

historic sites and other cultural resources in an agency that had no experience with or mandate to protect them. The matter came to a head at a statewide Audubon meeting when the director of the park division, an environmentalist with many personal friends in attendance, made a plea for citizen support of another alternative—transfer of a portion of the conservation tax to the department of natural resources to fund parks.

The resulting turmoil in the meeting revealed to many present their abject lack of understanding of statewide park issues and needs. Everyone in the room had visited individual state parks and some were even members of friends groups for particular parks or historic sites. But if they thought at all about the park division, they tended to view it as a poor cousin of the conservation department concerned primarily with providing for camping, swimming, picnicking, and other mass recreation. They had little comprehension of the array and quality of resources preserved in the system as a whole or of the values at stake in the current crisis. In truth, the park division itself had not traditionally reached out to environmental groups, but rather to recreational user groups and local organizations interested in individual parks. Audubon and Sierra Club activists, like the national organizations of which they were a part, tended to focus on the U.S. Congress and federal land management agencies rather

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than on state government. On state legislative issues they usually worked through the Conservation Federation, which dealt with a wide range of issues but, when the chips were down, almost always supported the conservation department.

The contention and uncertainty in the meeting finally reached a measure of resolution when Charles Callison, a former executive vice president of the National Audubon Society living in retirement in Jefferson City, rose to speak. "You are doing a good job with the parks and you need help," he told the director; "we will see that you get it, but we are *not* going to raid the conservation sales tax." Callison's idea of help was to found a new citizen group devoted solely to state parks—the Missouri Parks Association (MPA). As a leader who had developed the Audubon regional structure and encouraged the formation of hundreds of new local chapters in previous decades, he was a great believer in the power of an alert, active citizenry, and he also understood the importance of a focused mission. The new non-profit organization, independent and non-partisan, would be dedicated to the protection, enhancement, and interpretation of Missouri state parks and historic sites. Callison volunteered to edit the newsletter.

Leaders of the association saw their initial challenges as twofold—to educate Missouri citizens and public officials about the nature and mission

of the park system and to establish a consistent base of financial support. Fortunately, park officials had devoted considerable attention during the darkest days of the funding crisis to developing a clear understanding among park staff of the three-fold mission of the Missouri system—to preserve and interpret the finest examples of Missouri's natural landscapes, to preserve and interpret outstanding examples of Missouri's cultural heritage, and to provide healthy and enjoyable outdoor recreation opportunities consistent with its mission—and they had undertaken conceptual planning to lay the groundwork for a prioritized program of improvements should funds become available. But they had barely begun to communicate these efforts to the general public.

In a rush of enthusiasm MPA began laying plans with park administrators for an ambitious color-illustrated book about the nature and mission of the system with essays on the special contributions of each of the 75 parks and historic sites, somewhat on the model of the early national park portfolios that created the mystique of national parks as sacred places back in the 1920s. They also began to work with legislators, especially on a promising proposal for a one-tenth-cent sales tax to be split evenly between parks and soil conservation, both programs administered by the department of natural resources. The plan was obviously modeled on the

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state's conservation sales tax, but it was more modest and combined an appeal to urbanites (parks) with a program for rural areas (soil); at the time Missouri was second in the nation in the severity of its cropland erosion problem.

In tax-averse Missouri, there would be no chance to secure enactment of such a measure by legislators, but in the throes of the park and soil crises legislators might be willing to approve a resolution placing the measure on a statewide ballot for Missouri citizens to decide. With the MPA in strong support and other citizen organizations following its lead, the measure won legislative approval literally in the final hour of the session, after an amendment to add a five-year sunset clause. MPA officers hosted a series of meetings that summer with conservation, agriculture, and agency leaders to plan strategy for a major public campaign for citizen enactment of the tax, eventually spearheaded by a new umbrella organization, the Citizens Committee for Soil, Water, and State Parks.

While the campaign for the parks and soils tax was underway, the MPA, now aware that its proposed book on the parks would be a long time in coming, sought to focus more public and media attention on the park system by hosting, in concert with a wide array of other cosponsoring organizations, what they billed as the "First Missouri Conference on State Parks." It was a three-day event

funded in part by the Missouri Committee for the Humanities, complete with field trips to nearby parks and workshops on park resources and issues. Realizing the importance of a broader perspective on the values at stake in the Missouri system, MPA invited two nationally known experts on state parks—historian Robin Winks of Yale University and Ney Landrum, Florida park director and former president of the National Association of State Park Directors—to keynote the conference, taking them on a whirlwind tour of ten representative parks and historic sites with park officials before the conference.

After months of substantial public education and media spotlight on the parks, Missouri citizens in August 1984 voted by the narrowest of margins—only 1,699 votes out of nearly a million cast—to approve the tax. Money for the new tax would not even begin to flow for nearly a year, and only a few years after that it would be necessary to return to the voters for reauthorization, so it was critical for the park division to show quick results and for MPA to be vigilant in defending use of the tax for its intended purposes. These purposes, in true Missouri conservative spirit, were primarily "to take care of what we have," rather than substantially to expand the system. In the years to come, MPA would spend far more time and energy fighting *against* inappropriate proposals than *for* new parks.

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As it happened, there would be more new funds in the ensuing years than anyone had contemplated. A state bond issue for capital improvements that had been kicked around in the legislature for years at last became available in 1985, after a change in administration, and parks (because of shrewd decisions by officials in the depths of the funding crisis in the early '80s) would ultimately reap nearly \$60 million for visitor centers and museums at a number of units, upgrades of water and sewer systems, roads and campgrounds, and restoration of historic structures. Combined with more than \$13 million a year in additional funds from the sales tax, mostly for operations, the Missouri system was poised for a renaissance akin to that in the Civilian Conservation Corps days of the 1930s.

The aura of sudden wealth attracted an enormous array of proposals for use of what became known as the "park barrel," the trough of riches at which it was supposed anyone could feed. Proposals surfaced for urban storm sewers and for local parks, museums, golf courses, swimming pools, zoos, and other projects that could not possibly meet the test of statewide natural or cultural significance. But each was in the district of some legislator who wanted his or her share, and MPA was kept busy in the halls of the capitol explaining the mission of the system and the need to resist diversions and use funds as the voters intended. Some proposals

were more difficult to fight than others because of the array of political forces lined up on their behalf. MPA failed to turn back a \$2 million diversion for an African-American community center in Kansas City (it would be fourteen years before an agreement was finally negotiated with the city, under continued prodding by MPA, for the park division to share in operating the center as a black heritage museum and bona fide state park facility). But on another high-profile issue they were successful. When the governor himself proposed use of \$1.4 million in park funds to repair the exterior stonework of the state capitol, park officials had no choice but to acquiesce. It remained for MPA to issue press releases and rally other organizations in opposition to the diversion. Each victory in defense of the park system added to the credibility of the organization and made the next battle a bit easier.

Proponents of sundry worthy causes came out in force when it came time to consider renewal of the sales tax—so much so that there were proposals to combine it with the conservation tax and increase the total in order to fund more programs. In an effort to prevent tampering with the conservation tax, which had no sunset, the conservation federation sided with certain urban interests to promote a legislative resolution enlarging only the parks and soils tax, a proposal that MPA feared would doom

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the tax to defeat at the polls. After two legislative sessions failed to enact a satisfactory resolution, MPA and several other groups, including soil conservation interests, decided to mount an arduous initiative petition campaign for simple renewal of the tax; it would require the gathering of well over 200,000 signatures of registered voters properly distributed across congressional districts in order to place such a measure on the ballot. Following yet another unsatisfactory legislative session replete with tension among groups working at cross purposes, the federation and other organizations finally joined the initiative petition campaign, and the measure was ultimately approved more than two to one by the citizenry. However parsimonious Missourians might have been with their state government, they were proud of their parks and willing to support them.

A year after reauthorization of the parks and soils tax, it was the featured case example of park funding in a major national study of state parks underwritten by the Conservation Foundation. Generalizing from experience with special funds in a number of states, the study concluded: "Perhaps the most important lesson is that an earmarked fund does not put a park system outside the political arena.... It is rather a fresh point of entry to raise the visibility of state parks, air information about their condition and future prospects, and build new alliances" (Myers 1989).

Indeed, the Missouri experience suggests that parks are inevitably political because virtually every citizen and public official feels some sort of personal stake in at least certain parks or certain uses of parks; the challenge is to create a vision for the system as a whole guided by a clearly articulated mission that can provide a basis for assessing the myriad issues and proposals that arise, and to develop a constituency committed to defending that mission and advancing the vision.

In 1992, a full decade after the initial groundwork for a color-illustrated book about the system, the ambitious project came to fruition with the publication of a handsome, large-format volume, *Exploring Missouri's Legacy*. The new book—coupled with the presentation of the parks themselves through new visitor centers and museums, superb natural and cultural interpretation, and upgraded facilities and stewardship—left little doubt about the quality and integrity of mission of the Missouri system by the mid-'90s. Because MPA had been so closely involved in shepherding the book project from its inception, in raising funds to keep the price within reach of ordinary citizens, and in providing complimentary copies for legislators and other public officials, the organization gained additional credibility to augment that gained from the passage, renewal, and defense of the sales tax.

Because parks are so inevitably political and the institutional envi-

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ronment within which they function is so dynamic, the challenges for park systems and their constituencies never abate. In Missouri, although MPA enjoyed some success in preventing diversions of park funds for inappropriate or non-park projects, it was less successful in preventing internal siphoning for various state services. MPA helped the park division retain most of its general-revenue funding after initial passage of the sales tax in 1984, but after the overwhelming vote to reauthorize the tax in 1988, legislative and executive officials were determined to capture park funding for other functions of state government. Within a few years general revenue for parks had disappeared, previously unbudgeted expenses (such as staff benefits, rent, and certain administrative surcharges) were now being transferred to various agencies from the sales tax fund, and parks received no help from other state funds in responding to the extraordinary demands of the ADA, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1991. MPA could ferret out, tote up, and publicize the losses—some \$7 million in general revenue and \$5 million in transfers annually, plus an estimated \$7 million in ADA compliance costs—but it was powerless to prevent them (MPA 1993). The result was that even the growing parks sales tax, by the mid-'90s bringing in some \$25 million annually, was needed almost entirely to fund current operations, with little

remaining for capital improvements.

In preparation for yet another initiative petition campaign for renewal of the sales tax in the mid-'90s there was discussion of the advisability of changing the 50–50 split between parks and soils on the grounds that soil conservation measures were now largely installed on Missouri farms and needed only to be maintained, while park needs continued to mount. But the unwillingness of farm interests to give up funds and the demands of municipal interests for any funds that might be available led cooperating organizations once again to advocate simple renewal of the tax, which was again approved two to one by voters in November 1996.

Facing lean operating budgets and a dearth of funds for capital improvements, park officials initiated a feasibility study for a foundation with a full-time executive director to promote and facilitate major donations to the park system. MPA has 501(c)(3) charitable status under the Internal Revenue Code and has done some fund-raising over the years for its own projects, including the park book, conferences, and an urban outreach effort to bring inner-city youths to state parks, but it does not have a salaried executive director and it has never raised funds for transfer to the park system; it is supported primarily by annual dues from about 1,500 members. Discussions about the proposed new foundation inevitably raised the possibility that MPA might

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be restructured to take on more sustained fund-raising functions, but there were concerns whether its independent watchdog role related to park issues and the integrity and continuity of the sales tax might thereby be compromised. On the other hand, a new foundation, if it sought membership or annual gifts from ordinary citizens, could drain membership and support from MPA and imperil its vital functions.

The dilemma, not yet resolved in Missouri, has thrown into sharp relief the differences in types of constituency groups—park foundations dedicated to raising funds for system needs, such as the well-known California State Parks Foundation; local friends groups devoted to particular parks, of which every state has examples; user groups focused on camping, spelunking, all-terrain vehicles, or the like; professional associations of interpretive naturalists, historians, or park administrators; citizen organizations such as the Sierra Club, Audubon chapters, historical societies, or the Conservation Federation of Missouri, which may act on certain park issues but miss others; and

statewide watchdog groups focused on the system as a whole, such as the MPA.

The experience of Missouri suggests that there is a vital role for an independent citizen organization devoted to the system as a whole. Such an organization may identify issues emanating both from within and outside of the system and shape a recommended course of action; at times it may be necessary to challenge administrators of the system or to support a position when officials' hands are tied. It may assess proposals from interest groups or legislators for new parks or developments in existing parks for their bearing on the mission and viability of the system. Although on major issues there may be little it can do on its own, a citizen organization devoted primarily to the park system can provide essential leadership and gain support from a wide array of other organizations and individuals that collectively can make a major difference for the health and integrity of the system. Above all, the Missouri experience suggests that there is no substitute for an alert, active citizenry.

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