

John Henneberger

# State Park Beginnings

State park systems constitute an important and valuable component of the USA's total complement of national, state, regional, local, and private lands devoted to the preservation of nature and culture. These lands also provide outdoor recreational activity, aesthetic enjoyment, and education to many millions of people. A tracing of the history of the state park movement presents an intriguing story that begins with the Yosemite grant to the state of California in 1864. There, the national and state park ideas emerged within a new form of park, one whose purpose would be to retain outstanding natural wonders in public ownership for all the people for all time. A succession of state parks then appeared through the efforts of individuals and groups, especially the wealthy. Several national parks; many state, county and city parks; the national forest reserves; a few state forests; and several national and state wildlife refuges were established within what can be called the *first wave* of the conservation of America's natural resources. During this first wave, state parks often proved difficult to establish. Land acquisition, development, and operational funding were initially sparse. State legislatures were reluctant to spend tax dollars on parks. The *second wave* of the conservation movement occurred after World War I under the influence of a growing population, increasing affluence, and the arrival in common use of the automobile. Mobility became a distinctive feature of American life. This produced tremendous outdoor recreational demand. Numerous state parks were created in the 1920s in many states to handle populations streaming out of the cities into the countryside in search of camping and cabins in the outdoors. Growth in state park systems reached its highest levels when vast federal sums were poured into state park and recreation area programs during the Great Depression. The *third wave* occurred after World War II. It lasted until the presidency of Ronald Reagan, when a period of consolidation and stability in all park programs set in. Accounts of the establishment of some of the earliest and most notable state parks present reasons why the institution of state parks came into existence.

**The Yosemite state grant.** After Yosemite Valley was entered in 1851 by the California Mariposa Battalion of Rangers, who were pursuing Indians through the foothills of the Sierra Nevada in order to place them on reservations, the great scenic wonders of Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa

## THE STATE OF STATE PARKS

Grove of Big Trees to the south became known to the people of California, the nation, and the world, and soon grew into prime tourist attractions. Each region of the West was a dynamic section of its own, forming part of a larger developing "West" which itself was becoming a distinct "half" of the nation in apposition to the East. Such places as Yosemite, Yellowstone, Sequoia, Mount Rainier, Glacier, and the Grand Canyon helped form a specific view of the West that was vital, had power, was progressive, was different from European ideas and models, and was part of the construction of urban institutions, structures, and places devoted to social reform. The parks that were created were part of a larger phenomenon within the general American experience: the establishment of tourism as a prominent cultural activity, one that encompassed a growing appreciation of and concern for nature.

San Francisco was the major focus of a developing section of California coming out of its Gold Rush days. The northern California region possessed a world-famous, highly distinctive climate, along with attractive landscapes of mountains, valleys, and seacoast. In the national mind it became a very special place. Out of this bustling region, through the efforts of a few people, there emerged the proposition of the Yosemite Grant. The Yosemite park creation utilized the mechanism of a federal

grant of lands to the states for the purpose of the public use, resort, recreation, and, in this case, protection of an attractive part of the Sierra Nevada region. Congressional grants of public domain to the states were a common political instrument used to build canals, highways, railroads, public works, and schools. The Yosemite grant was different in that the parklands were given with the stipulation that they *not* be sold. The proponents of the Yosemite Valley and Big Trees grant initiated a novel park category of natural scenic lands to be protected in public park status, one which in a short period would become conventional in American culture. It joined the landscaped urban central public park, which was then being adopted in Eastern cities, to form two distinct park categories that would come to be blended over the next hundred years to produce a variety of parks at the federal, state, and local level.

The principals involved in the Yosemite grant were a group of northern Californian residents of various occupations. Israel Ward Raymond and Frederick Billings were businessmen. Raymond was an officer in the Central American Steamship Transit Company of New York. Between 1849 and 1864 he made numerous round-trips between New York and San Francisco to promote his company's efforts to construct a railroad across the Nicaragua Isthmus to carry people and

## THE STATE OF STATE PARKS

goods between the East and West coasts. Billings was engaged in mining ventures, urban residential schemes, and railroad construction in the West. Both Raymond and Billings visited Yosemite and the Mariposa Grove. At Wawona, they met Galen Clark, who was proprietor of an overnight facility that catered to tourists going to Yosemite. Billings was often in the Yosemite region at John C. Frémont's nearby Mariposa property to discuss mining business. Also stopping at Frémont's Las Mariposa home were Carlton Watkins, the California photographer; Thomas Starr King, a minister from San Francisco; and State Geologist Josiah Dwight Whitney and his assistant William Ashburner. All of them went to Yosemite. At Mariposa, they were greeted and made at home by Frémont's wife, Jessie Benton Frémont. When the Frémonts moved to San Francisco, Jessie's home at Black Point became the cultural center of the city. Between 1860 and 1863 it was a meeting place, akin to a country salon, for writers, artists, politicians, businessmen, photographers, ministers, and other intellectuals of the region. Jessie's role was that of a catalyst and muse, prodding and encouraging such men as Bret Harte and King to write and speak, as she could not in a period where women were expected to inspire rather than create. The emergence of the idea of a particular California landscape occurred through such activity as Starr's

articles on Yosemite and the work of the very lively Watkins, who would become one of the West's most distinguished commercial photographers. Billings urged Watkins to photograph the Valley and Mariposa Grove, which he did.

These principals interacted with one another at Las Mariposa, Clark's way station, and Black Point. Billings and Raymond were conservationists in a day when there were few in America. (Billings was a great admirer of fellow Vermonter George Perkins Marsh, who authored *Man and Nature*, the landmark conservation book of the time.) Billings felt that commerce could serve the cause of conservation by bringing visitors to a site such as Yosemite that was worthy of protection, thus building a political constituency and creating a source of funds to meet the costs of development and protection. Raymond initiated the Yosemite legislative campaign by composing and sending a letter from his New York Wall Street office on February 20, 1864, to Senator John Conness of California. The letter outlined the essence of the Yosemite grant proposal. To prevent private exploitation, he recommended a grant encompassing both areas to the state of California. Raymond appears to have been the main developer of the critical pronouncement of purpose: that Yosemite was to be granted for public use, resort, and recreation, with the lands held inalienable forever. Con-

## THE STATE OF STATE PARKS

ness sent Raymond's letter to the General Land Office Commissioner and asked him to prepare suitable legislation to effect the grant. The GLO promptly complied. Conness then introduced the legislation in the Senate. It passed there and went on to the House, where it also passed. President Lincoln signed it into law on June 30, 1864.

Raymond, Clark, Whitney, and Ashburner became members of the Yosemite State Board of Commissioners, the body created by the state to administer the park. Clark was also named "Guardian of the Yosemite." The famed landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, who at the time was managing the Las Mariposa mining properties, was also named to the board. The state commissioners ran the park between 1864 and 1906. Most accounts of their management have deemed it a failure. The state legislature refused to give the board sufficient funds to properly take care of the property. There was deterioration of the natural condition of the Yosemite Valley floor. Finally, John Muir and his Sierra Club's criticism of the board's management pressured the state to re-cede control back to the federal government in 1906. The first park under state administration was an unsuccessful venture. Yosemite nonetheless became a model that enlarged the scope of public park systems.

**Niagara Reservation.** Niagara Falls was located on one of the most

important transportation corridors in North America. By the 1820s it had become a heavily frequented tourist destination. It quickly degenerated into a shabby resort as private entrepreneurs sought to wring money out of tourists. Frederick Law Olmsted also became involved in Niagara Falls when, in 1869, he and others launched a media campaign to place the U.S. overlook in public ownership. The New York state legislature responded in 1883 by creating a park commission empowered to acquire land and manage it as a scenic reservation. Enough funding and land acquisition followed to establish a 107-acre park in 1885. Restorative work was undertaken that removed many unsightly buildings. Olmsted and his partner Calvert Vaux developed a park design that eliminated additional structures and re-established indigenous communities of trees and shrubs along the shoreline. Shelters, walks, and benches at overlook points provided a reasonably attractive setting within a rather small park reservation. Still, they never achieved the superior effort of the Canadians, who approached the administration of their side of Niagara Falls differently. They vested in their park commission all the lands above and below the falls and gave it leasing powers with authority over the design and location of generating plants to assure that the spectacle remained unmarred. On the American side there emerged a rather small standard landscaped park set up

## THE STATE OF STATE PARKS

as a scenic attraction.

**Adirondack Park.** The drive for an expansive park for the Adirondack Mountains first surfaced publicly in 1864 when *The New York Times* suggested that the spacious mountains and forests in upper New York state be created as "a Central Park of the world." The editorial summed up the view of many New York City summer residents of the Adirondack mountain region: namely, that a park there would make a fine wilderness suburb for the city, holding the capacity for imparting recreational and aesthetic pleasure as well as increasing wealth through tourist activity. Such a park would be a distinct outdoor adjunct to urban life. An Albany resident, Verplank Colvin, led the legislative campaign for such a grand park. Colvin approached the park proposal as a vehicle to halt the region's destructive logging practices in order to save downstate water supplies. Sportsmen joined in the campaign, for they knew that the best way to preserve hunting habitat was to make the case for a large preserve to augment and include their private hunting preserve holdings. Resort-oriented persons seeking recreational opportunities in relatively untouched country joined these factions. Doctors proposed the enclosure of the mountains in a park as a good place for the treatment of pulmonary diseases.

The initial step toward an Adirondack park/forest preserve oc-

curred in 1883 when the state legislature banned the exchange or sale of all state land in ten Adirondack counties. Funds were provided to acquire the underlying fee title to tax-sale lands held by the state within what was called "Lands in the Adirondack Forest Preserve." In 1885, the state authorized the establishment of a state forest preserve modeled after European municipal forests. There was opposition to creating a "park." That word conjured up taxpayer expense in maintaining an area for the enjoyment of those who had the time and money to spend in hunting, fishing and other recreation. Within a five-million-acre region in the upper New York state counties, some 681,000 acres of state land was designated as a forest preserve under an umbrella concept of these lands being kept forever wild. Private lands were not included within the preserve. The preserve was to be managed under scientific forestry principles that were being introduced in America in the 1870s and 1880s.

Management and protection of the new state forest preserve were virtually non-existent in the years immediately after its creation. Disregard for proper protection and utilization brought on demands for a state park. The state legislature corrected the situation in 1890 by calling for the gathering of the scattered preserve holdings into a park of "one grand domain" that was to lie within a larger forest preserve. A map of the entire

## THE STATE OF STATE PARKS

region was developed in which a blue pencil outlined a rough circle that took in nearly all of the Adirondack Mountains. Within the blue line was some 2,800,000 acres defined as park, of which the state owned just over 550,000. There were patches of forest preserve, with the rest of the land remaining private. It was recommended that the state buy up all the private land and turn the whole region into a unified forest preserve—or Adirondack Park. To this day, the “Blue Line” has remained synonymous with the park area, which has expanded to 5,927,600 acres, with 2,337,936 state-owned. The 1890 park legislation had loopholes that permitted the sale of timberland for logging. The fight over the future of the park was joined. In 1894 the forest reserve versus park issue became part of state constitutional convention proceedings. Preservationists won when a proposal for a “forever wild” park was approved to be put before the voters. The voters agreed. Civilization gradually encroached upon the Adirondacks via railroads, and then the automobile. Transportation opened the region to hordes of vacationists and sportsmen. Trails, shelters, and campgrounds were built. The mountains became a place to ski, canoe, and climb. The years ahead were turbulent until the 1970s, when a master plan was brought forth for both the public and private lands in which some portions remained wild while others were de-

voted to recreation, and there was an extension of governmental control over private property. Forty-five percent of the state lands were designated as wilderness. There finally had emerged a commitment to wilderness and the perpetuation of natural plant and animal communities by the state after a hundred years of struggle to preserve the Adirondacks.

**Itasca.** Greater numbers of state parks appeared at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries as states used the designation to establish scenic, recreational, and historic sites to meet outdoor recreational needs and to save particularly attractive and important cultural sites from encroachment and destruction. Itasca, at the headwaters of the Mississippi River in north-central Minnesota, became an active state park reservation in 1893. The source of the Mississippi River is a basin of lakes lying within a semicircle of wood ridges some two hundred miles north of the Minneapolis–St. Paul metropolitan area. Excursions to these headwaters brought the area into prominence. The need to protect this unusual place was seen by the Twin Cities community as they watched the region being dismembered through timber cutting, homestead entry, and railroad grant activity. At first, efforts were made to make Itasca a national park. Since there wasn't enough federal land to do so, the campaign shifted to the state level. Authorization by the state legislature

## THE STATE OF STATE PARKS

for an Itasca State Park came in 1891. A superintendent was appointed who proceeded to put together a sizeable park out of federal holdings, some Northern Pacific railroad grant lands, a Weyerhaeuser timber tract, state school lands, and miscellaneous purchased lands. The state later authorized additional purchases that brought the park to 32,000 acres. Park rules and regulations were drawn up, and penalties provided for infractions.

As in the Adirondack situation, at Itasca there was initial indecision over whether the area was to be a state park or state forest. Itasca initially shifted from a public outdoor recreation area that preserved scenery to a reserve where conservation of timber became the prime objective. The federal-state public works program of the 1930s brought substantial recreational facilities to Itasca. Federal funding for development forced the state to remove Itasca from supervision by its Forestry Department and place it under a newly created State Parks Division. Transitions through the whole range of park purposes, from scenic protection and outdoor recreation development to ecological concerns, were realized at Itasca when a 2,000-acre wilderness sanctuary was designated there after World War II.

**Palisades Interstate Park.** In 1895, New York and New Jersey created the nucleus of the Palisades Interstate Park along the Hudson River

with the involvement of prominent and wealthy personages who entered the field of public park establishment with timely gifts and donations of property. Such philanthropy became common as America produced a great number of millionaires who used their wealth in many areas of social reform—public parks being one prime area of interest. Many national and state parks throughout the country have benefited from individual and corporate wealth and interest.

The unbroken line of perpendicular Palisade rock, rising 550 feet from the shoreline, was being quarried to feed the demand for rock for New York City brownstone buildings and for ship ballast. The state legislatures responded to the threat by passing legislation creating a Commission for a Palisades Interstate Park who were directed to put together a park proposal. The first segment of the park was a Hudson Fulton Boulevard skyline drive corridor along the Palisades. An extension was then created to connect the Palisades with a Bear Mountain Park that was being established around the 1,314-foot-high mountain that overlooks the Hudson River. The Bear Mountain portion became a reality in 1901 through gifts from John D. Rockefeller and J. Pierpont Morgan. In 1909, Mrs. E. H. Harriman gave a million dollars and ten thousand acres to form the nucleus of a Bear Mountain-Harriman State Park complex. Eventually the two state parks were

## THE STATE OF STATE PARKS

expanded to over 85,000 acres. Bear Mountain became a popular outdoor recreation area. Steamers brought people from New York City on day and overnight excursions. Two million visitors were using the Interstate park areas by 1913. The Palisades Interstate Parkway was completed in 1958 to connect the Bear Mountain Park with the George Washington Bridge. This provided direct automobile access from New York City to the Bear Mountain Park and to the additional state parks that had been developed to the north and along the Hudson River to meet the park and outdoor recreational needs of the greater New York metropolitan region.

**The Massachusetts State Park System.** As the nineteenth century was ending, some states began to think in terms of park systems for their residents. The state of Massachusetts created the Trustees of Public Reservations (1891) and a Metropolitan Park Commission (1892) as their direction in establishing park, forest, and game reservations. The Metropolitan authority quickly created many parks in the Boston area. The Trustees for Public Reservations accepted gifts of park land to be administered by a special commission to handle each park, forest, or game refuge. A forested and mountain area in the Berkshires of 8,600 acres was given to the state in 1898 to become the Mount Greylock State Park. The Wachusett Mountain State Park of

1,500 acres in the southwest corner of the state, and a Martha's Vineyard Game Reservation of 1,601 acres, followed. These areas formed the nucleus for the Massachusetts State Park System that grew in scope in the next century.

**The Oregon experience.** The genesis of Oregon State Park System occurred in 1913 when the state legislature designated the entire coastal area as a public highway. Included were all the ocean tidelands from the mouth of the Columbia River to the California State line. This gave public access to the ocean shore for hiking, fishing, clamming, and aesthetic pleasure. The Oregon State Highway Commission in succeeding years acquired lands for highway construction along the coast, in the Columbia River Gorge area, and in the Willamette Valley. Remnants of parcels were developed into roadside parks and waysides. State legislation emerged to preserve timber along the rights-of-way and for parks, parking places, campsites, public squares, and outdoor recreation grounds. The State Highway Commission in 1925 was directed to improve, maintain, and supervise these parklands. Oregon's state park system thus primarily developed out of its state highway program. Substantial acreage for park purposes was subsequently acquired under aggressive leadership to facilitate a number of park areas of up to 4,000 acres that extended well beyond the highways.

## THE STATE OF STATE PARKS

**Katahdin—The wilderness state park.** The Katahdin region in Maine was wild, isolated, mountainous country to the early settlers. In the nineteenth century, there was little need within Maine to create parks, preserves, and refuges. The state possessed substantial acreage for outdoor recreation that was available to residents, tourists, hunters, and fishermen. It was only when lumber companies began to open up and log off huge blocks of timber that interest in setting aside some of Maine's wild country occurred. National park status for Katahdin was pushed in 1911, but Congress took no action—they were not yet ready to "buy" national parks. Percival P. Baxter, a wealthy Portlander and member of the state legislature, became a champion for park status for Katahdin. He began a remarkable lifelong campaign to preserve this area in a wilderness condition. Baxter was unexpectedly propelled into the state's governorship in 1920. From that position he succeeded in 1923 in getting the legislature to create a 90,000-acre Katahdin Park Game Preserve that was made up mostly of private timber company holdings.

After Baxter left state office, he intensified his crusade by deciding to purchase Katahdin himself and give it to the state. He bought an interest in about 5,620 acres from a lumber company. The state accepted his donation along with conditions of use that expressed his conception of wil-

derness. In 1933, the legislature approved setting aside this land as Baxter State Park. Baxter continued fighting for a larger park. He eventually managed to get it to 202,000 acres. Baxter developed an individual philosophy of wilderness for the park. In the 1930s, he developed a close relationship with Robert Marshall and other members of the Wilderness Society, who supported Baxter on wilderness status for the park. As the park grew larger and more popular, it became exceedingly difficult to maintain Baxter's rather pure wilderness philosophy for Katahdin. Like most state parks everywhere, Baxter Park was developed in the 1930s under Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) programs. A central wilderness component was, however, retained to somewhat secure Baxter's vision.

**The Redwoods.** By the end of the nineteenth century, logging companies had appropriated most of the redwoods on public domain lands from the Monterey Mountains up the coast into Oregon. They were cutting *Sequoia sempervirens* at an alarming, devastating rate. Individuals and groups began rescuing remnants to preserve sections as tourist attractions and for scientific interest. The initial focus was on a 20,000-acre grove at Big Basin in the Santa Cruz Mountains south of San Francisco. A local group and Stanford University became interested in this grove. They called themselves the Sempervirens

## THE STATE OF STATE PARKS

Club, which was later enlarged to broaden support. A successful campaign was mounted that obtains State legislation in 1901 to create a California Redwood Park Commission to save the Big Basin grove. Funding was obtained. Negotiations with lumber companies resulted in 2500 acres of prime redwood being acquired for the park. Additional cutover land was donated, along with 3,980 acres of federal land that was turned over to the State.

Interest in redwood preservation shifted to northern California in 1916 when state highway construction opened up the magnificent groves along the South Fork of the Eel River to logging and tourism. A prominent group of San Franciscans began a campaign to have some of the groves placed into park status. A Save the Redwoods League was formed in 1918 to consolidate redwood purchase efforts. Large amounts of money came forth from wealthy individuals and average citizens. Groves were purchased by the League and dedicated to particular individuals. The problem as to where the groves would eventually reside for their management and protection was turned over to the secretary of the League. Obtaining the necessary state legislation was difficult, but finally was achieved in 1927. State funds were made available that permitted a survey of potential state parks by Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. The younger Olmsted developed a standard pro-

cedure for planning a diverse park and recreation system over a large and varied geographical area. He developed criteria for the creation of comprehensive state, county, and local park systems. For California, Olmsted proposed 125 park projects he felt worthy of inclusion in a state park system. Many projects were beach sites; redwood and Sequoia groves; areas with lakes, rivers, mountains, and deserts; and sites of historical and cultural interest. Under this guidance, California began to build a remarkable State Park System. Voters approved a \$6 million matching state bond in 1928 to acquire the majority of the recommended parks.

**The National Conference of State Parks.** The automobile transformed outdoor recreation for the middle classes of America. The creation of state and local park commissions came about from the growing influence of the middle-class tourists who on weekends and vacations wanted to "get back to nature." These commissions sought to provide the needed areas and facilities. State park leaders and other advocates gathered in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1921 to strengthen state parks systems under the leadership of Stephen T. Mather. The Des Moines group proclaimed that outdoor recreation was a basic human need. The resulting National Conference of State Parks began to effectively promote the creation of parks that were closer to centers of

## THE STATE OF STATE PARKS

population and more easily accessible. Conference advocates met annually to discuss matters. They called for coordinated national outdoor recreational planning to provide a full range of recreational opportunities. In 1924, President Coolidge convened a National Conference on Outdoor Recreation, which assembled twenty-eight national organizations and a substantial number of state park representatives. The Conference resulted in the creation of a cooperative association of national, state, and local park and recreation groups to coordinate national policy. Under this emphasis, states began to plan for systems of scenic and recreational areas, parkways, and historic sites.

**CCC build-up.** The 1930s brought the most radical change to the status of state parks in America. The CCC was utilized by almost every state to perform emergency conservation work in their parks. The National Park Service (NPS) provided guidance for state and local park development. The creation of new state parks and the design of facilities was supervised from NPS's Branch of Recreation, Land Planning, and State Cooperation under the leadership of landscape architect Conrad L. Wirth. He vigorously pursued state cooperative activities. Where states had no parks or park commissions, he helped them prepare a recreational land-use plan so they could qualify for federal funding

for land acquisition for state parkland and development of the acquired individual park and recreational areas. His approach to state park activity was to embrace both scenic protection and the development of new kinds of recreational areas within a nationwide park and recreation planning structure. There was close cooperation between NPS and the states in park and recreational planning and development until the 1960s, when this function was taken away from NPS and given to the new Bureau of Outdoor Recreation. The CCC state park program was a major component of the American park movement, equal in scope to the development of the National Park System. State governments acquired over one million acres of new parklands during the CCC period. Hundreds of state parks were designed, with the characteristic features of roads and trails, picnic areas, and campground and cabin facilities.

**The future of state parks.** Tight budgets for public park maintenance and expansion in the last two decades of the twentieth century has to a great extent dissipated the work of the New Deal and that which occurred in the immediate post-World War II period. State outdoor recreation areas are now, for the most part, overcrowded and ill-maintained. Hardly any new parks have been created. What is needed is a massive program comparable with that of the CCC era so that state parks can help meet the

**THE STATE OF STATE PARKS**

needs of the American public for tion of their natural and cultural  
outdoor recreation and the preserva- heritage.

**John Henneberger**, 3256 NW Harrison Boulevard, Corvallis, Oregon 97330;  
jhenn@peak.org

