

Paul Pritchard

Challenges Facing State Parks

The National Park Trust issued the second of its two Legacy Reports on 25 August 2000, the 84th anniversary of the National Park Service. It focuses on America's state parks, an essential element of our "national system of parks." The term was first used by the founding director of the National Park System, Stephen T. Mather. He said that there would be no National Park System until there was a national system of parks.

In the first Legacy Report, the National Park Trust signaled the nation about the crisis facing the national parks because of growing numbers of privately owned and unprotected inholdings. In seeking to understand the degree of threat to state parks, we used the following three factors that weigh on the protection and determination of "threatened parks":

- Land-use controls around the park;
- Plans to protect the unprotected values; and
- Availability at the state level of funding for land acquisition.

This report found that state parks face two significant challenges. First, there is no real commitment by the states or the federal government to fund the states' land acquisition needs on a continuing basis. This, despite the fact that visitation to state parks equals that of the national parks. The second challenge is that development has spread to the edge of state parks. This development has been called a

"wall of sprawl." America is coming to the parks, and some of them are staying—by building their homes, their hotels, and their new urbania, using the parks as their backyard.

State parks are subject to individual state mandates, to varying political agendas, and to state budgets. For example, some western states with large federal inholdings place little value on state parks. Other western states, such as California, Oregon, and Washington, have extensive and highly regarded state parks.

National parks do not receive primary attention in this report, but we do bring attention on one issue. We grade the federal government on its response to the land acquisition needs of the 20 most threatened parks that we identified in our 1999 Legacy Report. The government gets, at best, a "D."

Why protect all the parks? Our national system of parks is a very small part of our public land holdings. Yet parks are the storehouse of our natural, historical, and cultural

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heritage. They generate millions of dollars in tourism yearly and, for many communities in America, they are the main industry.

First, all of the 379 national and 3,266 state park units (including parks, recreation areas, and natural areas) should be "finished." This means identifying key properties in and around parks, and then purchasing them from willing sellers. There is the challenge for this generation. We need a commitment, and we need a long-range plan. That is the challenge for the National Park Trust, the governmental trustees, and private land trusts.

Second, working with the National Association of State Park Directors, the National Park Trust is expanding its expertise and assistance to state park systems that request our involvement.

Third, federal support of land acquisition for parks at the state level has been lacking for more than two decades, even though it is authorized in the Land and Water Conservation Fund legislation. To counter this, states have taken bold initiatives. Many have established state funding mechanisms for park and resource

protection. They should continue to do this. They should not wait for Washington. But, Washington should support the states or expect to assume this role.

Fourth, there is a growing demand by the public to experience and learn about the heritage of local, state, and national resources. Through our cooperative agreement, the National Park Trust and the National Association of State Park Directors will work together to assure that America's growing need for conservation of important natural and cultural lands and resources across the country is met.

Last, and most important, every citizen who enjoys the parks, who knows of their value in our society, who cares about our heritage, needs to join up with those calling for greater public commitment. For, unlike any other issue, once a historic site or natural area is lost, it is lost forever.

The Legacy Reports are a first effort to bring order to the debate, substance where there has been none, and consensus to addressing a perceived national need: the fulfillment of a "national system of parks" and conservation areas.

Copies of the second report, "Saving the Legacy of the National System of Parks," can be obtained from Susan Hawley at the National Park Trust, 1-202-548-0500.

Paul Pritchard, National Park Trust, 415 2nd Street NE, Suite 210, Washington, D.C. 20002