

State Parks: The Backbone

State park systems in the United States are the backbone of the park network that exists from the national level to the tiniest unincorporated township in America. State park systems have been created by all techniques imaginable, are managed in a variety of innovative ways, and are usually unique when compared with their counterparts. These state systems underlie and support the body of public lands that provides the diverse recreation for our diverse society. We love our national parks. We plan our vacations around them, when we can—but some of us never get the opportunity to visit them. We love our local parks, using them for softball and soccer leagues, pick-up basketball games and a variety of active recreational opportunities—but they are not always the quietest places in our neighborhood. State parks are close, solid, safe, and dependable ... essential to our inner health, and often overlooked until a problem surfaces.

The decade of the 1990s was not kind to state parks. Looking back, it was a constant struggle for survival for state parks in a system that continued to expand with new public lands while operating and maintenance dollars for existing facilities declined. State parks just can't compete against schools, hospitals, or prisons in a tight economy. Their failure to compete is understandable, but it doesn't mean that they are not important. During that same period of the nineties, twice as many visitors came to use the country's state park systems. Part of the reason for the increased attendance was that the economy kept folks closer to home. We also have more people now, a problem that will never go away. So, the system will continue to increase in size, the visitors will continue to increase in number, and the backbone will be expected to carry these challenges.

You should not think that state

park managers ignored all these realities. They're pretty proud of how innovative they became. Early in the decade, some parks were closed in an attempt to deal with shrinking budgets. That action caused a huge outcry from the surrounding communities. The neighbors were upset, and they were vocal about it. They realized that their state park had been a dependable friend who brought peace and safety to their neighborhood. In retrospect, that action of closing a state park put the first spotlight on the system and can be credited for the dramatic increase in volunteers. Those volunteers have grown into a series of "Friends of" groups that provide perpetual care to their neighbor. Today, the system could not operate without them. As parks were re-opened with volunteer assistance, individual parks were clustered so that they could pool their diminishing resources and prioritize their efforts. Programs followed

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to reduce commitments of scarce resources. “Grow, Don’t Mow” and “Trash-Free Parks” not only helped on the expense side of the ledger, but they also allowed park professionals to highlight key concepts to visitors, such as the importance of natural resource management and the need for recycling. Both the state park system and individual parks within that system were examined under a microscope; that examination was the first step in the development of a health plan for the backbone.

The health plan required the system to define its purpose, its place in the body of national public lands. State parks have a distinct niche between the national park system and the local park system. Even though examples from each of those systems are resident in any state park system, emphasis on the management of natural resources and on “passive” recreation became the dual focus of the state system. (More on the term “passive” later.) Diversity exists across the entire system, both in what a state park is and in who comes to visit it. State parks seem to epitomize the idea of uniqueness. They come in all shapes and sizes, were bought or donated for myriad reasons, have passionate supporters and detractors, have a local flavor with state-wide or regional appeal, provide the perfect setting for user conflicts (no two of which seem to be alike), and are the product of the physical environment that defines their individual identities.

As the 1990s continued, state parks were positioned to take advantage of these identities. Concurrently, different techniques were tried in individual

state parks in order to deal with the fiscal crisis. Parks became more business-like, orienting towards making money as a necessary requirement for survival. Although the system was successful in increasing revenues to offset the decreasing taxpayer dollars, problems arose because state parks are *not* a business. They are part of state government and can have an unfair advantage over the private sector when it comes to competing for the almighty dollar. So, entrepreneurial efforts had to be tempered to avoid direct competition with the private sector. Moreover, just like a business would do, techniques to reduce costs were explored while attempts were made to bring in more revenues. Once again, the system could not operate exactly like a business, since parks are unable to “close profit centers” that are operating in the red. Managers had already learned that closure was not really an option. In addition, park customers are not “always right” and can be downright dangerous at times, requiring a different customer-service approach than one would expect from a business.

Privatization became fashionable in government in the nineties, and state parks tiptoed into that arena. In Maryland, a complete park was leased to a non-profit group that had a special interest in keeping it operational. After long negotiations, the lease was initiated with a two-year trial period that would allow the non-profit to emphasize that group’s special interest while the group agreed to keep the park open for the general public. Public land management learned a lot in that process. They learned that well-mean-

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ing people with a special interest could not provide the public services that the state park system is charged to perform. In other words, it is impossible to delegate the “public” portion of the system’s responsibility. Based on that experience, the system now “partners” with special-interest groups so that a state park presence is maintained at the facility. Major maintenance repairs are paid for by the state park system while the non-profit group emphasizes its special interest, welcomes everyone to use the facilities, and covers the expenses of the day-to-day operations. Time will tell if this new approach is successful.

Toward the end of this past decade, significant changes occurred in the use patterns of state park visitors. “Passive” recreators weren’t just coming to picnic or swim or hike the trail systems as they had in the past. Now, they are becoming “flow through” recreators, moving through a series of state parks by backpacking, riding mountain bikes, paddling kayaks, or a combination of techniques. These recreators are looking for more challenges, more risks, such as rock climbing or rappelling, in a system that prides itself on providing a safe environment for all visitors. Now, many of these same visitors are demanding the right to take more personal risks. The requests for these forms of recreation will continue to increase, far outstripping the ability of a state park to provide the service. A new role for state parks is emerging, one that requires them to be facilitators or links between the “public” and the adventure providers. Once again, the system is involved in business development and

economic benefit that will affect directly the region where the state park is located. Nature tourism is the trend for the future, underscored by the fact that society is moving towards shorter work weeks, more leisure time, and much more emphasis on healthy lifestyles. That trend brings with it the potential for significant impacts on natural resources, the very essence of the state park system; and that trend becomes the major threat to the health of the public land backbone.

We cannot allow those impacts to run rampant. Much like picnic sites are rotated to minimize impacts to the immediate area, we now need to rotate and adjust trail usage so that we don’t wear out the trails. We need a better understanding of “carrying capacity,” an inexact science that should provide us with an early warning system so that we can re-route visitors before they cause irreparable damage to the ecosystems that create a state park’s identity. That re-routing is easier said than done. When a trail system in a state park is studied, some user group will invariably object to a trail closing, even though it is obvious that the trail has had severe impacts on it. Trying to close a trail before the impacts are apparent is a real challenge and hits at the core of educating visitors in a manner that will generate a stewardship ethic in all of them.

Inculcating a stewardship ethic in each citizen is the ultimate solution for the long-term health of natural resources in our country, and, similarly, is the ultimate solution for the continued health of the backbone, the state park systems. Creation of the stewardship ethic in all of us begins in

the educational system. We can't focus on just the young student at this point because everyone needs to hear the message. We need a place to "spread the word." State parks have long been the outdoor laboratory for the entire educational system, from pre-school through doctoral dissertations. You can study nature macroscopically or microscopically within their boundaries. You can be rigorous or casual, serious or lighthearted. On any given day, you can observe both levels of study occurring side-by-side as a recreator passes by in some mode of travel. You have just discovered the state parks' secret. They are flexible, much like a healthy backbone that allows the body to accomplish the full range of motion needed to meet the diverse requirements placed on it. And, they are the perfect place to spread the word. State park systems probably come the closest to meeting that famous cliché, "You can't be all things to all people." They are the places that blend conservation with preservation, a balancing of needs, of demands, of wishes. They are the dependable friend that will be there when you need help, regardless of the problem you face. They represent the history of the region where they reside, both from the landscapes they protect to the activities they support. State parks *must* be healthy to stand the rigors of those diverse demands.

State parks are perfectly aligned to deal with the recreational needs for the new millennium. They can provide a nearby escape, an opportunity to take deep breaths, to think, to relax when you can't afford the time or the money to go far away. Simultaneously, they

can offer a wide array of experiences that are nature-based with increasing levels of difficulty and risk, either free of charge or at a reasonable cost. They are the daily hosts and educators for school groups of all ages, for adults from all walks of life, and for the residents of nursing homes. They are the open space that is so desperately needed as the population continues to grow and continues to require more homes, more schools, more recreation, more everything. They continue to improve accessibility for the disabled communities throughout the system, be they fishermen or hunters, campers or bathers, bird watchers or trail users. The ultimate goal of every state park system in America is a barrier-free recreational experience for all.

The backbone must be ready to meet the demands of millions of visitors annually. The backbone must be flexible to fill its essential role in the system of parks that exists in America. What state parks need the most are advocates. Unlike their federal or local counterparts, state park systems normally do not have an organized constituency. The decade of the nineties placed stress on the backbone—but the decade also brought a host of friends to help a neighbor in distress. Those friends need to ensure that their state government recognizes the value of its state park system and commits resources to keep that system healthy and growing. State parks can help themselves, and they do; however, they cannot do it alone. They are not a business. They are not a profit center. They are the future of recreation for you and your family, and they need your support and your voice at

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the state government level. That need for support will continue to increase as the population continues to increase, placing more demands and more stress on the constantly expanding system of public lands. As we all realize, stress brings out the worst in our own backbones. The backbone system of our national public lands has felt stress. It will survive, of course;

and, the system will continue to have its fair share of aches and pains. We must not let those stresses cause a failure requiring major surgery or, even worse, place the entire body into serious decline. How that body functions in the new millennium depends on all of us. Get involved. You'll love it, and you will feel *much* healthier.

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