

# America's State Parks & State-Owned Historic Sites

**A Public Policy Report Produced by the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Center for State and Local Policy**

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## Introduction

Deep funding cuts and uncertain futures have prompted the National Trust for Historic Preservation to name America's State Parks & State-Owned Historic Sites to its [2010 list of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places](#).

Seen as targets for cost savings, state parks and state-owned historic sites have been hard hit by record-breaking deficits. So far in at least 26 states this has led to:

- Closures and limited hours of operation and services.
- Reduced or eliminated budgets.
- Staff layoffs, furloughs, and hiring freezes.
- Deferred maintenance with an existing backlog in capital improvements now totaling hundreds of millions of dollars.

As a critical issue of our day, we must deal with immediate, short-term strategies while working hard to find lasting solutions to fund and take care of state's parks and historic sites.

## State Parks and Historic Sites are in Crisis

The current crisis over state parks and state-owned historic sites is a growing trend that now affects every state across the country. Nearly 30 states have experienced cuts to parks' and sites' budgets within the last year. Other states are not faring much better, simply holding on and doing more with less. The outlook is not encouraging. Without adequate funding and support, state parks and historic sites will likely continue to be "starved" of essential resources and face closure.

Described as being in "fiscal peril," at least 38 states now face multi-billion budget shortfalls that total nearly \$89 billion. California leads the pack at \$19 billion, followed closely by others, including New Jersey (\$11 billion), New York (\$9 billion), Arizona (\$3 billion), and Pennsylvania (\$1.5 billion).

## How are States Doing?

- In Arizona, on top of 8 state parks that have already shut down, another 13 are set to close June 2010, due to funding cuts of 80 percent in the last two years.
- In California, 150 parks are already operating with reduced services and part-time closures, through a system described by some as "sort of closed, sort of open."

CALIFORNIA STATE PARKS FOUNDATION



Deferred maintenance of the 1871 Pigeon Point Lighthouse, located on California's northern coast, resulted in state park officials closing the facility in 2001. Now in critical condition and blocked off by chain-link fencing, the restoration of the lighthouse is expected to cost \$9 million.

- In Missouri, the state parks system is facing a \$5 million shortfall, impacting more than 1,845 structures -- 700 of which are historic.
- In New Hampshire, the state parks agency is \$1.9 million in debt, leaving the home of Franklin Pierce -- the nation's 14<sup>th</sup> president -- needing \$360,000 in immediate stabilization.
- In New York, 55 state parks and state-owned historic sites are set to close the week of May 17, 2010, with a reduction in services at another 24 locations.
- In Pennsylvania, more than 20 state-owned historic sites are in trouble, including Old Economy Village -- a rare 19<sup>th</sup> century Utopian colony -- which narrowly averted closing down, thanks to the rescue of volunteers.

As governors and legislators scramble to cut spending, they are tapping meager state park and historic site funds as a source for savings. In the last two years, cuts to park and site budgets have ranged between 20-40 percent. Arizona has suffered the biggest blow so far with cuts reaching nearly 80 percent. Cuts in Virginia and New York are right around 25 percent, with Pennsylvania sustained a 48 percent cut, and Georgia took a 58 percent reduction over the past three years. In comparison to cuts to other state agencies, state parks and historic sites appear to be taking a disproportional share. In response, budget-makers say parks and sites are less essential in comparison to healthcare, prisons and education. Pennsylvania's Governor Rendell went so far as to say, "As important as the state's historical sites are, they are not part of the state's core mission."

Most predict the coming 2011 budget cycle to be even worse, chipping away at what is left. Everyone seems to agree on the problem of funding for state parks and state-owned historic sites, but few have reached a consensus on a solution.

## Beginnings of a National System of State Parks and Historic Sites

State parks and state-owned historic sites in the United States are still relatively young, in terms of how long they have been around. In 1921 the First National Conference on Parks was held, with only 19 states reporting having established a system. New York (1885), Pennsylvania (1889) and Massachusetts (1893) are some of the oldest state park systems. Arizona is the most recent, set up in 1957. The periods of greatest growth and expansion of state parks and historic sites occurred first in the 1930s, and later during the 1970s.

The establishment of the **Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)** in 1933 became one of the most effective agencies of the New Deal program, putting young men to work and credited with constructing more than 800 state parks. In large part to the CCC efforts, and funding available to create much-needed jobs, 41 states reported the establishment of a state park system by 1935, an increase of 54 percent in only 14 years.

Starting in the 1970s until recently, state parks have greatly expanded in overall size, in terms of land acquisition. Access to massive amounts of federal funds made available through the Land and Water Conservation Act of 1965 has provided states with millions of dollars for new state parks (averaging \$221 million annually). This era is characterized by a renewed interest in conserving and protecting natural resources.

The problem with this period of great expansion is the lack of resources for maintaining and taking proper care of existing state parks and historic sites. While state parks increased in acreage, so did mounting operating costs, at a much greater rate.

Early state parks and state-owned historic sites came about as a means of preservation, protecting significant places and sites as urbanization and industrialization presented potential threats. Described as "social safety valves," state parks offered people the ability escape city life.

State parks were central to economic development goals during the 1910s, as people became more mobile due to automobile advancements and the Good Roads Movement, leading to the start up of “auto camps” in parks around the country. Following World War II, the focus of many state park systems shifted more toward offering recreational amenities.

State parks across the country now encompass more than 13 million acres. In comparison to the vast 84 million acres managed by the National Park Service, state parks actually serve 2.5 times as many people.

## Closing State Parks and Historic Sites Weakens the Economy

Even during the Great Depression, with a nation confronting economic uncertainty, state parks did not close in most states. Then, and especially now, state parks were seen as a means for offering people a low-cost, in-state option to escape and enjoy nature as well as experience preserved historic sites. Today, attendance nationally at state parks appears to be on the increase. This is a change in comparison to the last ten years where visits to state parks between 1997 and 2007 were down by 16 percent. Virginia has seen a 4 percent increase in visitors this year, and Florida reports 700,000 more. Demand for campgrounds in Minnesota is up 17 percent in comparison to this same time in 2009. California and Michigan both have seen nearly 2 million more visitors in 2009 than 2008.

Ironically, plans to shutter historic sites and cut hours at state parks to save dollars may actually have the opposite effect. State budget cuts for parks and sites are likely to be a drag on the economy, and contribute to a slowing of the national economic recovery. State parks are economic engines that generate a lot to the economy, much more than what it costs to keep them open. As a catalyst for [heritage tourism](#), state parks and sites bring tourists dollars into a state’s economy. State parks had 725 million visits last year, according to the [National Association of State Park Directors](#). Those visits translate to as much as \$20 billion in economic activity, in comparison to the approximate \$2.3 billion that it cost to operate state parks. No matter how you look at the issue, that is a good return on investment.

New York’s state parks reportedly bring in \$1.9 billion in revenue, five times the operating budget of the state parks system. In [California](#) more than 80 million visits to state parks boost local and regional economies, generating more than \$4 billion annually (leveraging \$2.35 for every \$1 spent by the state). A study done in 2005 showed that 2.1 million annual visitors to [Maine’s](#) state parks supported \$95 million of economic activity, including nearly 1,500 jobs that provide \$31 million of personal income. [Texas](#) state parks are reported to generate \$935 million in economic activity and create over 14,000 jobs. A number of states have produced similar studies charting the economic impacts of state parks, including in part Arizona, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, and Tennessee.

The loss of jobs is a clear sign of the impact from cuts to state park budgets. In 2002 the U.S. Census Bureau indicated 226,031 local and 36,211 state jobs in parks and recreation. By 2008, local jobs had been cut to 167,220 and state jobs to 27,549, representing a decrease of approximately 25 percent.

## Paying for State Parks and Historic Sites

A chronic pattern of underfunding, slashing budgets and closing state parks and historic sites will cause more harm in the long-term than any problems solved by the small amount of savings gained. Cutting budgets by 20-40 percent that seldom exceed .5 percent of an entire states’ budget is shortsighted and not strategic. In Delaware and New York -- both experiencing cuts -- .7 percent of the state budget is spent on parks. Arizona, which has experienced an 80 percent cut,

is one of the least-funded state park systems in the country (ranking 43<sup>rd</sup>), amounting to less than one-tenth of 1 percent of the state's overall budget.

### *General Fund Support*

Paying for state parks and state-owned historic sites is a major challenge. Trends clearly demonstrate less and less support coming from a state's general fund. On average, about 41 percent of a state parks operating budget comes through general fund support, and that percentage is decreasing fast, down 22 percent in Virginia since 2008. To make up the difference, many states rely on funds generated through user fees, taxes and lottery proceeds.

### *Dedicated Taxes*

Some states generate funding through dedicated taxes established specifically for parks and recreation. State parks in Texas are funded through a portion of a sales tax on select sporting good items. In **Missouri, the Parks and Soils Sales Tax** has provided funding for about 75 percent of the state parks budget. When the economy is doing well and people are spending money, these types of revenue streams work well. With the economic downturn, sales tax revenues are off, in Missouri as much as 11 percent from 2007 - resulting in a \$5 million shortfall -- and expected to be even worse next year.

### *Self-Funded*

The New Hampshire state park system is unlike any other in the country, attempting to operate as a self-sufficient agency, receiving no general fund support. The **Ten Year Strategic Development and Capital Improvement Plan**, completed in 2009, states New Hampshire's self-funded model is inadequate, making it difficult to provide sufficient resources for even basic upkeep and staff. At the end of the 2009 budget cycle, New Hampshire state parks were in debt for \$1.9 million. In response to the mounting problems, the New Hampshire legislature has taken some positive steps, committing \$6 million in 2007 for deferred maintenance needs; establishing a new **Bureau of Historic Sites** in 2008 to provide focused management attention; and, recently passing legislation creating a new specialty license plate with revenues designated for state parks.

### *Ballot Initiatives*

A handful of states are looking to ballot measures with voters deciding whether or not to support special funds for state parks and historic sites. In Missouri, advocates are working to gain legislative support for the proposed \$800 million **Fifth State Building Fund** to support state parks and other infrastructure needs. In 1998, Oregon voters passed a measure dedicating 15 percent of lottery funds to parks and natural areas. This source of funding is credited with helping address long-standing, deferred maintenance needs. With this initial funding set to expire in 2014, advocates are hoping the turnaround in state parks within the last ten years will garner enough support to place the **Oregonians for Water, Parks and Wildlife Initiative** on the November 2010 ballot.

California advocates also hope voters support a ballot initiative this November, called the **State Parks and Wildlife Conservation Trust Fund Act of 2010**. If passed, the measure directs new revenues from an \$18 vehicle license fee, generating about \$500 million in annual revenues for state parks (with 15 percent going for wildlife and ocean protection agencies).

### *Park Access Pass Programs*

If California is successful, it will join a list of states which offer an access pass program that generates revenue for state parks while providing a cost-savings for frequent, in-state users. **Montana's** program is funded through an optional \$4 fee that is included on the registration of vehicles, allowing residents free admission to state parks. In March, **Michigan** successfully passed legislation creating a state park passport program that will go into effect in October. Modeled after Montana's program, the system will also be voluntary in Michigan, available to residents for

\$10 per registered vehicle. Supporters anticipate about \$40 million in revenue for state parks through this program, if 65 percent of Michigan's residents opt in.

### ***Public-Private Partnerships***

In a few states, cash-strapped state park agencies are looking to nontraditional approaches, including teaming up with private corporations to earn revenue. In April this year, California state parks benefited from a campaign called, "[Care for Our Coast.](#)" During most of the month of April, Coca Cola agreed to donate \$1 to state parks for every \$10 purchased. In 2009, \$600,000 was raised for California's state parks through a similar effort.

Georgia state parks are proposing something a little different and more controversial. Last year the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, the state agency which oversees state parks, had to lay off 90 people due to a 40 percent budget cut. To make up for that loss in funding, Georgia has decided to allow "non-intrusive" advertising within state parks. As expected, the plan has met with controversy with critics saying there is no room for ads in state parks.

### **Can Nonprofit Groups Save State Parks and Historic Sites?**

Privatizing state parks and historic sites through public-private partnerships is an idea that has taken hold in several states. While it may sound like a good idea in concept, proceed with extreme caution. "Friends" organizations representing individual state parks and historic sites, as well as statewide nonprofit foundations for parks, are increasingly seen as part of the solution. Nearly every state has at least one nonprofit support group of this kind.

When \$7 million was cut from the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission budget last October, keeping the state's system of 20-plus historic sites afloat seemed unlikely. A spokesperson for the agency stated at the time, "On a case-by-case basis we will have to rely on friends groups to help keep them open." So far that is exactly what has happened.

Volunteers reopened [Brandywine Battlefield Historic Site](#) – the site of the largest engagement of the Revolutionary War – ten days after it was shut down in August of 2009. Now operated by The Friends of Brandywine Battlefield Staff & Volunteers, the site is open on a limited basis and efforts are underway to raise necessary funding through private sources. Friends groups are trying to raise funding to do the same for other closed historic sites throughout Pennsylvania.

States looking to nonprofit organizations or local municipalities to step in and take over historic sites is not the answer. Already, the nation's [privately-owned historic sites and museums](#) are struggling to survive, and sustain organizational and financial operations.

At best, turning over management of state parks and state-owned historic sites is a temporary, crisis-relief strategy, applicable to only a small percentage of sites. Most nonprofits are ill-prepared – financially or through staff expertise -- to take on the long-term responsibility of properly caring for a state park or historic site. While providing some short-term budget relief, closing parks and sites will actually cost states far more in the long-term. Before they can re-open, state-owned and managed resources will require massive investments to undo the damage suffered from abandonment, neglect, possible vandalism, and deferred maintenance

### ***Temporary Management Agreements***

In Arizona, few options remain for state parks and sites, facing closure or being turned over to other entities through temporary management agreements. Knowing how important state parks are to local economies, the City of Yuma has agreed to take over [Yuma Territorial Prison State Park](#). The Arizona Historical Society will operate [Riordan Mansion State Historical Park](#) for at least the next three years.

### *Co-Stewardships*

Ohio has been working for a number of years to seek additional partners, through a co-stewardship approach of managing historic sites and avoiding closures. In late 2007, the Ohio State Legislature undertook a study called Incentives for [Local Entities to Assume Control of State Historic Sites](#). The study looked at 20 sites, including historic buildings, parks, monuments, archaeological sites, and natural areas. Presently 24 agreements have been entered into with private organizations to manage state-owned historic sites. The Ohio Historical Society anticipates another 24 sites to be added to this list before the end of 2010. As part of the agreements, the Society provides resource management, major maintenance, and funding for capital improvements.

### *Resident Curatorships*

Much like the National Park Service, a handful of states offer a resident curatorship program within state parks, as well as forests, recreational and scenic areas. These programs address underutilized state-owned properties by entering into long-term leases with qualified tenants who agree to make repairs and provide ongoing maintenance. [Maryland](#) pioneered this approach, beginning in 1982 and now has more than 40 curatorships in operation. [Massachusetts](#) established its Historic Curatorship Program in 1994, with about a dozen properties now under agreement. New York, Delaware, and soon Connecticut will join the list of other states offering this creative approach for dealing with unused state-owned historic buildings.

### **Conclusion**

One hundred years after America's first state parks and state-owned historic sites began to take shape, in this time of crisis and wake up call, it is important to ask what steps we are taking to ensure that this extraordinary legacy is on solid footing for the next century.

In New York, California, Idaho, Pennsylvania and elsewhere across the nation, people are standing up for state parks and state-owned historic sites, through rallies, protests, and the formation of new advocacy organizations. The organization, [America's State Parks](#), was recently launched as a national advocate for the cultural value and economic benefits provided by state parks.

There are no easy answers or quick fixes to this problem that is years in the making. Any solution will require a long-term plan around innovation and collaboration, through a state-by-state approach. What we do know is successful stewardship of the nation's state parks and state-owned historic sites starts with financial sustainability.

## About the National Trust for Historic Preservation

Adrian Scott Fine is the Director of the Center for State and Local Policy of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. For more information about state parks and state-owned historic sites, please visit [www.PreservationNation.org/issues/11-most-endangered](http://www.PreservationNation.org/issues/11-most-endangered).

The National Trust for Historic Preservation ([www.PreservationNation.org](http://www.PreservationNation.org)) is a non-profit membership organization bringing people together to protect, enhance and enjoy the places that matter to them. By saving the places where great moments from history – and the important moments of everyday life – took place, the National Trust for Historic Preservation helps revitalize neighborhoods and communities, spark economic development and promote environmental sustainability. With headquarters in Washington, DC, eight regional and field offices, 29 historic sites, and partner organizations in 50 states, territories, and the District of Columbia, the National Trust for Historic Preservation provides leadership, education, advocacy and resources to a national network of people, organizations and local communities committed to saving places, connecting us to our history and collectively shaping the future of America's stories.

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