

A VISION FOR EXCELLENCE FOR
CALIFORNIA'S STATE PARKS

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Park Excellence Project Task Force Members

Kate Anderton: *Former Executive Director, Save the Redwoods League* **

Pete Dangermond: *Former Director, California Department of Parks and Recreation* **

Caryl Hart: *Chair, California State Parks and Recreation Commission* **

Stephen A. Johnson: *Director, Gnarus Advisors LLC* *

Stephen P. Johnson: *Senior Advisor, Conservation Strategy Group*

Amy Lethbridge: *Deputy Executive Officer, Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority*

Sam Livermore: *Task Force Chair; Partner, Cooley LLP* **

Patricia Pérez: *Partner, VPE Public Relations* *

Anthony Veerkamp: *Director of Programs, Western Office, National Trust for Historic Preservation*

Peter Weiner: *Partner and Chair, Paul, Hastings, Janofsky & Walker LLP* *

Mary Wright: *Retired Chief Deputy Director, California Department of Parks and Recreation* **

* CSPF Trustee, ** League Councillor

Park Excellence Project Steering Committee

Elizabeth Goldstein, *President, CSPF*

Velma Gentsch, *League Executive Assistant*

Bob Hansen, *League Consultant*

Ruskin Hartley, *League Executive Director*

Kate Litzky, *Research & Policy Assistant, CSPF*

Traci Verardo-Torres, *Vice President of Government Affairs, CSPF*

Harvard Business School Community Partners assisted with conducting personal interviews and additional research. Special thanks to: Jayee Xu Coffey, Maricor Fahlander, Jon Goulden, Susan Hailey, Rob Lightfoot, Robert Martin, and Kristina Sepetys

Report Editing

Roxane Buck-Ezurra, *Consultant to CSPF*

Report Design

Briar Levit, *BriarMade*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

(Opposite) Sugarloaf Ridge
State Park

What do the seat of California's government, an old-west mining town, world-famous surfing breaks, the Ewok's home on planet Endor, and the world's tallest forest have in common? They are all part of the rich fabric of California and found within its magnificent state park system.

Californians love their state parks

Throughout its more than 100 year history, the state park system has served to inspire Californians and define the very identity and character of the Golden State. California state parks help create shared memories of first-time adventures in hiking, camping, fishing, and more. Our parks kindle the imagination during walks among towering redwoods, silent paddles across still lakes, and while stargazing at an infinite sky. State parks are sites for reunions, marriage proposals, and family celebrations. City-weary residents seek refuge in the natural spaces in our parks. And state parks are outdoor classrooms that tell and re-tell California history, from its native origins to the heydays of the state's Gold Rush and beyond.

Our parks do more than inspire, they literally sustain us and provide critical environmental benefits to state residents by protecting clean air, clear water, and sensitive ecosystems. The California state park system includes 1.3 million acres of land and protects over 8.6 million feet of waterfront, including almost 320 miles of California coastline. More than 49,000 acres of old growth redwood forests in California's state parks comprise the world's largest stands of old-growth redwoods and store more carbon per acre than any other forest on the planet. Virtually all state wilderness is found in the state park system, with 549,500 acres of designated state wilderness. Over 160 rare, threatened, and endangered species are found and are protected in California's state parks.

Our parks provide tremendous economic benefit to the state and local economies by enticing millions of out-of-state and out-of-country tourists to visit the beaches, deserts, forests, and mountains that are uniquely Californian. With over 72 million visits annually, state parks already bring in more than \$4 billion in tourism and tourist-related activity throughout California. State parks currently provide opportunities for job creation—in parks and externally—in retail, construction, trade, and other sectors in communities near state parks. A June 2009 study conducted by California State University, Sacramento confirmed the role that state parks play in sustaining local economies and businesses. Study results found that each visitor spends an average of \$57.63 per visit—\$24.63 inside state parks, and \$33 in surrounding communities within 25 miles of the visited park.

Our parks need help

California's state park system is at a crossroads. As a system, California's state parks have persisted even in the face of challenging and shifting political, social, and environmental priorities. Yet, after more than a century of leading the way in preserving and protecting precious resources, today's pressures are the most challenging the system has ever seen.

The state park system stands on a financial brink and under a mountain of more than \$1.2 billion in deferred maintenance needs. Twice in recent years, proposals for wholesale closures have been put forward and only narrowly avoided. First, in 2008, 48 state

“The state of the state parks is reflective of our times. The Golden State is in tough times, but we owe it to our ancestors and children to preserve these places. We need [our state parks] more than ever.”

—Personal interview participant

parks closures were proposed; then, in 2009, 220 state parks were made vulnerable to shutdowns. Though total closures were avoided, California’s state park system is increasingly characterized by partial and indefinite closures that have left restrooms locked, visitors centers shuttered, campgrounds closed, and more. Even as this report was being finalized, a new state budget was proposed that anticipates a new, permanent cut of almost 20 percent of the state park system’s General Fund support—virtually guaranteeing additional rounds of closures.

In the areas of visitor services, staffing, resource management, cultural preservation, historic interpretation, and more, our state parks cannot keep pace with the needs and expectations of Californians that come at a time of shrinking budgets. With a state population expected to increase from 38 million to more than 44 million in the next nine years, and almost over 50 million by 2030 (State of California, Department of Finance, *Population Projections for California and Its Counties 2000–2050*, 2007), visitor demands and expectations will only grow. In addition, state parks face development and external pressures that threaten resource protection and public enjoyment of our parks.

These crises cannot continue to define our state parks. As California faces some of its most challenging days right now, our state parks can be an essential element in the economic and civic recovery that is so vital to the state. In an era when time spent outdoors is a necessity for the health and well-being of every Californian, where protection of irreplaceable natural resources is vital to the overall environmental condition of the state, and where barriers to park access remain high for many state residents, we need a new vision for our state parks—a vision for the next 100 years and beyond. The moment has never been more important.

The work ahead

Now is the time to reexamine the ways in which our parks are supported, financed, protected, managed, promoted, and maintained, and to ask if this is the best way forward for the next 100 years. Doing more for our state parks, doing better, and doing that work collaboratively is what’s needed to achieve excellence in California’s state parks. *A Vision for Excellence for California’s State Parks* begins that process and calls on the community of park supporters and stakeholders to come together and prioritize their collective work in five strategic areas:

- Make Parks Relevant**
- Increase Access for All**
- Defend Park Lands and Resources**
- Broaden Leadership for Parks**
- Strengthen and Diversify Funding**

To truly achieve excellence, traditional park supporters, managers, and partners need to think creatively about ways to improve and invigorate existing roles and practices. Flexibility and innovation must be built into the ways parks and park resources are managed, protected, marketed, and made available to the public. New partners must be welcomed. Committed stakeholders must embrace novel ideas. And all must work together to make state parks more significant to California residents, more essential to the economic recovery of the state, and more prominent in state environmental priorities.



(Left) Morro Strand State Beach

Now more than ever

As this report was being written, in late 2010, Californians voted on Proposition (Prop) 21, the State Parks and Wildlife Conservation Trust Fund Act of 2010. Prop 21 proposed a long-term, sustainable funding stream for the state park system that would have also provided Californians with free day-use access to state parks. Unfortunately, Prop 21 was defeated in the midst of an extremely complex and noisy election. Yet even within that environment, more than 4 million voters supported the measure. Paradoxically, post-election discussions with voters showed that the measure's defeat did not contradict Californians' love for their state parks. Rather, voters who did not support Prop 21 expressed a mistrust of government leaders to strongly safeguard new funding for state parks.

Fundamentally, California's state parks belong to her residents and are an asset that every Californian should claim as his or her own. For much of its history, the place of state parks in the civic life of California has been secure, but that security is not certain in the future. The defeat of Prop 21 does not make the search for excellence in California's state parks less urgent. To the contrary, it means more work must be done to increase Californians' support for their parks and their confidence in solutions to make state parks available, accessible, and enjoyable for all.

The responsibility of achieving excellence in California's state park system does not rest with any single stakeholder or entity. It is truly a shared responsibility. One that starts with individual Californians, who use and benefit from our state parks, and extends out to include organizations, businesses, agencies, institutions, communities, and governments that all have a stake in a healthy, vibrant, and sustained state park system.

An invitation

This report presents a vision for excellence, based on public opinion and feedback, and makes specific recommendations for achieving that excellence. We hope it will also serve as an invitation to its readers and as a roadmap to get us started in the challenging, yet vital, pursuit of excellence for California's state parks. Please join us.



INTRODUCTION

(Opposite) Del Norte Coast Redwoods State Park

When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe. —John Muir

The Vision for Excellence for California's State Parks is a report of the Park Excellence Project, a joint undertaking of the California State Parks Foundation (CSPF) and the Save the Redwoods League (the League). Both organizations have long histories steeped in promoting and preserving the unparalleled natural, cultural, and historic treasures that make up California's state park system.

The impetus for the Park Excellence Project began in mid 2005 when CSPF looked closely at the overall fiscal picture facing California's state park system. As CSPF worked to identify ways to improve the financial health of the system, it, along with other partners including the League, identified the need for a contemporary, relevant, and inclusive vision that would invite Californians to the work of sustaining and improving their state parks.

In particular, CSPF and the League agreed that a new vision must reflect the direct voice of Californians and their views for their state parks. Beyond simple satisfaction surveys, the Park Excellence Project asked Californians for their opinions about the purpose of our state parks, as well as their desires for specific park experiences, programs, services, and amenities.

In the past, the state's Department of Parks and Recreation, as well as CSPF, the League, and many other park partners have undertaken various research projects. Yet few of these studies asked the public directly:

What role should California's state parks play in the lives of its residents and visitors?

What would make state parks more appealing, accessible, and relevant?

How can state parks overcome the barriers to achieving excellence?

The Park Excellence Project develops a vision of excellence for the state park system in the 21st Century, shared by the public and key park stakeholders, and makes recommendations as to how best to overcome barriers to excellence and promote that vision. Specifically, the project is intended to:

- » Engage the public in a dialogue about current park needs and the goal of a comprehensive, creative, and visionary plan for funding, protecting, and operating California's state parks.
- » Identify a shared vision of excellence for the state park system in the 21st century.
- » Identify barriers to achieving excellence in state parks.
- » Increase public support for an enhanced, improved, and excellent state park system and the mechanisms to achieve excellence.

Engaging the public in this dialogue came about via a comprehensive set of data-gathering methods, including a statewide web survey, public opinion poll, meetings with park stakeholder groups, and individual interviews with park and conservation experts.

The quotes that appear throughout this document are first hand reflections from Californians who participated in personal interviews, statewide surveys or listening sessions as part of the Park Excellence Project. A summary of the research findings is contained in the “Searching for Excellence” chapter. *(Detailed information on the methodologies used is included in the Appendix.)*

From thousands of collected responses, five key themes emerged. These themes make up the vision for excellence that, when fully realized, results in an excellent California state park system that will: **Celebrate Our Enduring Heritage, Welcome Visitors, Teach Californians, Safeguard Resources, and Connect Individuals, Organizations, and Partners.** To establish a common understanding of the vision, each theme is paired with a set of clear goals. These goals help articulate the meaning of each theme, or Vision Element. Each element establishes a set of expectations that communicate how to monitor progress toward, and achievement of, excellence. *(Vision Elements and their associated goals are described in the “A Vision for Excellence” chapter.)*

The real challenge ahead lies in making this vision a reality. Doing so will require dedication and collaboration among the public, the non-profit sector, businesses, institutions, and policymakers. The “Achieving the Vision” chapter reveals the five core strategies that create a focus for that work. They include:

- Make Parks Relevant**
- Increase Access for All**
- Defend Park Lands and Resources**
- Broaden Leadership for Parks**
- Strengthen and Diversify Funding**

A list of specific recommended actions for each strategy is included in the “Achieving the Vision” chapter. The recommendations listed in this report are important first steps to be taken, though others may be identified as the many partners who have a role in making the vision for excellence a reality, come together to begin this critical work.





SEARCHING FOR EXCELLENCE

(Opposite) Anza-Borrego Desert
State Park

What is excellence? What prevents it in our state parks?

California's population has increased and changed dramatically since its state parks were established. To ensure parks remain relevant to these changes, the public was put at the center of the data gathering for the Park Excellence Project. We asked how they view state parks and what they would like to see changed to achieve excellence. In addition to reaching out to current park users, opinions from potential state park visitors and outdoor enthusiasts were also sought to understand what it would take to make state parks more relevant to *their* lives.

A statewide online survey was fielded for five weeks and yielded more than 6,400 responses. Additionally, a telephone-based opinion poll of 800 Californians, generally representative of the statewide population, was conducted. However, the poll specifically solicited equal numbers of non-park user respondents and current park user respondents, excluding those who indicated an extremely high use of state parks or no interest in visiting state parks at all. Finally, small-group listening sessions and semi-structured personal interviews were scheduled with key park stakeholder groups and representatives of other park systems. Feedback from these individuals, organizations, and institutions was used to complement and augment findings from the public at large. (*For detailed information on the data methodologies used, see Appendix A.*)

Four questions guided the various approaches used to solicit public and stakeholder responses for the Park Excellence Project:

*What is the **primary purpose** of California's state park system?*

*What are the most **important features** of an excellent state park system?*

*What **programs, services, and amenities** should be offered to achieve excellence?*

*What are existing **barriers** to current state park use and/or to achieving excellence?*

Across the data gathering methods, many similar responses were provided to these questions. In some ways, the common responses (even among visitors and non-visitors or longtime partners and park novices) reveal a shared understanding of the opportunities and challenges that face California's state parks.

Primary Purpose

In response to questions about the primary purpose of the state park system, the public overwhelmingly sees *safeguarding the state's natural resources for the future* as the primary purpose of the system. Agreement about that purpose points to an important shared sense of the value of our state parks. Indeed, the idea that the state park system exists to ensure a unique legacy passed on to future generations reflects the very concept that established the system at its founding. Related to that is the additional purpose expressed that state parks exist to *protect natural resources, including plants, animals, habitat, and California's coast, as well as cultural and historic resources*. When asked about the role of the state park system in the lives of its residents and others, Californians identified *fostering education about nature, historical significance of parks, and environmental awareness* as a key role of the state park system. Among the top responses in this area, Californians be-

(Opposite) Henry W. Coe
State Park

“Parks, both state and local, have the obligation to connect society’s youth to its natural and cultural history. Without this, future generations will be indifferent to parks and their continued existence.”
—Web survey respondent

lieve that another key role of the state park system is in *providing affordable access to the outdoors and recreational opportunities*. Finally, Californians also recognize the impact that state parks have on tourism and reported that one of the key roles of the system is as *a resource that draws out-of-state visitors and tourists*.

Important Park Features

Responses to questions about the most important features of an excellent state park system first followed from the preservation concept expressed as the primary purpose of California’s state parks. *Successfully protecting resources from development or damage* was overwhelmingly the top-rated feature. Californians also reported *providing places for quiet, solace, and enjoying nature* as a key feature of an excellent state park system, as well as *providing places for spending quality time with family*. More specific to visitors’ uses of state parks, *having clean, well-maintained facilities* was listed as a critical feature of an excellent state park system.

Programs, Services, and Amenities

Answers differed somewhat among park users and non-users when asked which programs, services, and amenities should be offered to achieve excellence. Current park users were more likely to report *updated and marked trails*, as well as *maps and park guides* as important amenities to achieve excellence. Current visitors also noted the need for more *self-guided tour/trail materials and information*. In some contrast, non-visitors described amenities and programs that would help infrequent visitors become more familiar and comfortable with state parks, including *visitor centers* as well as *more opportunities for educational/interpretive programs*. However, both visitors and non-visitors reported that an increase in *visible park employees* would help achieve excellence.

Barriers to Excellence

Finally, some barriers to achieving excellence unite park users and non-users. Both groups share *concerns about affordability*, specifically *high fees for day use and camping*. A *lack of consistent funding for the state park system* was overwhelmingly cited across all four research methods as a major barrier to excellence. Non-users also reported specific barriers to overall state park use, including *lack of awareness about activities in state parks* and *lack of knowledge about how to utilize state parks and facilities*. Non-users expressed concern about being unfamiliar or unprepared to access state parks, citing barriers such as *lack of companions* to visit state parks and *lack of equipment necessary to use state parks*. Among almost all park stakeholders, inconsistent approaches to partnerships were cited as a barrier to excellence, especially as many partners expressed that multi-faceted partnerships are increasingly required as public resources to support state parks diminish. Stakeholders also cited *underutilization of current, science-based best practices* as a barrier affecting the primary resource protection purpose of the system.





A VISION FOR EXCELLENCE

(Opposite) Pigeon Point Light
Station State Historic Park

Five essential elements

“It is an incalculable added pleasure to any one’s sum of happiness if he or she grows to know, even slightly and imperfectly, how to read and enjoy the wonder-book of nature.” —Theodore Roosevelt

Data from the public surveys, stakeholder interviews, and listening sessions pointed to a set of issues and ideas that crystallized around five main themes. These themes form the basis of the Vision Elements for this report, and are framed as active, durable outcomes that an excellent state park system achieves. They, and the accompanying goals, are not intended to simply reflect the current condition of California’s state parks. Indeed, there are gaps between the desired future and where we stand today. The Vision Elements define the experiences and purposes that will be achieved in an excellent state park system in California. To that end, as an excellent state park system, California’s state parks will: **Celebrate Our Enduring Heritage, Welcome Visitors, Teach Californians, Safeguard Resources, and Connect Individuals, Organizations, and Partners.**

The remainder of this chapter provides additional detail on each Vision Element, and current gaps, and are complemented by a set of goals that define excellence for each theme.





(Above) Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park (Below) Old Town San Diego State Historic Park

“The historic fabric of the system is critically important because authenticity is hard to come by. These are the real places and things that made history, not representations of them.”

—Personal interview participant

Celebrate Our Enduring Heritage

VISION STATEMENT: California’s state parks inspire people with the natural and cultural heritage that defines the state: from wind-swept beaches to ancient forests and high mountain tops, from the pioneering spirit of the Gold Rush to the present-day pioneers, from its original peoples to its newest immigrants.

California’s state parks reflect the character and unique “brand” that is the Golden State. Its 278 park units make up the largest state park system in the United States and contain unparalleled natural features and historic and cultural resources. By telling, retelling, and interpreting key history, geology, and cultural facts, our state parks celebrate California and what it means to be a Californian. Maintaining these features and continuing to celebrate the stories told by our state parks is essential.

Excellence in **celebrating our enduring heritage** will be met when:

- » All Californians are aware of their state park system and the amenities and resources the system offers and protects.
- » All Californians feel ownership in their state parks system.
- » All visitors experience the wonder and inspiration that parks provide through exposure to, and interpretation of, the extraordinary natural features and authentic cultural places in parks.
- » New state parks prioritize access in areas currently park deficient and where stories of California’s heritage have not yet been told.

FROM ITS INCEPTION, CALIFORNIA’S STATE PARK SYSTEM has been guided by the desire to preserve and make accessible a resource that defined the very identity of the state. In 1899, a well-known artist and photographer, Andrew P. Hill, made a trip to the Santa Cruz Mountains to photograph magnificent California redwoods. After being told the redwood groves were privately owned and off-limits to the public, an energized Hill launched a campaign that eventually caused the state Legislature and the Governor to establish “California Redwood Park”—a 3,800-acre area in the Santa Cruz Mountains within what is now Big Basin Redwoods State Park. Arguments for the preservation of natural beauty, public access to the nation’s natural wonders, and the economic value of tourism had won the day.

Today, more than 1.5 million acres of land and over 3,100 historic buildings and 6 million cultural and historic artifacts are counted among the resources protected in California’s state parks. This collection of parks is designed to allow visitors to touch the many unique facets of California’s ecosystems, cultural history and life. Yet inadequate and erratic funding over the years has resulted in a state park system unable to respond to overall needs of the system and to changing use patterns. California’s state parks protect some of the most significant places for California’s history, but the future of the system requires looking forward to making sure that we are protecting places that are important today, and that remain important to an enduring and contemporary story of the state. Though containing some of the most magnificent places and resources in California, state parks are not capitalizing on the “wow factor” that is inherent in many parks. While park-specific stories are well told, an overall, integrated story about the importance of the entire park system is lacking.

Welcome Visitors

VISION STATEMENT: California's state parks belong to the people of California and welcome visitors to enjoy the diverse natural places and historic resources that provide inspirational, spiritual, and recreational opportunities.

At the heart of an excellent state park system is the experience of its visitors. Cultivating and maintaining an environment where visitors are welcomed and provided access to services and amenities, which increase their affinity for state parks, is a fundamental facet of an excellent state park system. State parks need to be physically available to all residents, both physically, as well as in ways that bring park information to those who cannot easily go to parks by themselves.

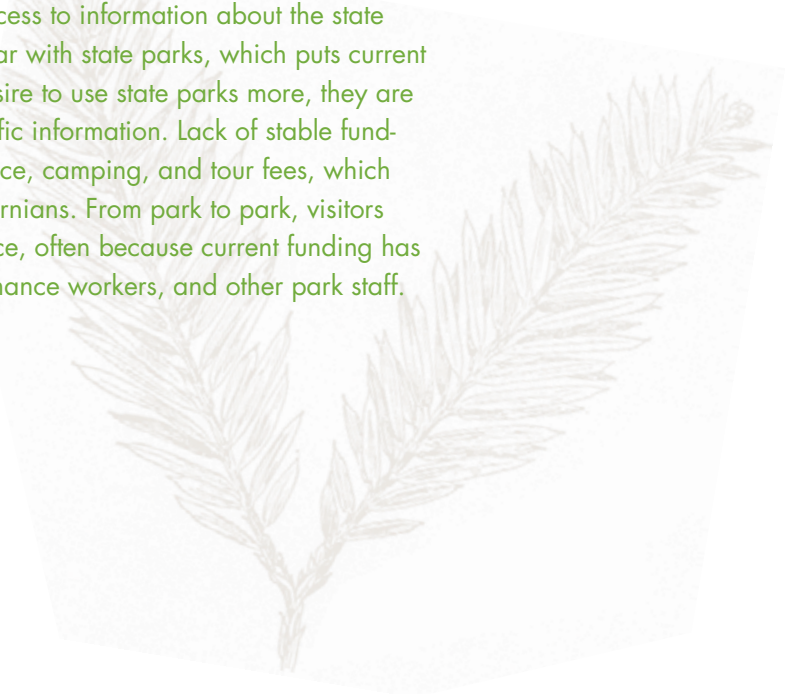
Excellence in **welcoming visitors** will be met when:

- » All state parks are open, accessible, and welcoming.
- » High quality, affordable recreational opportunities, for both day-use and overnight visits, are available throughout the state park system for all.
- » Every state park has well-maintained amenities, public access points, clean restrooms and facilities, and available staff to assist visitors.
- » All visitors have access to basic park information and materials to help them plan trips to state parks, in a language they understand.
- » Every Californian has access to equipment and/or programs to aid them in using and enjoying state parks.
- » Every Californian in an urban area has access to nearby state parks through public transit.



(Above) Mount San Jacinto State Park (Below) Mount Diablo State Park

CURRENTLY, THE STATE PARK SYSTEM RECEIVES over 72 million visits from California residents and tourists each year. Yet access to the state park system is uneven across the state, based generally on geography and income. Access to information about the state park system is easier for those who are already familiar with state parks, which puts current non-visitors at a disadvantage. Though non-visitors desire to use state parks more, they are uncertain about where and how to find reliable, specific information. Lack of stable funding has also created pressures to increase park entrance, camping, and tour fees, which exacerbate current barriers to state park use by Californians. From park to park, visitors may experience very different levels of customer service, often because current funding has reduced the number and presence of rangers, maintenance workers, and other park staff.





(Above) Columbia State Historic Park

Teach Californians

VISION STATEMENT: California’s state parks provide lifelong opportunities for children and adults to explore, discover, and experience the natural environment, heritage, and rich stories that state parks contain.

Through visits to state parks, all Californians have an opportunity to gain new information, skills, and knowledge that can shape lifelong learning. Preservation of cultural and historic artifacts and narratives are a key part of the story that California’s state parks tell, and ability to interact with and experience those stories in a personal way creates opportunities that extend all Californians’ knowledge.

Excellence in **teaching Californians** will be met when:

- » Interpretive materials and displays at state parks are up-to-date, relevant, appealing for a modern audience, and tell diverse California stories.
- » All historical and cultural artifacts in the state’s collection are safely and properly protected and available for the public to experience through high quality display and exhibition.
- » All California children have opportunities to visit state parks as part of class-related trips and virtual visits through school-connected technology.
- » Educational materials and/or curriculum for highlighting or incorporating state parks in core content standards—especially math, science, and history classes—are available to all California educators.
- » All California youth have opportunities to play, learn, and explore the outdoors in state parks.

CALIFORNIA’S STATE PARK SYSTEM OFFERS UNRIVALED EDUCATIONAL experiences for Californians of all ages. Offering “outdoor classrooms,” the parks feature the geology, biology, and natural resources that are distinctively Californian. Overall, it is second only to the state’s public education system in offering educational opportunities to school-aged youth. Yet within the state park system, decreased funding has reduced the number of interpretive specialists and park liaisons to educational and community groups. Funding for interpretive displays and materials has not been a high priority in lean budget years, and existing displays and materials are often outdated or not compelling for diverse audiences or new audiences with increased technological use and sophistication.

“Creating opportunities for people to learn and care for their parks is important. It builds a community around the park.”

—Personal interview participant

Safeguard Resources

VISION STATEMENT: California’s state parks safeguard irreplaceable natural and cultural resources and utilize contemporary science and management practices to ensure their protection and preservation for the future.

“Protecting resources for the future” is not only a value of the state park system, but also its active, ongoing purpose. Currently, a network of key partners are supporting stewardship goals through natural resource planning, managing conservation easements or other buffer lands adjacent to state parks, helping protect cultural resources, and more. Those partnerships can be used even more effectively to take advantage of contemporary resource stewardship data and expertise that exist in organizations and within scientific institutions.

Excellence in **safeguarding resources** will be met when:

- » All state parks are secured by permanent legal protection against development threats and non-mission uses.
- » Regular assessments of natural and cultural resources in all parks are conducted to guide management decisions and resource allocation.
- » A system-wide master plan that addresses current needs and forecasts future needs in the face of climate, environmental, and population change is developed and regularly updated.
- » Every state park has a current park-specific plan and budget that includes resource management, interpretation, cultural, historic resource, facilities management, and public access plans.
- » System-wide resource management is guided by current science-based techniques, best practices, and ongoing research.
- » Expertise of researchers, scientists, academic leaders, and practitioners in natural, cultural, and historic resource fields is actively sought and incorporated into resource management practices in state parks.

CALIFORNIA IS ONE OF THE MOST BIOLOGICALLY DIVERSE places in the world, and the state park system itself protects much of this diversity. It is estimated that almost 50 percent of the state’s rare habitats are represented in the state park system, including units with national or international recognition, such as World Heritage Sites, National Natural Landmarks, and International Biosphere Reserves. More than 11,000 prehistoric and historic archeological sites and 3,100 historic buildings are in the stewardship of California’s state parks. Yet persistent underfunding has eroded the state’s ability to effectively monitor and manage current natural and cultural resources and artifacts. With limited financial resources and staffing, long-term stewardship practices and science-based operational decisions in state parks have, in some cases, taken a back seat to short-term decisions about which immediate crisis to address. Demands over defending the existing land base and infrastructure outweigh a proactive approach to stewarding existing resources and meeting pent-up needs for park access. In the face of climate change, the state park system needs to adapt to survive; this will require changes in management practices and acquisition strategies. State parks already sequester carbon in forests, grasslands, and open spaces and can play an important part in helping mitigate climate change.



(Above) Antelope Valley California Poppy Reserve State Natural Reserve (Below) Ano Nuevo State Park



(Above) Mount Tamalpais State Park (Below) CSPF Vikingsholm Celebration (Opposite) Bodie State Historic Park

Connect Individuals, Organizations, and Partners

VISION STATEMENT: California’s state parks engage individuals and a broad network of public, private, and non-profit partners in flexible, innovative, and inclusive approaches to protect park resources while delivering a high-quality visitor experience.

In the face of declining public funding, partnerships with public, non-profit, business and community groups are more important than ever. Partners can provide long-term stability, engage the local community, encourage stewardship and land management practices, provide assistance with maintenance and acquisitions, and provide a voice for the parks. California’s state parks can become a “hub” for collaboration among recreational, conservation, or cultural and historic preservation entities and systems. Successful and effective partnerships that fully engage local communities, non-profit supporting organizations, concessionaires, and others are fundamental to the future success of California’s state parks.

Excellence in connecting **individuals, organizations, and partners** will be met when:

- » All partners to the state park system have capacity, leadership, and mission-related expertise to add value to resource protection and/or visitor service goals.
- » All visitor-facing park employees and park partners are trained in visitor service and prioritize visitor experience and hospitality within their career paths.
- » All state parks welcome volunteers to assist with visitor services, interpretation, education, and resource protection and restoration.
- » Concession and park business opportunities are aligned with visitor needs and encourage visitor use and resource protection goals.
- » Local businesses, community groups, key stakeholder groups, leaders, and residents are involved in decisions about enhancing, changing, and improving park facilities and services.
- » Creative, entrepreneurial, and inclusive approaches to park operations are encouraged through flexibility and incentives for locally based decision making.
- » Philanthropic organizations and partners collaborate with state parks to identify programs and projects that will enhance park uses and complement core park services.

HISTORICALLY, A VARIETY OF ORGANIZATIONS (philanthropic, foundations, concessionaires, cooperating associations, corporations, local businesses, and local, state and federal governments) have developed partnerships with the state park system. These partnerships typically have been limited to augmenting state services or providing specific programs that go beyond traditional state government responsibilities. Within fiscal and bureaucratic constraints, the state’s Department of Parks and Recreation (Department) is perceived as trying to achieve a diverse, multi-faceted mission with inadequate resources and therefore unable to fully meet the demands of the current system. Staff turnover and retirements as well as changes in staff training and management—particularly emphasizing law enforcement among rangers—have altered the ways in which Department staff interact with and serve the public. Over the last several decades, the Department’s culture has shifted from a focus on visitors and service to “playing defense” on fiscal and policy issues. The Department also suffers from cumbersome and outdated administrative and decision-making systems, which creates challenges to much-needed partnerships and engagement with local communities.





ACHIEVING THE VISION

(Opposite) Schooner Gulch
State Beach

Important actions we can take

Working to achieve excellence requires ensuring preservation of the park system as a whole and the resources within the parks, addressing barriers to park visitation and use, and sustaining strong, broad-based networks that will take responsibility for maintaining excellence. To achieve the vision for excellence in California's state parks, the following five strategies and subsequent recommended actions provide a roadmap for action by the community of partners and stakeholders to the state park system, the Department, and the public at large:

Make Parks Relevant

GUIDING STRATEGY: State parks compete with other recreational, technological, and social pursuits for attention and use by Californians and tourists. An excellent state park system creatively engages and interacts with residents and visitors, provides high-quality hospitality and amenities, and visibly showcases the benefits of park use.

Recommended Actions

1. Provide hands-on activities and interactive demonstrations that allow park visitors to participate in telling and interpreting park stories.
2. Develop a statewide public outreach and education effort to kindle the imagination of all Californians about their state parks and promote awareness of the affordability, amenities, and features of state parks.
3. Train park staff, volunteers, and concessionaires in hospitality and providing integrated service to visitors.
4. Update and modernize existing interpretive displays and materials in parks.
5. Utilize technology to support and enhance in-park experiences (i.e., audio tours/podcasts, mobile apps for park use, etc.).
6. Develop new models for providing recreational opportunities and park features that will attract new audiences of state park visitors.
7. Explore new models for campgrounds, lodging, picnicking, and visitor centers to welcome and accommodate new communities and visitors.
8. Include themes of relevance to California's diverse populations when interpreting park history.
9. Initiate an outreach campaign with the medical and public health communities to utilize health professionals as advocates for increasing use of state parks as part of a healthy lifestyle.
10. Encourage state park-specific identification and marketing in statewide Travel & Tourism Commission advertising and marketing campaigns.

Increase Access for All

GUIDING STRATEGY: Californians need to see themselves as owners of, stewards of, and investors in of their state parks, and see that ensuring their use of state parks is fundamental to those goals. An excellent state park system helps Californians become comfortable in nature, is easily reachable—(physically or virtually), grows the next generation of

stewards, and integrates with other education and recreation programs.

Recommended Actions

1. Increase availability of public transportation routes and lines that include access to state parks.
2. Conduct research and community assessments to identify key geographic, cultural, recreational, and other factors that will ensure fair distribution of new state park resources.
3. Collaborate with outdoor and recreation groups to create an “ambassador” program to train non-visitors in park use and increase their familiarity with state parks.
4. Translate all basic park materials (maps, visitor guides, web-based information) into languages that reflect those spoken by California’s diverse public.
5. Target outreach to science, math, and history teachers to integrate state parks within curriculum and lesson plans.
6. Encourage use of state parks to bring concepts from the model curriculum in California’s Environmental Education Initiative to life.
7. Promote the use of state parks as a venue for facilitating a student’s continuum of learning during summer and non-school periods.
8. Promote state park connections to the California Children’s Outdoor Bill of Rights.
9. Expand the existing Parks Online Resources for Teachers and Students (PORTS) program.

Defend Park Lands and Resources

GUIDING STRATEGY: Protecting state park lands and the natural, cultural, and historic resources within the parks strikes at the core of why state parks exist. An excellent state park system is protected by legal tools, collaborates with other park systems, uses science-based practices, and engages citizens in safeguarding their parks.

Recommended Actions

1. Create a system for all state agencies to share specific information regarding planned or pending infrastructure projects that impact state parks.
2. Enact state legislation to achieve the highest level of protection for the entire state park system.
3. Develop volunteer programs to assist with monitoring natural, cultural, and historic preservation resources within state parks.
4. Encourage use of conservation easements and adjacent land buffer purchases to assist in protection of existing state parks.
5. Enter into cooperative management agreements with other agencies (federal, regional, local, and non-profit) to strengthen protections across park systems.
6. Develop an ongoing network for science and academic leaders and experts in natural, cultural, and historic preservation efforts relevant to California state parks to regularly share information, new research findings, and best practices.
7. Institute a collaborative planning effort to highlight connections and identify areas of cooperation between state parks and other park systems, open spaces, and protected lands.

Broaden Leadership for Parks

GUIDING STRATEGY: The task of protecting park resources and providing high-quality recreational experiences lives in a network of public, private, and non-profit efforts and expertise. An excellent state park system cultivates leadership from a diversity of sources, creates efficiencies in operations, and encourages a shared and collaborative approach to ensuring the secure future of state parks.

Recommended Actions

1. Establish a Partners Leadership Institute for non-profit and for-profit partners and staff of the Department of Parks and Recreation to learn and improve management, partnership, and entrepreneurial techniques.
2. Convene community, non-profit, and for-profit partners on a semi-annual basis to share best practices and identify opportunities to collaborate.
3. Create paths and career support that allow all state park employees opportunities for leadership.
4. Hire, train, and invest in professional park managers and rangers with background in natural and cultural resources, environmental education, and/or park management.
5. Reorient park operation priorities to emphasize visitor services, education, and resource management and protection as the primary operation activities.
6. Encourage performance-based management practices by the Department of Parks and Recreation.
7. Encourage operational decision making at the lowest appropriate level, while providing central standards, practices, and advice.

Strengthen and Diversify Funding

GUIDING STRATEGY: Reliable funding to ensure the long-term existence of the state park system is a necessary condition for excellence. An excellent state park system is funded by a three-pronged approach that balances stable public funding, philanthropic and non-profit support, and revenues generated from concessions and new business opportunities.

Recommended Actions

1. Secure long-term, sustainable public funding to guarantee the future of the state park system.
2. Conduct a statewide assessment and inventory of assets for mission-centered revenue opportunities (i.e., historic buildings as overnight accommodations).
3. Review current approaches to concessions to create new efficiencies and identify new concession opportunities and categories (i.e., recreation concessions, facility concessions, interpretive concessions).
4. Increase philanthropic efforts to support state parks in ways that enhance citizen engagement in state parks.
5. Encourage appropriate, mission-centered options for locally earned revenue.
6. Ensure that future bonds include appropriate funding levels for growing the state park system, consistent with research and community assessments.



CONCLUSIONS

*(Opposite) Redwood National
and State Parks*

California’s state parks hold the potential to play a prominent role in improving the health and well-being of our citizens, boosting the state’s economic recovery, upholding environmental protections, and serving as a reflection of the diverse cultures, character, and nature of the state. To tap this potential, we need to start working on this new vision for our state parks now.

The challenges to excellence in our state parks are clear, but so are the ways in which progress can be made in addressing and overcoming those challenges. Together, the strategies and recommended actions in this report make clear the way forward for a comprehensive, statewide effort for excellence. We will know we have been successful when we’ve achieved the goals that define the essential Vision Elements of excellence. That work will be challenging, and will require many partners to come together.

On behalf of park supporters and visitors—current and future—we look forward to the creativity, passion, and results that will come from our collective work ahead.



“State parks should provide a place to enjoy the natural beauty of California in a healthy way which preserves the natural resources, environment and ecosystem of California.”

—Web survey respondent

APPENDIX: DATA GATHERING METHODOLOGY

Data were gathered in four primary methods: a statewide online survey, telephone-based opinion poll, small-group listening sessions, and semi-structured personal interviews. After data had been gathered and preliminary analysis and recommendations created, a stakeholder forum was convened to give early feedback on project findings and recommendations.

Statewide Web Survey

An online public opinion survey was launched via the web tool Zoomerang and was in the field for approximately 5 weeks, beginning on February 26, 2010 and closed on March 31, 2010. The online survey consisted of 29 overall questions (21 opinion questions, when demographic questions are excluded), including 4 open-ended responses. Key areas explored in the survey included:

- » The primary purpose of California’s state park system;
- » The most important features of an excellent state park system;
- » Programs, services, resources, activities, and amenities that should be offered; and
- » Existing barriers to state park visitation and use.

Survey dissemination included membership lists and social networking sites of CSPF and the League, as well as outreach to 600 organizations. In addition to reaching out to environmental, conservation and service organizations, the survey was distributed to 422 chambers of commerce and convention and visitors bureaus for the participation and dissemination within their own chapters and networks. A Spanish language version of the web survey was developed, but did not yield sufficient responses to analyze as a separate survey population.

A total of 7,958 responses were provided by the close of the survey, with 81 percent of the survey questionnaires fully completed. Residents of 57 of California’s 58 counties responded to the web survey (no responses came from Modoc County). Low park users comprised 20 percent of the sample; medium park users were 24 percent of the sample; and high park users made up 55 percent of the sample.

Statewide Telephone Poll

In early April 2010, a telephone survey of 807 California residents was conducted. The goal of the telephone poll was to reach equal numbers of state parks visitors and non-visitors, excluding those who were identified as avid park users or who expressed no intention of visiting state parks. The survey intentionally sought to gain equal participation from current visitors and non-visitors; a total of 403 visitors and 404 non-visitors were interviewed. State park visitors were defined as those who have visited a state park one to eight times in the past year, but no more than eight times. The most frequent visitors, those who visited nine times or more in the past year, were excluded from this poll. Non-visitors were defined as those who have not visited a state park in the past year, excluding those who were “not at all interested” in visiting a state park in the next 12 months.

Similar to the online survey, poll respondents were asked about their perceptions of the purposes of state parks, key features and amenities in state parks, and barriers to park visitation.

Demographics of telephone survey respondents (April 2010)

Demographic Group	Visitors (%)	Non-Visitors (%)
GENDER		
Men	49	41
Women	51	59
AGE		
18-29	13	12
30-39	22	12
40-49	22	21
50-64	26	27
65+	13	25
EDUCATION		
High school or less	21	32
Some college	29	29
College graduate	37	27
Post graduate	12	12
ETHNICITY		
White/Caucasian	71	65
Asian/Pacific Islander	6	4
Latino/Hispanic	15	20
African-American/Black	3	7
All people of color	27	33
ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME		
<\$30,000	12	19
\$30,001-\$60,000	19	23
\$60,001-\$75,000	17	14
\$75,001-\$100,000	12	12
>\$100,000	16	10

Listening Sessions

Small listening sessions with state legislative staff, state park rangers and other park staff, non-profit park cooperating associations, and land trusts were conducted to solicit perspectives from key state park constituents. The focus of the sessions was to hear directly from park stakeholders and experts about the challenges and opportunities they faced in working to help maintain and improve current conditions in California’s state parks. A moderator’s guide for the listening sessions was modeled on the statewide web survey questionnaire. Eight sessions were conducted from March to May 2010 with organizations including:

*(Opposite) Mount Tamalpais
State Park*

- » California Council of Land Trusts
- » California League of Park Associations
- » California State Park Rangers Association
- » Staff of the Asian Pacific Islander Legislative Caucus, Latino Legislative Caucus, California Black Legislative Caucus, and Legislative Environmental Caucus

Personal Interviews

Confidential, semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals representing a broad spectrum of experience both inside and outside the California state park system. Current and retired park professionals, National Park Service managers, non-profit leaders, journalists, concession operators, and conservationists were among the 50 interview subjects. The personal interviews centered on identifying priority management, operations, and partnership challenges that are barriers to achieving excellence in state parks as well as key situations or scenarios where changes can be implemented to move toward excellence. Interviews followed a 24-question format that asked what constitutes an excellent park and park experience, what best practices promote excellence in parks, and current views of California's state parks. Interviewees also engaged in an open-ended discussion about parks and ideas about what could be done for California's state parks to achieve excellence.

Stakeholder Roundtable Forum

A group of diverse stakeholders was invited to a Stakeholder Roundtable Forum in late July 2010 to provide input on preliminary findings, recommendations, and strategies. Participants included key state park constituent groups and partner organizations, and representatives from broader policy issue areas with overlap to state parks, including youth education/development, public health, academic research institutions, and others.



“State parks offer wonderful access to nature, redwoods, seeing wildlife, appreciating nature, learning about natural history, scenic beauty, and recreation activities. It’s important to keep these places open and available to future generations.”

—Web survey respondent

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California State Parks Foundation (CSPF), with 120,000 members, is the only state-wide independent nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting, enhancing, and advocating for California's magnificent state parks. Since 1969, CSPF has raised more than \$173 million to benefit state parks. CSPF is committed to improving the quality of life for all Californians by expanding access to the natural beauty, rich culture and history, and recreational and educational opportunities offered by California's 278 state parks—the largest state park system in the United States.

For more than 90 years, **Save the Redwoods League** has been dedicated to protecting the ancient redwood forests so all generations can experience the inspiration and majesty of redwoods. In 1850, there were nearly 2 million acres of ancient coast redwood forests in California. Today, less than 5 percent remains and faces threats from unsustainable logging practices, poorly planned development and global climate change. Since its founding in 1918, the League has protected more than 189,000 acres of land.

For more information about how you can help achieve the vision for excellence for California's state parks, please contact us.



California State Parks Foundation
www.calparks.org

50 Francisco Street, Suite 110
San Francisco, CA 94133
Phone: 415-262-4400

1510 J Street, Suite 120
Sacramento, CA 95814
Phone: 916-442-2119

714 W. Olympic Boulevard, Suite 717
Los Angeles, CA 90015
Phone: 213-748-7458



Save the Redwoods League
www.savetheredwoods.org

114 Sansome Street, Suite 1200
San Francisco, CA 94104
Phone: 415-362-2352

