

# Strapped States Farm Out Upkeep of Parks

With budgets tight, conservation groups are stepping in to spruce up California's facilities



A member of the California Conservation Corps last month cut out a stump on a trail being built in Mendocino County by several groups. *PHOTO: TALIA HERMAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By **JIM CARLTON**  
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PHILO, Calif.—California's cash-strapped parks system has a \$1.2 billion maintenance backlog. But many of its 279 parks are getting spruced up anyway thanks to a secret weapon: conservation groups that have stepped in to rebuild trails, renovate restrooms and even buy more land.

Park Champions, a program run by the California State Parks Foundation, a nonprofit umbrella group, has had 3,202 volunteers work 23,790 hours cleaning up tarnished facilities around the state during the past four years. In Mendocino County north of San Francisco, two nonprofits

recently picked up half the \$160,000 tab to rebuild a dilapidated day-use area at Hendy Woods State Park that features a picturesque strand of towering, old-growth redwoods.

“Without the support of our nonprofit partners and all of our volunteers we would be in a lot worse spot,” said Dana Jones, a division chief for the California Department of Parks and Recreation, which has outsourced much of its maintenance and improvement to nonprofit groups.

Similar public-private partnerships have formed in Florida, Pennsylvania and elsewhere. In Florida, the number of volunteer hours contributed to state parks by nonprofit workers in 2014 was up 33% from before the recession in 2008. Over the same period, full-time park staffing remained at about 1,060, according to the Friends of Florida State Parks nonprofit group.

In Pennsylvania, volunteers in the state’s park and forest system nearly quadrupled to 2,260 in 2014 from six years earlier, according to the Pennsylvania Parks & Forests Foundation. Marci Mowery, the group’s president, said nonprofits have stepped in because funding for parks and forests was slashed during the recession and never fully restored.



Redwoods along an area slated for the trail to be built on the Mendocino County property. *PHOTO:TALIA HERMAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

“We are all committed to making sure our parks are there for the next generation,” she said, adding that the public lands receive nearly 40 million visitors a year. “That’s a lot of loving, which creates a lot of maintenance and repair,” she said.

Municipal parks are getting a hand, too. In New York, the Central Park Conservancy provides 75% of the park’s \$65 million annual operating budget, according to the group’s website.

The unpaid efforts have proved invaluable, park officials said.

In Pennsylvania, volunteers lead many school-group tours at the William Penn State Forest, said Joe Frassetta, a district manager at the Pennsylvania Bureau of Forestry. “In some cases, they are more informed than we are,” he said.

But for some, the growing role of nonprofits in parks raises concerns. Using donations to acquire more land to turn over to a state for parkland, as some groups have done, makes no sense when many states can’t maintain current facilities, said Steve Hammond, executive director of Citizens’

Alliance for Property Rights, a nonprofit advocacy group for private property based in Enumclaw, Wash.



The coastline is seen from the trail being built in Mendocino County. *PHOTO: TALIA HERMAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

“State budgets are strained, but that doesn’t stop [nonprofits] from buying more land,” Mr. Hammond said.

Others say the situation underscores the need for states to secure more reliable park funding.

General-fund revenue set aside for state parks has been cut nationally, forcing agencies to reduce costs by limiting hours and in some cases closing facilities, according to a 2013 report by Resources for the Future, a nonpartisan think tank in Washington.

Will Abberger, conservation finance director for the Trust for Public Land, an environmental group in San Francisco, said nonprofits are only a stopgap for financing park operations. “It’s not a long-term strategy for managing the parks,” he said.

From 2008 to 2010, as many as 80% of California's state parks, the largest such system in the U.S., were threatened with closure, prompting the California State Parks Foundation to create a grant program to help keep them open. California's fiscal picture has since brightened, but its parks aren't back to their previous staffing level.

A group called Save the Redwoods League, meanwhile, stockpiled about 1,600 undeveloped acres of land it eventually plans to turn over to California's state park system, while expanding into new areas such as park maintenance, said Sam Hodder, president and chief executive of the San Francisco nonprofit.



Marlene Padilla walks down the stairs she helped build as part of the new trail. *PHOTO: TALIA HERMAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

“What we are trying to do is stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the state,” he said.

In Mendocino County, the Hendy Woods rehab project was undertaken after the park was threatened with closure in 2012. With 92 campsites near wineries in the county's Anderson Valley, the closure would have dealt a severe economic blow to the area, said Kathy Bailey, who heads the Hendy Woods Community group.

Her organization joined forces with Save the Redwoods to help the state pay for other improvements at the 816-acre park, including replacing a plywood outhouse with a modern restroom, adding concrete pathways and building shade-covered picnic tables.

The changes have been welcomed by visitors, including 68-year-old Judy Kerry of Kentfield, Calif., who noticed a new water fountain as she hiked with her family this summer. “To have running water here, that’s priceless,” she said.

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