

California State Parks

by
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Of course, we already know that California is the most beautiful state in the nation, so it's not surprising that we've tried to preserve a lot of that beauty in our State Park System...some 264 of what park officials call "units," covering a total of 1.3 million acres of the state's treasures: old-growth redwoods and giant sequoias, deserts and sand dunes, beaches and rugged coasts, lakes, hot springs, Native American sites, mountain wilderness, Gold Rush towns, Hearst Castle, and so much more. The variety is staggering.

The California State Park System includes not only what we usually think of as parks, with camping facilities, evening ranger presentations, etc., but state historical monuments, beaches, recreational areas, vehicular recreation areas, wilderness, and wayside campgrounds and reserves. Within the 264 units, visitors have available to them: 280 miles of Pacific coastline, 811 miles of lake, reservoir, and river frontage, 3,000 miles of trails, 17,500 campsites, and 11,000 picnic sites. And the visitors come...do they ever! 70 million people a year!

"Where else in our republic can a vacationing family, traveling for a week within the confines of one state (i.e., California's 158,693 square miles), spend their first day in towering old growth forest (Humbled Redwoods), their second day in tide marshes and secluded coves (Tamales Bay), their third day overlooking the most spiritual and dramatic coast on the planet (Big Sur). And if they can tear themselves away from any of these roosts, move on in quick succession (and regional progression) to a choice of a dozen or more beaches between Santa Barbara and San Diego, to the desert badlands of Anna-Borage, Cootie Wells, and the Salmon Sea, to the windy volcanic solitude of the Mono Lake Tufa Reserve—returning at last to their point of origin with a stop at one of the many parks in the Sierra Nevada and its foothills in the Central Valley?"

But the System has had its problems. California's recent economic ups



and downs (mostly downs) have resulted in a number of years of serious budget restrictions in the already plagued area of parks and recreation. There haven't been many major additions to the system for a very long time, and Californians haven't passed a bond issue for such purchases since 1988. Additionally, the Land and Water Conservation Fund, established in 1964 to collect royalties from offshore oil and gas drilling, was supposed to provide states with money to acquire state and urban parklands. Instead, much of this money has been diverted to reducing the national deficit and for other bailouts. In 1996, Congress shut off all state access to these funds.

The results have been the problems that have surfaced in recent years: maintenance has been postponed and facilities have deteriorated; understaffing is endemic throughout the system; and more and more of park rangers' time is being taken up with law enforcement rather than more productive activities. There was a General Fund bailout of \$16.4 million in fiscal 1996-1997 for the park system, but this was a temporary stop-gap measure at best. Many believe the solution is to return the state parks to the private sector. Other recommendations include fee increases, the transfer of management of some parks to local governments or non-profit organizations, a campaign to recruit business sponsorship, and leasing land in parks for restaurants, hotels, etc.

“Whatever answers the Department of Parks and Recreation comes up with for fiscal restructuring, their “units” will never suffer for lack of visitation. At time Ano Nuevo (a mere 4,000 acres in all, with no camping, picnicking, or freedom of movement) upwards of 60,000 people a year walk the trails out to the viewpoints...In the long run, it is excessive demand and over-use that are the ultimate threats to any natural environment, and all over the West we have long been loving our Wild lands to death.”

All of this is very important, of course, but by now you're probably wondering what all of this has to do with your State Parks collection. Well, the direction that the California State Park System takes (and this would be true of any state's park system) could have a very important effect on your future covers (the anti-smoking campaign aside). If, for instance, it was decided to lease park lands for resorts, hotels, and the like, it's reasonable to assume that there would be an increase in covers...simply because of the increase in tourist-oriented businesses. On the other hand, and at the other extreme, there has always been the more radical idea that state and national parks should be strictly preserved and not developed *at all*...no roads, no hotels, no picnic benches...nothing. If you can't backpack in, you don't belong there [*that may sound incredibly unfair to the poor, the elderly, etc., but there is logic to that argument in that if the purpose of such systems is to preserve nature for the future, then injecting millions of people a year into those areas (with cars, garbage, pets, noise, etc.) is self-defeating*]. If this latter direction were to be taken, that would be the end of covers from those parks.

State Park covers, it seems to me, have that special attraction that many other covers do not. They're famous places; they have “name recognition;” and, if you've actually been to those specific places, there are specific memories attached to them. So keep your eye on what's happening in your California State Park System. For Californians, there is the opportunity to voice your opinions, either directly to appropriate officials or indirectly through voting. For those of you living outside of California [*and you have our sincere condolences*], there is the opportunity to see a model of what may be happening to your own state parks.

[quotes from *Motorland*, March/April '97]