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Parks and Recreation in the United States

State Park Systems

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Introduction

There are over 6,600 state park sites in the United States covering 14 million acres of land. These parks provide a wide range of recreation opportunities in accessible, relatively close-to-home settings. In fact, state parks serve two and a half times as many visitors as the National Park System with only 16 percent of the acreage. The systems vary widely across states, however, and have changed over time. In this Resources for the Future (RFF) backgrounder, we provide some history about state parks, discuss the variation in acreage, facilities, and funding for parks across states, and show trends in state park visitation over time in the United States. We also report on a recent survey of state park directors that we conducted and identify current challenges and the outlook for the future.

History

The notion of state parks and protected lands managed by state government agencies arose in the late 19th century. New York set up the Adirondack and Catskill Preserves, as well as Niagara State Park Reservation, in 1885; Pennsylvania created state forests and wildlife protection areas in 1889; and Massachusetts's park system was established in 1892 when three properties in metropolitan Boston were purchased for protection (Douglass 1999; Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation 2008). By 1921, when the National Park Service hosted the first National Conference of State Parks, 29 states still did not have a state park system. The conference spurred interest and by 1925, all 48 states had begun to formulate park development plans (Paige 1985). However, the onset of the Great Depression halted most of their work.

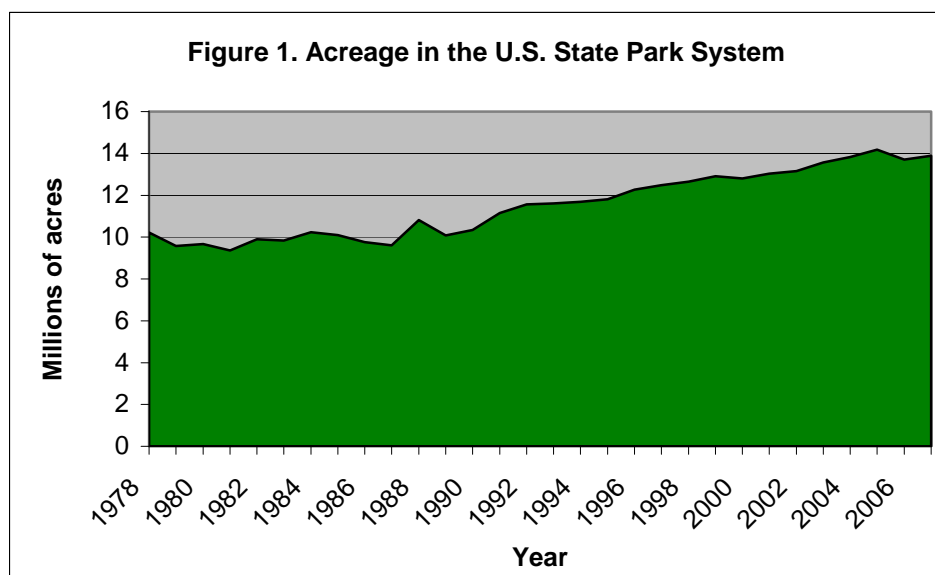
* Senior Fellow, Resources for the Future. I appreciate the assistance of Phil McKnelly, Executive Director of the National Association of State Park Directors, in administering the RFF survey of park directors and the helpful comments of Carol Ash and Erik Kulleseid, New York Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation Commission; Yvonne Ferrell, National Association of State Outdoor Recreation Liaison Officers; and Gordon Binder of the World Wildlife Fund. This backgrounder is one in a series of backgrounders for the Outdoor Resources Review Group (see www.rff.org/org).

The big boost to state park systems came with the establishment of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in 1933. This work relief program put young men between the ages of 17 and 23 to work planting trees, cutting trails and scenic vistas, and constructing picnic areas, campgrounds, cabins, bathhouses, and other facilities. By 1935, thanks to the CCC efforts, 41 states had developed active state park programs (Paige 1985). In many cases, the free labor spurred states to action. For example, in 1933, the Florida state legislature, in order to make use of the CCC, quickly passed a law directing the state's Board of Forestry to find areas suitable for state parks and forests. The park system was officially established in 1935, and within a year seven sites had been established (Florida Online Park Guide, 2008). The CCC program helped to create a total of 711 state parks across the country (Paige 1985).

According to Douglass (1999), state parks originally focused on preservation rather than recreation. But beginning in the 1960s, increased demand for recreation fueled development of state park facilities. In addition, land acquisition rose rapidly in the 1970s. This period coincided with the large increase in federal funding for land acquisition from the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). The LWCF, initiated with passage of the Land and Water Conservation Act in 1965, upon recommendations of the influential Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission distributed billions of dollars in grants to states during the 1970s (Walls 2009a). Between fiscal years 1971 and 1981, state LWCF grants averaged \$221 million annually (in inflation-adjusted 2006 dollars). After that time, state grants dwindled to a fraction of that amount and in several years in the late 1990s fell to zero.

State Parks Today

State park agencies manage a range of lands in most states, including recreation areas, natural areas, historic areas, and in some cases, state forests and designated fish and wildlife areas. In total, state parks and recreation areas account for more than 73 percent of the total acreage managed by the system, and state parks alone make up 65 percent. Figure 1 shows the growth in total acreage managed by state park systems over the period 1978–2007. Total acreage rose from 10.2 million in 1978 to just under 14 million acres in 2007, an increase of 37 percent.



Source: National Association of State Park Directors, *Annual Information Exchange*. Report years: 1979–2008.

The systems vary widely across states. Table 1 shows the distribution of acreage and number of sites or areas in 2007. New York has 1,416 state park sites, by far the most of any state, while Alabama has the fewest at 22. Perhaps not surprisingly, Alaska has the most park acreage with 3.4 million acres. California and New York have the second and third most acreage at 1.6 million and 1.4 million acres, respectively.¹ These three states account for 45 percent of all U.S. state park acreage.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of state park acreage as a percentage of state land area. On average, across all states, park acreage is only about 1 percent of total land area. Half of the states have less than 0.45 percent of land area in parks. As the figure makes clear, the average is brought up by the five states with greater than 4 percent: New Hampshire, New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New Jersey. One point to emphasize about these Northeastern states is that they have very little federal land acreage, including national parks. State parks may be providing the recreational resources that are provided by federal lands in other states, particularly those states in the West.

¹ The New York figures do not include the approximately three million acres in the Adirondack and Catskills Forest Preserves that are state owned. These areas provide significant recreational resources but are not included in state park statistics.

Table 1. Distribution of State Park Acreage and Number of Sites by State

<i>Acreage</i> ¹	<i>Number of States</i>	<i>Number of Sites</i>	<i>Number of States</i>
>3 million	1	1,416	1
1–2 million	2	300–400	3
500,000–700,000	3	200–300	4
200,000–500,000	9	100–200	11
100,000–200,000	14	50–100	17
50,000–100,000	12	25–50	12
<50,000	9	<25	2

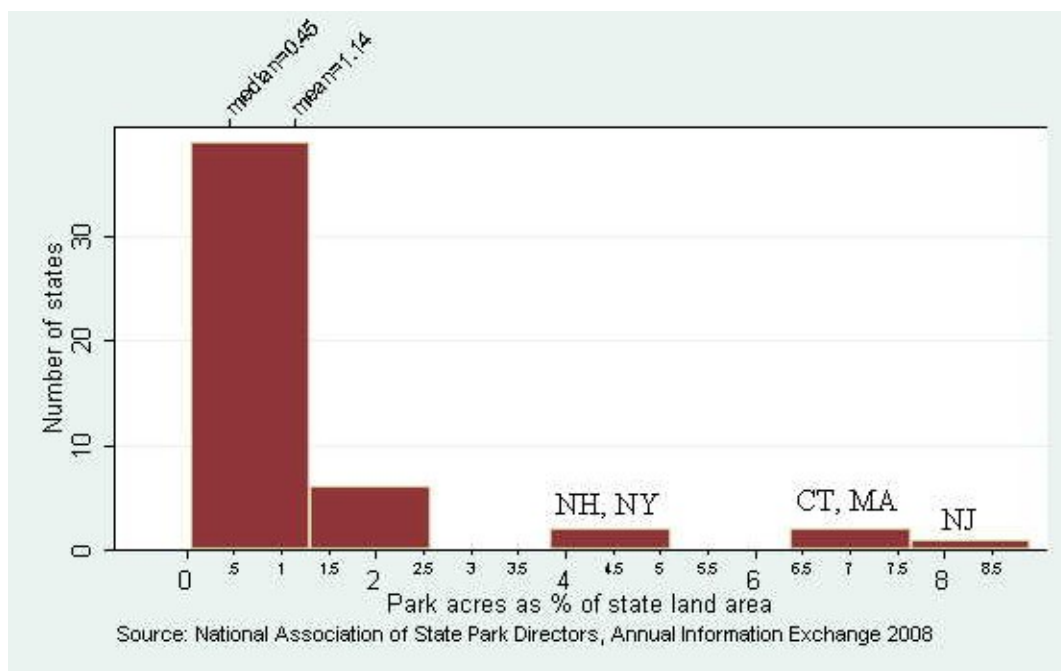
¹ No states have between 2 and 3 million acres or between 700,000 and 1 million acres, thus we leave these two categories out of the table.
Source: National Association of State Park Directors, *Annual Information Exchange 2008*.

Facilities vary widely as well. Some states have parks with cabins or cottages, lodges, pools, and in some cases, golf courses; other states have more rustic provisions with only trails and campgrounds. Kentucky, for example, has a total of 18 lodges in 53 state parks, but 23 states have no lodges at all. The average state has 3,214 improved campsites in its state parks but Alaska has none—only primitive campsites—and Wyoming has only 15, while New York has more than 15,000 campsites and Michigan nearly 13,000 (National Association of State Park Directors 2008).

Park Funding

Figure 3 shows total annual state park operating expenditures from 1978 through 2007 for all states as well as operating expenditures per state park visit. Even after adjusting for inflation, expenditures have risen over the past three decades, both on a total and per-visit basis. States spent \$2.3 billion in total on parks in 2007 compared to \$1.3 billion in 1978 (in 2007 dollars), an increase of 81 percent. Although acreage has risen, as Figure 1 shows, the percentage increase in operating costs is greater than the percentage increase in acreage.

Figure 2. State Park and Recreational Lands as Percent of State Land Area

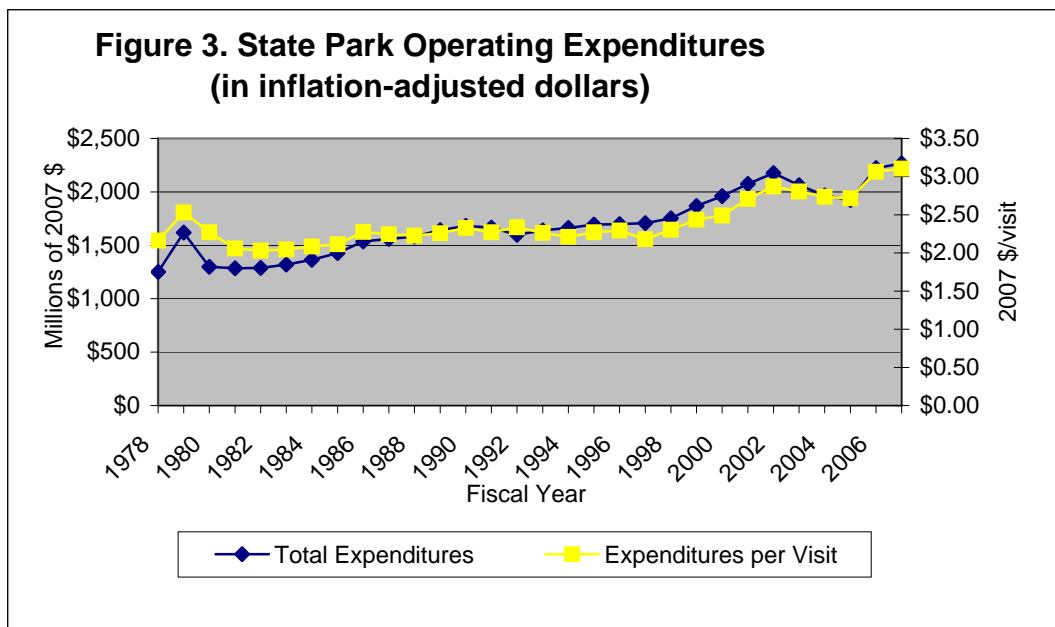


Expenditures per visit vary across states. Although the median expenditure across all states was \$3.20/visit in 2007 and 38 out of 50 states had expenditures less than \$5/visit, Utah had costs as high as \$32 per visit. Three other states also had relatively high costs per visit: Arizona and Kentucky at approximately \$13 and Louisiana at \$20. Utah’s costs are high primarily because visitation is low compared with other states. While the average number of annual visits across all state parks was 14.7 million in 2007, the average number in Utah was only 905,000. The lowest costs per visit were in Oregon at \$0.98.

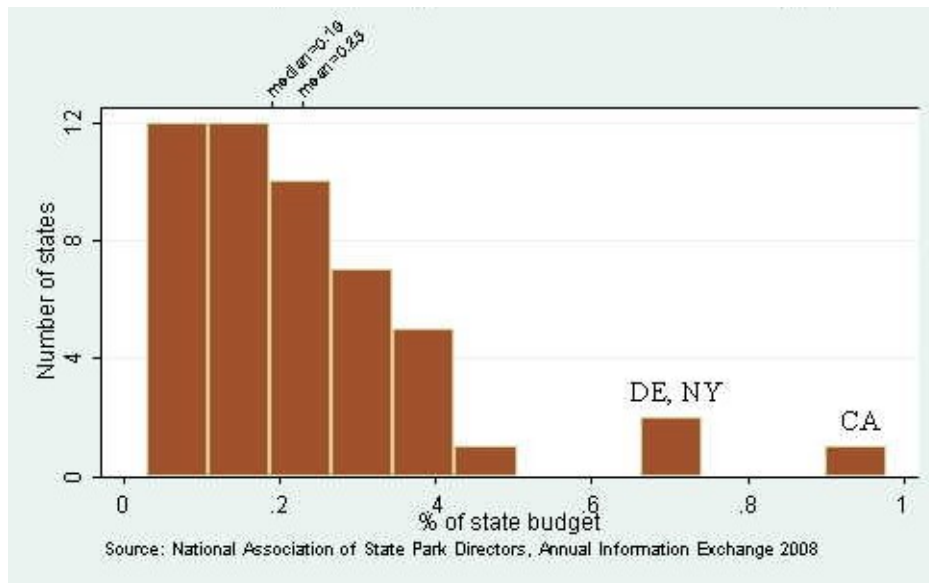
Even states with relatively high operating costs spend only a small fraction of their total state budget on the state park system. On average, in 2007, states spent one-quarter of one percent of their total operating budget on parks. Figure 4 shows the distribution across states. Three states are outliers: California, spending slightly less than one percent of the state budget on parks, and Delaware and New York at 0.7 percent.

States get funds for parks from a variety of sources. User fees (entrance fees, campground fees, charges for lodging, and park passes) are important in almost every state. According to the National Association of State Park Directors (2008), only seven states received no money from park entrance fees in 2007. The remaining states received over one-quarter of their operating

funds from entrance fees and a significant additional percentage from campground and lodging fees. Registration fees for boats, off-highway vehicles, and snowmobiles, as well as a portion of hunting license fees, provide park funds in some states; other states have special taxes devoted to parks and recreation, such as tobacco taxes or taxes on sporting goods, and many get funds from concessionaire licensing and souvenir sales. In a 2008 RFF survey of state park directors, the average percentage of states' operating budgets covered by user fees was 42 percent.²



² The survey was conducted in the Fall of 2008 by email with the assistance of the National Association of State Park Directors. All results from the survey reported here are based on responses from 46 states. The 4 missing states are Hawaii, Michigan, New Mexico, and Washington. The full survey is available from the author upon request.

Figure 4. State Park Operating Budget as Percent of Total State Budget, 2007

In almost every state, parks receive money from the state government's general fund. Responses to the RFF survey indicate that states receive an average of 41 percent of their operating budget from the general fund. However, 7 out of the 46 states responding to the survey reported that they received no such money in 2007.³ According to Landrum (1999), states park agencies have been increasingly expected to rely on revenue generation from park operations to cover their costs. He finds that the degree of operating cost recovery rose from slightly less than 36 percent in 1975 to 43 percent in 1995.⁴

A much smaller percentage of park agencies' operating budgets is provided by other sources, including grants from the federal government and from private groups, including nonprofit organizations. According to Landrum (1999), state park agencies have looked

³ The National Association of State Park Directors survey also asks this question but gets slightly conflicting responses in different parts of its questionnaire. Seven states reported a zero dollar contribution to operating expenses from the general fund, but in a separate yes/no question about sources of funds, nine states reported that they receive no general funds.

⁴ The RFF survey did not ask for this specific piece of information, nor does the National Association of State Park Directors survey; thus it is difficult for us to say for sure how this figure has changed in the past 10–12 years. However, if the average percentage covered by the general fund is 40 percent, as we report above, this means that an average of 60 percent is recovered by fees, grants, and other revenue sources dedicated to the park agency.

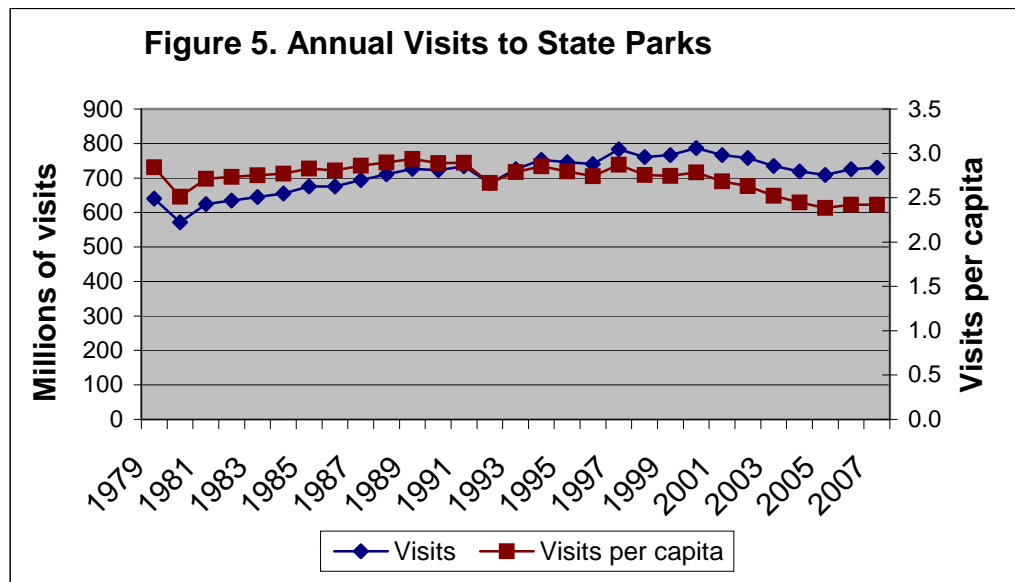
increasingly to the nonprofit sector (e.g., “friends” groups, park foundations, and support organizations) to provide financial and other help with various problems. The National Association of State Park Directors (2008) reports on the number of support groups and endowment funds that exist in each state in 2007, whether for the state park system as a whole or for individual parks. Results show that almost every state has a support group at least for individual state parks and 32 have such groups for the system as a whole. However, endowment funds are less common—only 13 states have system-wide funds. Despite these numbers, responses to the RFF survey indicate that funding from private groups is insignificant. Only California appears to receive substantial funding (26 percent of its 2008 operating budget) from private sector grants.

Visitation and Use

On a per-acre basis, state parks serve far more people than the National Park System. In 2007, there were 730 million day and overnight visits to state parks. The National Park System, which includes not only national parks but also national monuments, national recreation areas, national seashores, and several other categories of federally owned land, served 276 million visitors in 2007. Approximately 84 million acres are managed by the National Park Service. Thus, state parks served 2.7 times as many people on only 16 percent of the land area.⁵

Visits to state parks have remained relatively steady over the past three decades. Figure 5 shows total annual visits and visits per capita, that is, total visits divided by the U.S. resident population, for each year from 1978 through 2007. The total number of visits has risen slightly, but on a per capita basis, state parks have seen a small drop. That decline appears most pronounced over the current decade: between 1997 and 2007, visits per capita dropped by 16 percent. The per capita visitation figure for 2007 indicates that the average person in the United States makes three visits per year to a state park.

⁵ Sixty-seven percent of the acreage in the National Park System lies in Alaska (Walls 2009b). Comparing visits and acreage in the lower 48 states, state parks still serve far more visitors per acre than the National Park System: 728 million visits on 10.5 million acres compared with 273 million visits on 27.8 million acres. National Park System statistics are available at <http://www.nature.nps.gov/stats/index.cfm>.



The RFF survey asked state park directors their opinions about the popularity trends of various nature-based recreation activities in their parks. Ten categories of activity were given, and a 5-point scale was provided: “declining significantly,” “declining moderately,” “about constant,” “increasing moderately,” and “increasing significantly.”⁶ Camping and hiking were perceived by many state park directors to be on the increase or at least holding steady; almost no director responded that those activities were declining. By contrast, eight directors thought that fishing was declining in their parks, and only seven thought that fishing was increasing (out of 43 surveys returned). Finally, state park directors report a marked contrast in outdoor recreation trends for youth compared to the population as a whole. Forty-six percent of respondents reported that outdoor recreation among youth was declining significantly or moderately, but only 7 percent of respondents reported that outdoor recreation overall was declining. In fact, 57 percent reported outdoor recreation overall to be increasing. Recent studies have documented declines in youth participation in the outdoors, and state park directors appear to be observing that trend.⁷ Surveys of state park users would be helpful for shedding light on the demographic profile of visitors to state parks, particularly the age profile.

⁶ The ten categories were camping, hiking, hunting, fishing, other water-based activities, wildlife watching overall, bird watching, sightseeing by car, outdoor recreation overall, and outdoor recreation among youth.

⁷ See, for example, Louv (2005) and Pergams and Zaradic (2006).

Current Challenges in State Park Systems

The RFF survey asked state park directors about a variety of current challenges that they face. On a scale of 1 to 5, the survey asked directors to state whether each of a set of ten specific challenges was “not a challenge,” “a minor challenge,” “a significant challenge,” “a major challenge,” or a “huge issue.” The challenges listed included both funding problems and issues associated with park use.⁸ The survey also asked directors to identify the single biggest challenge among the options on the list.

Having adequate funding for operations and maintenance was a clear concern expressed in the survey responses. Fully 74 percent of respondents listed this as a “major challenge” or “huge issue” and 59 percent listed it as their single biggest challenge. Funding for capital expenditures and construction of new facilities was also important: 60 percent listed this issue as a “major challenge” or “huge issue.” However, this category of funding was the single biggest challenge for only 18 percent of respondents. In written responses on the questionnaire, several directors mentioned the problem of “deferred maintenance” in their parks and costs associated with replacement of aging infrastructure.

Funding for land acquisition was only listed as the single biggest challenge for 7 percent of respondents, but it still appears to be a significant concern to state park agencies. Forty percent of states listed this problem as a “major challenge” or “huge issue.” The survey asked if states had a separate source of funding for land acquisition, and 58 percent of respondents stated that they did. In some states, such funding comes from special tax revenues such as a real estate transfer tax (e.g., Illinois, North Carolina, and Delaware)⁹ or from lottery revenues (Colorado); some states have a dedicated source of funds subject to annual appropriations, such as the Heritage Land Conservation Fund in Kentucky and Program Open Space in Maryland. In New York, the Environmental Protection Fund, which is funded by a real estate transfer tax, provides money for land acquisition but also “stewardship” funds for capital projects. The survey did not

⁸ The challenges were insufficient funding for land acquisition, insufficient funding for operations and maintenance, insufficient funding for capital expenditures and construction of new facilities, congestion or crowding at some parks, complaints from citizens about park conditions, insufficient use of some parks, determining how best to provide access to different user groups (e.g., hikers, mountain bikers, anglers, and ATV users), conflicts between users of the same park, the changing popularity of nature-based recreation, and other (with respondents asked to specify).

⁹ North Carolina reported being in a “sizeable growth phase for parks” as a result of having a trust fund indexed as a percentage of the real estate transfer tax and also receiving direct appropriations from the legislature.

ask how much money the park agencies received from these special funding sources. One problem in some states in recent years has been the diversion of funds to other uses. In Maryland, for example, over \$480 million was diverted from Program Open Space to the general fund between FY2002 and FY2006 (Partners for Open Space 2007). Many states reported that they had land acquisition funding from voter-approved bond referenda. Such referenda have become increasingly important as a source of open space and conservation funding at the state and local level in the past 25 years. However, bond funding is only for a limited number of years, not a permanent dedicated funding source.

The economic downturn in 2008 may seriously affect state park systems in 2009 and beyond. A December 2008 *USA Today* story reported that Illinois closed 12 historic sites as of December 1, New York cut services at 75 parks and historic sites, Georgia plans to close 13 sites in 2009, and other states, including Florida and New Jersey, are contemplating closures (Bruno, 2008). Ohio has also proposed to temporarily close, or “mothball,” some parks, and Oregon is proposing sharp fee increases to cover budget shortfalls (Niquette 2008; Esteve 2008). Perhaps the largest impact may be felt in California, where the budget crisis has the Governor proposing closure of 43 state parks, partial closures of others, and delayed opening of three new parks (Anonymous 2008; Save Our State Parks 2008).

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