

# Hearing on Sustainability of the State Park Closures

*Little Hoover Commission  
(State Capitol, March 27, 2012)*

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## INTRODUCTION

Thank you for inviting me, on behalf of Save the Redwoods League, to testify at this hearing examining the sustainability of the California state park system. Before addressing the specific questions you have asked, I wanted to start with some history that I believe remains relevant today.

The League's relationship with the state parks dates to the establishment of the state park system as we know it. It was the League's leaders who in the 1920s recognized the need to move beyond the handful of "state parks" that had grown up somewhat haphazardly to a comprehensive system designed to meet the needs of the state now and into the future.

At the time, the League's goal was simple: protecting the redwoods of northern California from destruction and making them available as public parks. J.D.Rockefeller Jr. had committed \$1 million in the 1920s to purchase what would become the heart of Humboldt Redwoods State Park. His one requirement was that it be matched with public dollars to demonstrate broad-based public support. The League realized that to meet this challenge would require building a state-wide, indeed nation-wide base of support.

To accomplish this they set about establishing the three pillars of the state park system that are with us today:

- **State Park Commission** -- charged with overseeing the establishment and growth of the system. They commissioned and led the first comprehensive state-wide survey of lands for inclusion in the new park system.
- **State funding** -- that has served to provide the public funds to acquire the lands identified by the commission and build the infrastructure of the parks. They ran the successful 1927 state park bond act -- the first of its kind in California.
- **State parks department** -- charged with administering and managing the growing park system.

These institutions, "the pillars," have served the state admirably for more than 80 years, growing from a handful of sites to a world-class system today. But we wouldn't be having this conversation today if all remained well. Over time, we have seen the Park Commission take a greatly reduced role, the last park funding measure all but spent, an initiative to fund the parks defeated at the polls, and a defunded and demoralized Department of Parks and Recreation rendered incapable of even keeping the gates open throughout the system. Today we are faced with the closure of 70 parks (25% of the system), a backlog

of more than \$1 billion of deferred maintenance, and a wholesale reduction in services and programs in the parks that remain open. The pillars have collapsed one by one, and the system today is in grave jeopardy.

Many of the concepts in this testimony were developed as part of the State Park Excellence report -- a joint project of the league and California State Parks Foundation. Copies have been made available to the commission and it's also available online at through the League's web-site.

## SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

***What are the key functions of a state park system? Which functions must be handed by the Department? Are there other models that provide examples of how necessary functions could be better organized or managed?***

The essence of the *state* park system is that it protects places of state-wide importance: from a natural, cultural, historical and recreational perspective. These places are held in trust for current and future generations in order that they might appreciate the natural and cultural history that made California what it is today.

So what functions *must* be handled by the department? Being provocative, we could say none. Perhaps a more relevant question is what functions *must* be handled by the state. In our view, the core responsibility for maintaining the integrity of the system vests with the State of California, specifically:

- Ensuring that lands within the system are held in trust for future generations and are passed on unimpaired. This is not a static task as the state is changing rapidly and the protected lands are facing new threats for climate change, population growth, and more.
- Identifying necessary changes to the system, either through the addition of new park units, or indeed removal from the state park system of those units that no longer meet the needs of the state.
- Enforcing consistency of management through clear standards, careful oversight, and periodic reevaluation— regardless of who the actual management entity is.

We are fortunate that there are many good examples of how to handle this, both within the current state park system and beyond it. If the old model was the “Department *is* the park system”, the new model is “the park system is much more than the Department”. Of course, this has always been true to some extent but it's becoming the new normal -- and while closures are hastening this, it's a trend that has been growing for some time. To the public at large, it matters less who the management entity is than that the job gets done efficiently, effectively, and to a consistent set of high standards.

Taking just the redwood parks,

- The League has worked with the Department over many decades to establish and build 39 redwood parks. In the process bringing more than 150,000 acres into the system with private contributions in excess of \$135 million. This work continues today.
- Redwood National and State Parks have been managed under a memorandum of understanding since 2002. This M.O.U. allows sharing of resources and responsibilities across park boundaries while striving to deliver a seamless experience to the visitor.
- Dozens of interpretive associations run educational programs for thousands of kids visiting the redwood parks.
- At Willow Creek, an addition to Sonoma Coast State Beach, a local non-profit group called LandPaths operates a permit system to allow public access to a part of the park that would otherwise be closed.

It is also worth looking beyond the state park system to see how other park systems are run and operated. I'll use three examples from a regional, national, and international perspective.

- At the regional level, the **East Bay Regional Park District** is the largest regional park system in the nation. Established in the 1930s it has enjoyed consistent strong local support enabling them to develop a consistent and reliable base of funding. Similar to the National Park Service they utilize a specialized park police model. They also have several innovative trail patrol teams utilizing volunteers on horse, bike and foot to extend their reach.
- Given the scope and scale of California's state park system, the **National Park System** is in many respects it's only peer. Several aspects of how they operate are worth examining more closely. First, their fee demonstration project captures a significant proportion of fee revenue in the local park to provide incentives to generate revenue (it also makes the public feel good about supporting their park, rather than some faceless bureaucracy). Second, the law enforcement function is provided through a specially trained park police force. Finally, my observation is that they delegate more decision making authority down to park superintendents enabling them to be nimble, despite their size.
- Looking internationally, the **National Trust** in England, Wales and Northern Ireland has transformed itself in recent years. While it is a charitable body, as opposed to a public entity, in many ways it plays the same role as the national and state park systems here in the USA. Two things jump out from a recent visit I had. First, their "going local" program has sought to redefine how people relate to the great places they protect. In the old approach a red velvet rope to keep you out of the room, the new approach brings there stately homes to life by inviting you in to experience how people used to live. They are finding was to say "yes" rather than the litany of "no" we have become used to in many parks. Second, they have established an "enterprise division" as a for-profit company focused on business development within their properties. The result today is that there is a consistent high level of services for the public in the properties, from tea and cakes a 3pm to a perfect gift to take home. Yes it's commercial, but it's also mission focused.

***What is the role of the League in supporting the state's mission? What are some of the functions the League can perform that cannot be performed by the state parks department? What are the limits to the League's involvement?***

The League's mission is to protect and restore the redwood forests and help the public appreciate them better. In this we have many supporters, but California State Parks remains our key partner. We see this as a true partnership, where they do as much to support our mission as we do theirs.

Most of the places we have protected since our establishment in 1918 are in the state park system. For these to remain protected and accessible; the system as a whole needs to stay strong. That's why in addition to our work in and around particular redwood parks, we joined forces with a broad array of conservation partners to try to develop a stable funding stream for state parks (unfortunately, Proposition 21 ultimately failed). It's also why we joined with the California State Parks Foundation to articulate a vision for excellence in the state parks.

Traditionally the League has focused on land acquisition, partnering with the state to purchase over 150,000 acres that are now part of the system. Our programs within state parks now span restoration, education, and research activities. It's not that the state could not do these on their own, but we are able to extend the reach of the state by bringing private financial support to bear and by bringing in new collaborators.

Because we are independent of government, we are able to think and act with a longer time frame in mind -- purchasing critical inholdings when they became available even while the state has halted all land acquisition for parks. Or continuing to invest in science and research to enhance our ability to protect and restore these forests, even as the state cuts back on its natural resources team. Or providing funds to rent kids can get from classroom to the redwood park, while they are dealing with pressures to balance budgets by increasing class sizes.

As an organization we are taking this time of change to revisit our relationship with the state around the redwood parks. We've always worked with the state to build the parks, but our role in the past has generally been to buy the land and support some capital improvements. Looking ahead, we believe we also need to be looking carefully at what is going on within the park and determining how we can add a "margin of excellence" to the parks. We can only do this if the state renews its commitment to pay for maintaining the parks. We believe there needs to be a demonstrated public commitment to these public places. With this in place, we are confident we have members who will answer the call to help bring that margin of excellence to the redwood parks once more.

***Proposition 21 would have created a new model for parks funding. Are there elements of that model that are important to consider even without a funding stream?***

There are three elements of Proposition 21 that are worth considering further:

1. The recognition that whatever solutions we look to for the future there is a backlog of more than one billion dollars of needed repairs and improvements that remain entirely unaddressed. The deferred maintenance backlog is so great that it will continue to drag the system down even if we deal with the day to day operational needs.
2. A trust fund should be created for state parks, along the lines described in Proposition 21, with independent audit, transparent accounting, review by legislature, and oversight by a citizens committee. The public wants to know that money from this fund will stay in parks, and that it won't be used to supplant funds from the general fund. This concept should be expanded to all private contributions to parks -- donors want assurances that their dollar is additive, not allowing a dollar to be redirected elsewhere.
3. That a strategic plan be prepared that addresses access to the system. The population and demographics of the state continue to change, while the land base and facilities within parks has remained more or less static. Unless we reach out and engage the new face of California the system as a whole risks losing relevancy.

***What opportunities does AB42 open up? What implications does AB42 have for parks and other department assets and operations beyond the parks on the closure list?***

AB42 (Huffman) State Parks-- -- allows the department to enter into operating agreements with nonprofit groups capped at 20 state parks on the closure list. At this time it's an important tool to help in the moment of crisis and affords the possibility of trying some new approaches to park management. As outlined above, there are already examples of other public entities and nonprofit groups operating parks, this extends that capacity. In the last six months we have seen many local interpretive associations grappling with what it takes to operate a park. To date, few have been approved although some show signs of promise.

Using nonprofit organizations to manage parks has to be approached carefully, with an eye firmly on financial sustainability. Many of these groups are all volunteer organizations, more used to selling books than operating a complex park. They feel compelled to step up because they love *their* park and don't want it closed. Unless approached carefully, this approach risks damaging both park resources and the long term ability of these groups to do what they were created to do in the first place – to enhance the management of the parks not run them.

The very approach taken to identifying parks on the closure list has created inherent challenges with an AB42 type model. The department prioritized parks for closure based on low attendance and low

revenue. By definition, these are the hardest places to craft a well thought out business model that is sustainable in the long-term. And arguably these are the very places that the state should continue to invest, given their state-wide significance and the lack of alternative management solutions.

If we look instead at the whole system, including the parks that remain open, AB42 type approaches may afford opportunities to enhance visitor services and reduce costs to the benefits of the systems a whole. It's this more extensive review of places to reduce costs and increase revenue that is critically needed

***What changes need to be made, structural or otherwise, to the department to put the state park system on a more self-sustaining path?***

Rather than focus solely on the Department, the closures and the budget cuts, we need to step back and look at the various components of the system and look at changes to each. The common thread is to find ways to focus on the long-term needs of the system as a whole, rather than the short-term closure response.

I will return to the three elements of the system as set in developed in the 1920s.

- 1. State Park Commission.** *Decouple the park system from DPR by reforming the State Park Commission and elevating its role.*

To create a sustainable park system we suggest viewing the state park nomenclature as a designation afforded to very special places of natural, cultural, historical, or recreational significance. While many will be managed by DPR, many will be managed and perhaps even owned by other entities -- the Federal government, local government, nonprofits and the private sector. In this view, the state park commission has an elevated role, determining what is in and out of the system, and providing broad oversight as to how sites are managed. In this view, parks in the system would be managed by whatever entity is best positioned to provide long-term, efficient and responsible management for the site -- be it the National Park Service, local park district, or NGO. We believe DPR most often will prove to be the best manager, but in this approach DPR will be doing only what it needs to do, and not what others are capable and eager to do.

Among other things, this would require reexamining the role of the commission, the qualifications of those that serve its authorities, and staffing.

- 2. State park funding.** *Develop a new approach to funding development and operation of state parks that is predictable and inviolable.*

This is clearly the most challenging piece to address in the current economic climate. As described above, it's also critical that we get a handle on both the deferred maintenance backlog and ongoing operational needs. The key reform needed is establishment of some form

of state park trust fund that is inviolable, plus an agreement with the Legislature that when additional funds are generated, either through self-generated revenue, cost savings, or outright gifts, that the base level of general fund support is secure. Without these two elements, there is no incentive to get creative in fixing the economic woes of the state park system. A portion of any new revenue clearly needs to be dedicated to addressing the deferred maintenance backlog.

**3. State park department.** *Refocus the department on partnerships, innovation and entrepreneurial approaches to protecting resources and providing services to the public.*

Since the closures were announced in May 2011, the department has been forced to take a cadre of professionals trained to operate parks from a law enforcement perspective and asked them to become innovative, entrepreneurial and partnership focused in an effort to forestall the closing of 70 parks. This is the right thing to be doing, but as with all changes it will take time to fully implement and likely requires different skill sets to be developed over time. This challenge is compounded by the uncertainty over whether this is a temporary state of affairs, or whether this is the start of a permanent shift.

Because we believe these are the skills needed to foster a sustainable park system in the future, we recommend that DPR start emphasizing these skills and competencies in the recruiting and training of its park managers. DPR needs to look at its job classifications, hiring and advancement procedures and plan for change. For a generation, park managers have been drawn from the ranks of badged park rangers. And while no one questions the need for public safety in parks, or that there aren't innovative, entrepreneurial, partnership-focused peace officers within the department, it has meant that an entire class of potential park managers have been overlooked. In addition, the cost structure for peace officers and ongoing training requirement makes it increasingly cost inefficient for the department to continue on this path. We recommend that DPR evaluate separating the peace officer function from park manager and develop a program to prepare park managers for the jobs they are now being asked to do.

***How would the department balance the need to bring in more revenue with public trust considerations regarding conservation and protection of cultural and historical assets?***

For too long we have worried about "commercialization" of our parks where we should have been worried about adding services to engage the public in new ways while diversifying revenue streams. There is a presumption that commercial services are detrimental to the park experience and as a result we have made it difficult for private enterprise -- both for-profit and non-profit groups -- to play a vital role in the system. Rather than layering new processes and approval processes in place, we need to rethink and error on the side of innovation and partnership.

Fortunately we can look beyond the world of parks here, and be informed by some of our other great public institutions such as our galleries and operas. Galleries are extending their reach and diversifying

revenue streams by developing strong retail arms so you can take the art home with you. And what successful gallery doesn't also boast at least one great cafe? The opera has extended beyond the black-tie brigade, to engage a new audience through simulcasts in movie theaters. In both instances these institutions did not compromise mission and values -- far from it, they focused on these and found new ways to pay the bill to achieve them.

State Parks needs to do the same: it's not that they should just copy these institutions, but rather looks at ways of engaging people *that also* generate revenue. It's necessary now because of the requirement to diversify revenue streams, but in the long-term it's essential if we are to ensure the parks remain relevant.

## CONCLUSIONS

The park system stands at a turning point and we contend that continued piecemeal changes will make a bad situation even worse. What we need now is a thoughtful and comprehensive review of how the entire system, the institutions created to support it -- the Commission, the Department and all the park partners -- can work better together to build a new and better State Park System. Just as the original Olmsted survey took a year and engaged thousands across California, a similar effort is needed today. This hearing and the work of the commission is a good start. This comprehensive review should examine the system in its entirety:

- **Land base** -- how should we add new units to the system? Remove some? Where should new parks be located, what communities should they serve? What are the gaps in the natural and historical representation within the system? How do we adapt to meet the changing environment and demographics of California?
- **Governance** -- what reforms should be made to the Commission to enable it to balance the need to address the systems long-term needs while being responsive to the short-term issues?
- **Funding** -- how do we meld public and private funding to create a structure that enables stable and predictable budgeting of revenue and expenditures?
- **Administration and management** -- given all of the above, how can we best utilize the strengths of DPR and its many partners to administer and manage the system in its entirety?

These four elements are so closely interrelated that in spite of the daunting nature of this challenge, they all need to be examined together. .

In many ways, the problems of the state park system reflect the bigger problems of the state as a whole. While we hope that the state eventually finds solutions to its multi-billion dollar problems we need not wait around and watch the park system that has been built up over many generations decay. While it's a small part of the state budget, it's a large part of what gives people pride in California -- its beaches

and redwoods are known around the world. Perhaps if we can fix this one piece of government, it will give people hope we can fix the rest.

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#### ABOUT SAVE THE REDWOODS LEAGUE

Since 1918, Save the Redwoods League has protected and restored redwood forests and connected people with their peace and beauty so these wonders of the natural world flourish. Unfortunately, some ancient redwoods remain unprotected, and forests that are protected face threats from a changing environment, disease and devastating government budget cuts. Donations help us save these special places, allowing us to purchase redwood land, restore logged forests, research how to best protect them and teach children and adults about these magical expressions of life. To date the League has completed the purchase of more than 189,000 acres of redwood forest and associated land. For more information, please visit [SaveTheRedwoods.org](http://SaveTheRedwoods.org), or to receive monthly email updates, sign up at [SaveTheRedwoods.org/signup](http://SaveTheRedwoods.org/signup).