Logging redwoods in Humboldt County, ca. 1900

To its early settlers, California appeared to have an unlimited bounty of natural resources. By the mid-1800s, however, the redwood forests began to suffer from rapid deforestation by the lumber industry, building for the massive migration of fortune seekers to the gold country. Without the help of conservationists and a grassroots effort to save the unique redwoods, California's rich natural landscape would have been lost forever.

Our Mission

The mission of California State Parks is to provide for the health, inspiration and education of the people of California by helping to preserve the state's extraordinary biological diversity, protecting its most valued natural and cultural resources, and creating opportunities for high-quality outdoor recreation.

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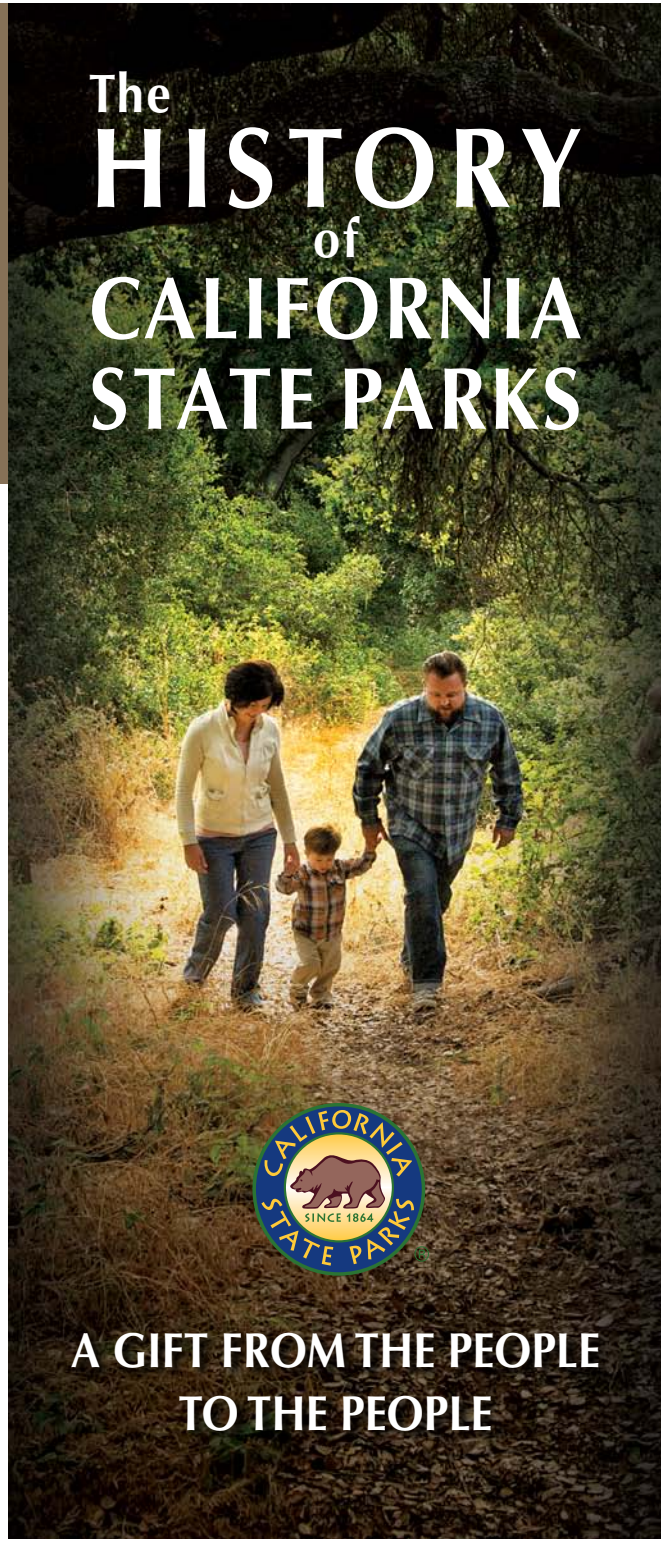
The HISTORY of CALIFORNIA STATE PARKS



A GIFT FROM THE PEOPLE TO THE PEOPLE

CALIFORNIA'S FIRST PARKS

Yosemite

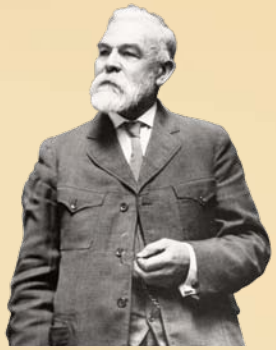
In 1864, as the Civil War threatened to tear the country apart, California became the first state in the nation to establish a state park. With little opposition, Congress and President Abraham Lincoln granted Yosemite Valley and Mariposa Grove to the State. This historic legislation marked the beginning of land preservation designed for public use.

Yosemite Valley and Mariposa Grove remained a California state park until 1906, when it became a national park.

Turn-of-the-20th-century citizens and lawmakers preserved islands of California's most valuable and scenic lands for future generations.

Big Basin

Acquiring Yosemite would be just the beginning of a movement to preserve California landscapes. In 1899, San Jose photographer Andrew P. Hill became concerned for the future of the redwoods after a confrontation with a redwood grove landowner in the Santa Cruz Mountains.



Andrew P. Hill, 1910

Recognizing a need for organized protection, he and fellow activists established the Sempervirens Club, named for the coast redwood species (*Sequoia sempervirens*).

Hill initially struggled to get California legislators on board with the proposal for a state park. He refused to give up, and in 1902, Big Basin Redwoods became what is now California's oldest state park.

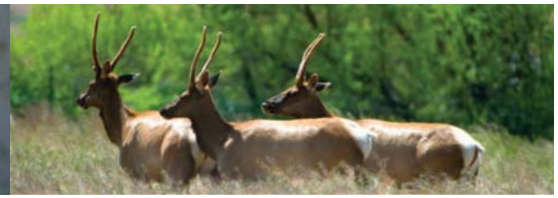
Save the Redwoods

In 1917, attention to saving the redwoods shifted farther north in California. Highway construction and logging threatened the Humboldt County forests. A group of scientists and naturalists explored the area and its damaged trees, inspiring the founding of the Save the Redwoods League.

The League helped negotiate with lumber companies and raised funds to purchase land for conservation. Helped by advertising executive Newton B. Drury, the organization lobbied for support to establish an official California State Park Commission.

Drury went on to serve as the League's Executive Director for 20 years before leaving to lead the National Park Service. He would later become one of California State Parks' most influential directors.

Humboldt Redwoods State Park

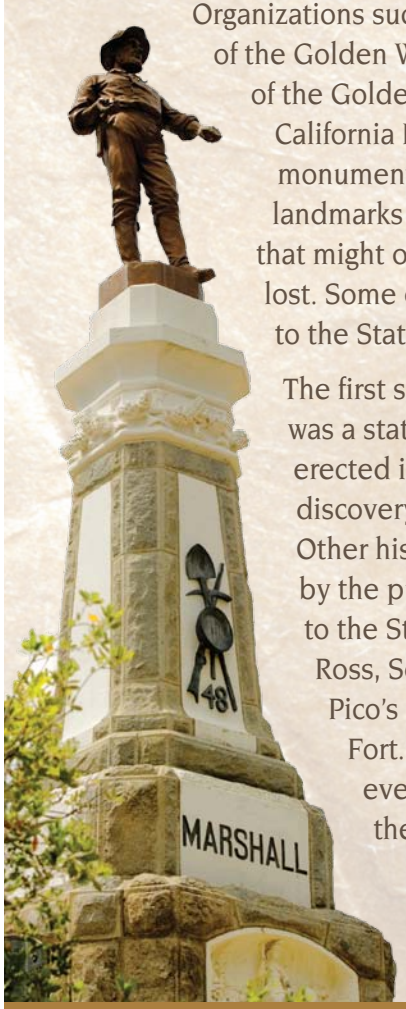


HISTORIC PRESERVATION

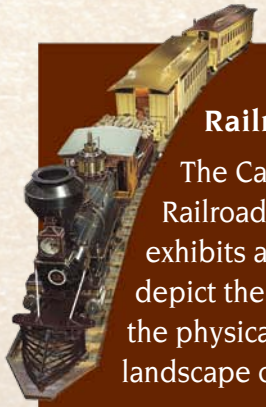
Concurrent with the movement to save redwoods, public interest grew in preserving historic sites and honoring important events.

Organizations such as the Native Sons of the Golden West, Native Daughters of the Golden West and the California Historical Society built monuments and helped save landmarks of California history that might otherwise have been lost. Some of these were donated to the State of California.

The first state historic monument was a statue of James Marshall erected in 1890 near his gold discovery site in Coloma. Other historic sites preserved by the public and later given to the State included Fort Ross, Sonoma Mission, Pío Pico's home, and Sutter's Fort. These historic places eventually became part of the State Park System.



Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park

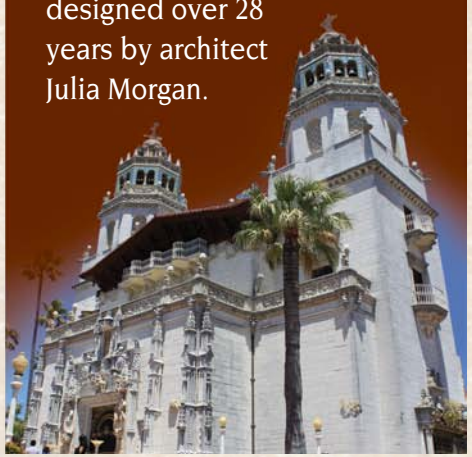


Railroad Museum

The California State Railroad Museum's exhibits and programs depict the train's effect on the physical and economic landscape of California.

Hearst Castle

The fabled "La Cuesta Encantada," William Randolph Hearst's hillside estate, is now Hearst San Simeon State Historical Monument. It displays Hearst's priceless world treasures in a setting designed over 28 years by architect Julia Morgan.



BUILDING THE SYSTEM

Frederick L. Olmsted, Jr., Survey of 1928

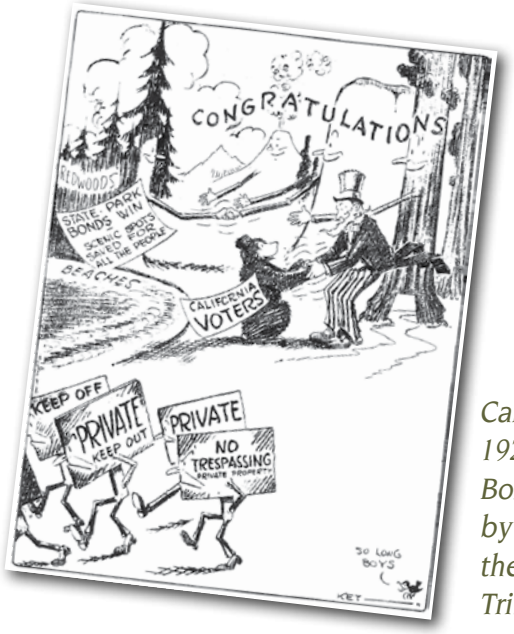
The California State Park Commission hired landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., to conduct a survey of the state for potential park sites. Olmsted, working under a tight deadline and budget, assembled 12 regional volunteer committees for input; they studied more than 320 potential park sites.

Olmsted's deep conviction that open spaces should be preserved led his advisory teams to survey not only forest regions, but historic areas, beaches and deserts as well. Olmsted's report recommended more than 125 varied park sites; many have since become state parks.

1928 Bond

After the State Legislature established the State Park Commission in 1927, the commissioners gathered public support for a crucial bond act. The people of California supported the new California State Park System by nearly a three-to-one vote. The bond set aside $6 million to acquire new park land, to be matched by private donations.

Top images—from left to right: Fort Ross State Historic Park, Old Sacramento State Historic Park, Angel Island State Park, Tule Elk State Natural Reserve



Cartoon of 1928 Park Bond passage by "Ket" for the Oakland Tribune

Making a Difference

State Park personnel and a small army of volunteers have protected, administered, maintained and interpreted the parks down through the decades. This often unseen and unrecognized day-to-day, year-to-year effort has sustained state parks through the generations.

The first paid state park employee was Galen Clark, appointed state Guardian of Yosemite in 1866 at a salary of $500 per year. Clark is recognized as the first state park ranger in California and the nation. John Scroggs, the first known employee to serve in a dedicated maintenance position, was titled "gardener" at Sutter's Fort in 1907.

By 1927, the 17 parks in the new Division of Parks had a staff of only 15 people: the division chief, two park wardens, five laborers and seven seasonal employees. Civilian Conservation Corps and Works Progress Administration laborers built much park infrastructure in the 1930s.

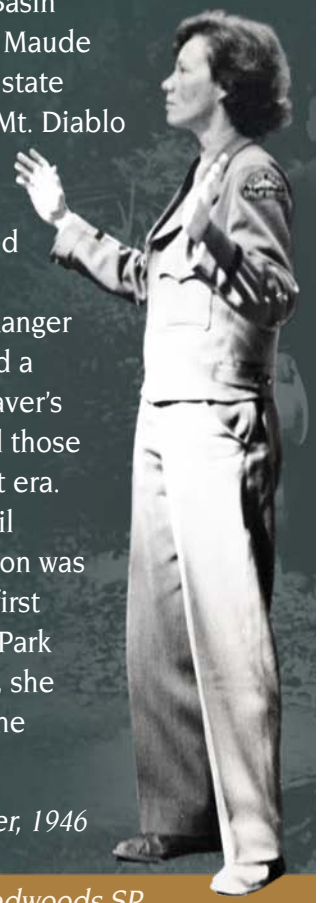
Today, a large team of staff and volunteers are devoted to the public and the parks: "a truly magnificent system—the result of foresight and devoted public service on the part of countless people over several generations," says author and park historian Joseph Engbeck.

Galen Clark, 1891

Notable women stood among the groups and individuals who created and nurtured the California State Park system.

Members of women's clubs drove many grassroots movements to conserve land, resources, and historic sites.

In 1899 Josephine McCracken helped found the Sempervirens Club, which worked to create Big Basin Redwoods State Park. Maude L. Dodge was the first state commissioner on the Mt. Diablo Park Commission in 1921. Harriet "Petey" Weaver was considered to be the first female California State Park Ranger in 1930. Formally titled a recreation leader, Weaver's job functions mirrored those of a park ranger of that era. However, it wasn't until 1972 that Paula Peterson was officially hired as the first female classified as a Park Ranger. By retirement, she was Chief Ranger for the Monterey District.



Harriet "Petey" Weaver, 1946

Top images–from left to right: New Brighton SB, Rangers at Calaveras Big Trees SP in 1948, Anza-Borrego Desert SP, Grizzly Creek Redwoods SP

WORLD WAR II AND BEYOND

During World War II, park attendance declined and many parks closed. Rationing of gas and rubber reduced the distance vacationers could travel. The War Department used some of the closed parks for training troops.

After the war ended, California experienced a population boom, doubling between 1940 and 1950. As more families bought cars, the public's interest in parks and open space also increased. The parks could barely support the enormous burst in attendance. Visits to the Founder's Tree in Humboldt Redwoods State Park jumped from an average of 50 a day to 500 after the war. Camping stays had to be limited for the first time in state parks' history.

In 1945, Governor Earl Warren called for support of an "Omnibus Park Acquisition Bill." The legislature passed the bill, which doubled the number of state beach parks in southern California. It also funded recreation areas in the desert and inland mountains.

U.S. Marines hike through Cuyamaca Rancho State Park. During WWII, coastal state parks were guarded by troops who protected Californians from threats by sea or air.

Return Of Newton Drury

Newton B. Drury was chosen to lead California State Parks in 1951. Drury's experience heading the National Park Service helped him to reorganize the California park system, tackle legislative problems, and increase park acquisitions.

Drury, ca. 1940

1960s Park Expansion and Conservation

The 1960s saw a renewed interest in conservation and environmental issues. Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson both supported legislation to save lands from increased urban sprawl and highway growth.

As national awareness for the need to preserve and protect public lands and ecosystems grew, the overwhelming passage of a 1964 bond act showed continuing public support for California State Parks.

Mott in 1983

In 1967, Governor Ronald Reagan appointed William Penn Mott, Jr., as director of the Department of Parks and Recreation. During his tenure, park acquisitions were doubled. Mott's passion for State Parks' mission and public education led him to expand park ranger duties to include those of peace officer and interpreter. After retiring, Mott established the California State Parks Foundation.

Top images, from left to right: Elephant seals at Año Nuevo SP, Ehrman Mansion at Ed Z'berg Sugar Pine Point SP, Lake Oroville SRA, Indian Grinding Rock SHP

Late Twentieth Century

In the 1990s, California State Parks revised its long-term goals. The Seventh Generation plan recognized that today's actions will affect at least the next seven generations—emphasizing continued resource protection, education, recreational development and outreach to serve more Californians.

The voters of California passed Proposition 12 (the Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air and Coastal Protection Bond Act) in 2000. This bond helped achieve Seventh Generation goals by providing $2.1 billion to enable California State Parks to acquire new land, develop new facilities, and address overdue maintenance projects. It also furnished significant funding to local agencies.

Six years later, Proposition 84 dispensed more funds for parkland acquisitions and for the protection of beaches, bays, coastal waters and other natural and cultural resources. The bond also set aside grant funding to allay the effects of climate change, and to promote cleaner air and water in our communities.

URBAN PARKS

After the 1965 Watts riots in Los Angeles, urban unrest continued to spread. Director William Penn Mott, Jr., recognized the need for more open spaces and recreation in confined areas. He believed that if the people couldn't get to parks, parks should come to the people.

Starting in 1968, Mott initiated new measures to reach out to underserved populations. Programs included media and publications in Spanish and other languages. A cooperative project with Amtrak brought inner-city children to parks for recreational outings, and rangers toured cities in a 40-foot "park experience" trailer.

California State Parks acquired land for the first urban park in 1972 at Candlestick Point in San Francisco. In 1975 Governor Edmund G. Brown, Jr., appointed Herbert Rhodes as the first African American director of Parks and Recreation. "I bring something to the job that's never been here before. I've been poor most of my life . . . I know the contaminated neighborhoods people live in," said Rhodes. He spearheaded efforts to locate parks near urban areas. Candlestick Point State Recreation Area officially opened in 1978 as a leisure venue for the adjacent community of Bayview-Hunters Point.

Los Angeles SHP, Kenneth Hahn SRA, and Rio de Los Angeles SP now afford one of the nation's most open-space-deprived cities with a sense of place and pride in their surrounding neighborhoods.

California State Parks' ongoing outreach efforts deliver distance learning to K-12 classrooms in underserved districts. Free videoconferencing helps schools teach parks-related science, history and conservation. Park interpretive programs embrace current technology to reach many more people.

Continuing park expansion relies on a growing cadre of public-spirited volunteers from all demographics.

View of city skyline from Los Angeles State Historic Park.

Top images, left to right: Watts Towers of Simon Rodia SHP, Candlestick Point SRA, Rio de Los Angeles SP, Baldwin Hills Scenic Overlook at Kenneth Hahn SRA

NATURAL RESOURCES AND PARK MANAGEMENT

California is famed for its scenic grandeur, biological diversity, and unique plant and animal species. Early park visionaries, supported by California's voters, ensured that a remarkably high proportion of the state's landscapes are now included in the State Park System. More than forty of the state's 700 native wildlife species and 2,100 of its 6,300 native plant species can be found nowhere else.

Early resource management emphasized protecting parks from poachers, timber thieves and other despoilers of park lands by enforcing state laws and park regulations. Park managers assumed that Nature had taken care of itself for eons—and if protected, could continue to do so.

Resource guardians across the country soon saw that important natural systems were continuing to degrade even after being "protected." In many cases, damage done to the land prior to park acquisition had so greatly destabilized natural processes and biological communities that their failing ecosystems needed to be saved. However, restoration of complex environmental systems required a new look at physical and biological interactions.

During the 1970s, California's state park ecologists and environmental scientists began developing system-wide natural resource restoration and maintenance programs to meet the challenges. A 1980 park bond act was the first to fund these programs; subsequent bond support and dedicated annual funding is ongoing.

California State Parks' natural resource management efforts strive to meet the challenges caused by climate change and loss of natural linkages between State Park lands and other protected wildland. Connecting these conservation areas helps nourish healthy, resilient animal populations and plant communities.

COLLABORATION WITH CALIFORNIA INDIANS

California State Parks has worked extensively with Indian communities to properly represent the history of California tribes within the parks. In 1957 Francis Riddell, a curator of the State Indian Museum, made it a priority to remove hundreds of sacred baskets nailed to walls and begin a modern conservation program. Today State Parks collaborates with tribes to preserve and interpret their sacred sites and to educate the public.

Understanding this rich historical legacy gives our citizens a sense of place and continuity in the modern world.

At Indian Grinding Rock State Historic Park, the reconstructed Miwok village represents and interprets part of the tribal culture. Present-day Miwok have an opportunity to preserve their heritage and traditions, and share them with present and future generations of Californians.

Sumêg Village at Patrick's Point State Park was designed by and built with the labor of several tribes living in the park area.

In the near future, the California Indian Heritage Center will house California State Parks' extensive collections that represent Indian tribes, to interpret these still-thriving cultures for the public.

Above: Chumash basket (L), Maidu feasting basket (R)

Off-Highway Vehicle Parks

By the late 1960s, the growing popularity of unregulated off-road vehicles threatened to erode trails and harm park wildlife. The 1971 Chappie-Z'berg Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Law set aside funding to establish regulated OHV parks and mitigate environmental damage.

Designated OHV parks offer trails, free safety training, and rules to make off-road riding safe and fun while preserving resources.

Underwater Parks

Preservation of natural resources is not limited to land. In 1960, an offshore area of Point Lobos State Natural Reserve became the state's first underwater reserve. As interest in underwater activities increased, an Advisory Board on Underwater Parks was established in 1968 and an Underwater Parks Master Plan was adopted in 1979.

Of more than twenty underwater parks, most are coastal marine areas; however, four are freshwater lake environments in the interior of the state.

Crystal Cove State Park features an underwater park.

THE FUTURE

Since 1864, grassroots activism and legislation have made it possible for all Californians to take pride and ownership of their unique and diverse landscapes.

Parks maintain not only the natural beauty of California, but provide recreation, escape, history and a special place for contemplation and reflection.

California State Parks continues as a national and world leader in conservation. Today and into the future, California State Parks preserves land, biosystems and historic sites for public use.

The geographic diversity of California's state parks ensures that all populations, regardless of income or status, can enjoy the benefits of the outdoors.

Roosevelt elk