



# RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES

*Offering Ideas to Expand Visitor Experience*

PLANNING DIVISION, RECREATION SECTION · 916-653-9901 · FALL 2011

Economic climate, new styles could provide incentive to park managers

## Time is right to consider alternative camping

Trends in demographics and recreation habits<sup>1</sup> indicate a decline in traditional camping. Inexpensive lodgings like cabins, tent cabins, or yurts offer an alternative to camping that can help draw new and returning overnight visitors to parks. Adapting existing campsites and partnering with businesses and nonprofit organizations are excellent ways to provide these facilities relatively quickly and with low out-of-pocket costs.

Two current influences provide additional incentive for park managers to add facilities:

- **Today's tough economic times.** Return on investment (ROI) of alternative camping facilities is good. Depending on the facility costs and rental fees, facilities can become profitable in from 1-5 years and can generate ongoing revenue for parks for years, even decades.<sup>2</sup> Partnering can reduce costs for construction and installation.



The nine rustic cabins at Mount Tamalpais State Park's Steep Ravine Environmental Campground include amenities like sleeping platforms and locking doors. The conveniences of alternative camping can attract parents with young children.<sup>4</sup>

- **New construction methods and styles.**

Prefabricated facilities can reduce costs of planning, construction, and installation and offer green advantages; new building styles (see sidebar on page 7) offer exciting options for landscape settings unsuited to the traditional log-cabin style. Overnight visitors to state beaches in Southern California, for example, would likely find a sleek structure with expansive ocean views very appealing.<sup>3</sup>

A new Department report, *Alternative Camping at California State Parks*,<sup>4</sup> the source for some information in this bulletin, is available online. It documents results of two surveys at state parks with alternative camping facilities, a 2009-2010 Visitor Survey, and a 2010 Management and Maintenance Survey. See [www.parks.ca.gov/corp](http://www.parks.ca.gov/corp).

### Next steps. . .

Whether you are ready to add alternative camping facilities or still weighing their merits, this bulletin can help.

### What is 'alternative' camping?

Most camping other than 'traditional' camping (where campers spend the night under the open sky or in a tent or RV) is considered alternative camping. Because cottages with plumbing, like those at Crystal Cove State Beach, do not provide the typical alternative camping visitor experience, such facilities are excluded from this newsletter.

# 4 reasons to consider alternative camping

Here are key reasons to consider adding more alternative camping facilities at state parks.

## 1. More overnight facilities are needed in the California State Parks system.

Each year the approximately 14,000 state parks campsites host about 7 million campers—some of them repeat visitors.<sup>5</sup> Less than 200 of these campsites offer alternative camping facilities like cabins.

As Chart 1 on the next page shows, only about 1% of all overnight accommodations are alternative camping facilities. By comparison, Oregon devotes almost 5%, or about 285, of its camping facilities to alternative camping. Oregon’s alternative camping facilities consist of “standard and deluxe cabins and yurts, and teepees.” That state’s long-term goal is to double the number of facilities to about 500.<sup>6</sup>

A recent survey of visitors to 26 California state parks<sup>7</sup> showed that about one-third of respondents indicated interest in staying overnight in most types of alternative camping accommodations (only about one-tenth expressed interest in floating campsites).

Table 1 shows facilities, occupancy rates, and overnight fees at current California state park facilities. The approximately 100 alternative campsites range from rustic cabins at Malakoff Diggins SHP to floating campsites at Lake Oroville SRA.

### Camping is king at state parks

Most overnight stays at state parks involve a campsite (see chart on opposite page). The remainder of facilities—about 3%—are lodgings. Many lodgings are designed primarily for groups, like the Asilomar Conference Grounds at Asilomar State Beach.

Table 1. Existing alternative camping facilities at California’s state parks.<sup>8</sup>

Park name	No. of rustic cabins	No. of tent cabins	No. of floating campsites	Average occupancy rate, summers 2009 & 2010	Maximum occupancy	Overnight fee
Big Basin Redwoods State Park (A, C)		38		69%	8	\$75
Brannan Island State Recreation Area (B)	1			62%	4	\$50
Clear Lake State Park (cabins scheduled to open by Memorial Day, 2012)	8			NA	6	TBD
Cuyamaca Rancho State Park	6			41%	8	\$70
Hendy Woods State Park	4			54%	6	\$50
Lake Oroville State Recreation Area (B)			10	80%	15	\$150
Malakoff Diggins State Historic Park (C)	3			58%	4	\$40
McArthur-Burney Falls Memorial State Park (C)	24			58%	4, 6	\$71.50, \$93.50
Mount Tamalpais State Park (B)	9			84%	5	\$100
<b>Total number of each facility type</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>10</b>			

A. Near urban area B. Near urban area and water feature C. Alternative camping facilities are operated by concessionaire

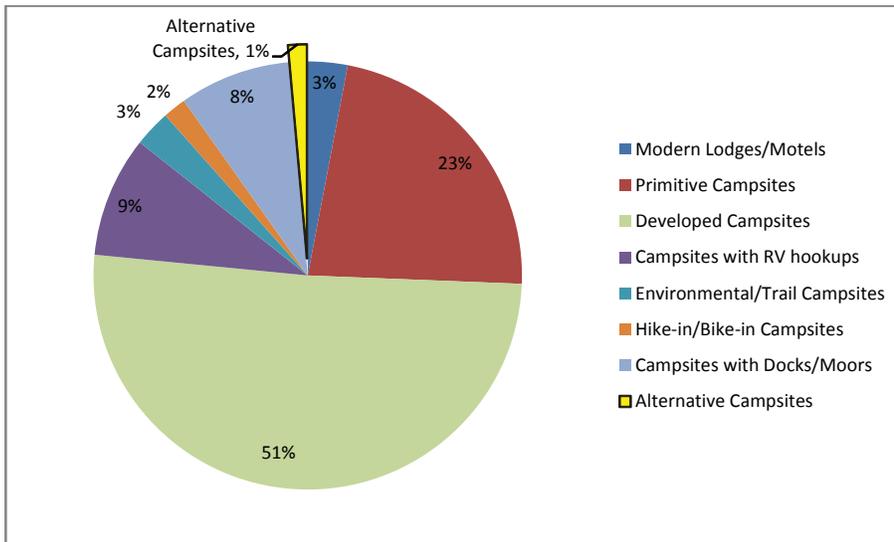


Chart 1. Types of overnight accommodations at California state parks, FY 2008/2009, by percentage.<sup>5</sup>

The yellow, “exploded” section of the chart represents alternative camping facilities, which are about 1% of all accommodations.

Most accommodations involve some sort of camping; developed campsites are about half (51%) of all accommodations.

## 2. Visitors like the facilities and amenities.

Alternative camping facilities can be more convenient for visitors than traditional camping—no tents required (although as shown on page 5, visitors to floating campsites often bring tents). At some facilities, sleeping pads are provided.

As Table 2 shows, a recent Alternative Camping Visitor Survey<sup>4</sup> showed that most visitors were satisfied with facility aspects, and most thought that all aspects were important. The top two additional amenities desired by respondent, by facility, were:

- For tent cabins (available only at Big Basin SP), “Nothing, I liked it just the way it was” (51%) and “Electricity” (24%)
- For floating campsites (currently available only at Lake Oroville SRA), “More units (tent cabins, cottages, yurts, floating campsites, or cabins)” (51%) and “Nothing...” (39%)
- For rustic cabins (currently available at 6 state parks), “Nothing...” (51%) and “Sink” (16%)

*Alternative Camping Facilities Suppliers List* now available online. See a list of suppliers, websites and products at [www.parks.ca.gov/?page\\_id=25990](http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=25990).

### Most visitors satisfied with all facility aspects; viewed all aspects as important

A recent visitor survey at state parks<sup>4</sup> shows visitor satisfaction and importance levels of various alternative camping facility aspects.

Table 2. Percentages of visitors who were “satisfied” with and rated as “important” various facility aspects.

Facility aspect	“Satisfied”	“Important”
Outward appearance	92%	59%
Overall condition	87%	90%
Convenience and comfort	84%	83%
Feeling of safety and security during visit	89%	80%
Availability of restroom and/or shower nearby	81%	80%
Location of unit in relation to rest of park	87%	60%
Fees paid compared to value	71%	76%
Cleanliness of unit	89%	89%

## Concessionaire, Department staff report on McArthur-Burney Falls Memorial SP cabins

*The 24 one- and two-room cabins at this park near Redding are within the traditional campground. Cabins are open each season except winter. The concessionaire RRM Management constructed the single-wall, prefabricated cabins in 2008 and operates and maintains the cabins and the associated restroom. Each cabin has propane heating and sleeping platforms with mattresses. Outside, each cabin has a picnic table with benches, bar-b-que grill, fire pit, and space to pitch a tent.*

*Per-night cabin rental fees are substantially higher than for campsites. Fees for the 111 park campsites range from \$5 for a small number of hike and bike sites to \$30 for developed sites. The 24 cabins rent for \$71.50 and \$93.50 per night.*

**Concessionaire:** According to Bud Dawson of RRM, among those enjoying the cabins are former ‘traditional’ campers and Bay Area visitors. By the time visitors from the Bay Area typically arrive, it is almost dark; opening a cabin door is much easier than pitching a tent. Dawson says that in general, visitors enjoy the rustic cabins at the park because they don’t like the hassle of setting up camp; many are return visitors.



Interior features include wood floors, propane heater, platform beds with mattresses. Visitors bring sleeping bags, battery powered lanterns.



Cabins feature locking doors and covered porches. Some units are accessible.

For RRM, maintenance is “not a problem,” and when weathering to the outside walls occurs, Dawson thinks it will add to the cabins’ rustic feeling. RRM advertises the cabins on Facebook, and visitors reserve cabins on ReserveAmerica, the Department’s online reservation system. Dawson says that although cabins do not extend the season or significantly increase shoulder-season visitation, some shoulder-season visitors enjoy the solitude and reduced crowds.

**Department staff:** Heidi Horvitz, Superintendent of the Cascade Sector, Northern Buttes District, concurs with Bud Dawson’s summary above. Horvitz notes that during the week, when the regular campground is full, the cabins are not always occupied, and that in winter (when cabins are not open), park usage is very low anyway.

Horvitz comments that a planned replacement of the existing restroom unit was not done due to lack of funds; as a result, the 2 ADA cabins sit in the regular camping loop near an ADA restroom and the concession has an old restroom unit. Horvitz reports that cabin fees may be a bit high compared to similar units at nearby Lassen National Park, and that noise issues at the cabins are very rare.

4 reasons to consider, continued

### 3. Department staff and concessionaires have generally positive opinions of the facilities.

Responses from Department management and maintenance staff and concessionaires to the recent Management and Maintenance Alternative Camping Survey<sup>4</sup> were generally favorable.

Facilities have a low incidence of vandalism, with 44% of respondents indicating that, on average, it occurred annually, 30% said monthly, and 3% daily. When asked to respond, “Do you agree? Maintenance requires very little of my daily time,” about half (48%) agreed; about one-quarter disagreed or neither agreed or disagreed (27% and 25% respectively).

Maintenance-related survey comments varied widely and included: “Cabins are built like tanks...,” “very little vandalism,” and “vandalism is high during the peak season.” A few comments suggested that some concessionaires do not meet Department maintenance standards.

About 70% of respondents indicated that alternative camping facilities bring visitors to parks during the shoulder season.

As to facility design, construction and installation, Department staff and concessionaire staff reported that:

- Converting a traditional campsite to an alternative campsite is relatively easy (compared to the process

#### Legal guidance for cabins in state parks

Public Resources Code 5003.4 indicates that the Department of Parks and Recreation “may install or permit the installation of camping cabins... if installation of camping cabins is consistent with the general plan of the unit.” (A Health and Safety Code provision referred to in Section 5003.4 that limits camping cabin sizes and amenities was repealed in 2000.)



A floating campsite at Lake Oroville State Recreation Area sleeps up to 15, rents for \$150 per night, and includes a restroom. Despite the relatively costly maintenance process (which involves daily use of a barge during the busy season and major off-season maintenance), the revenue and minimal resource impact of these structures make them an attractive option for parks with boating facilities.

required to create the original campsite) because usually the environmental impact of the change is small.

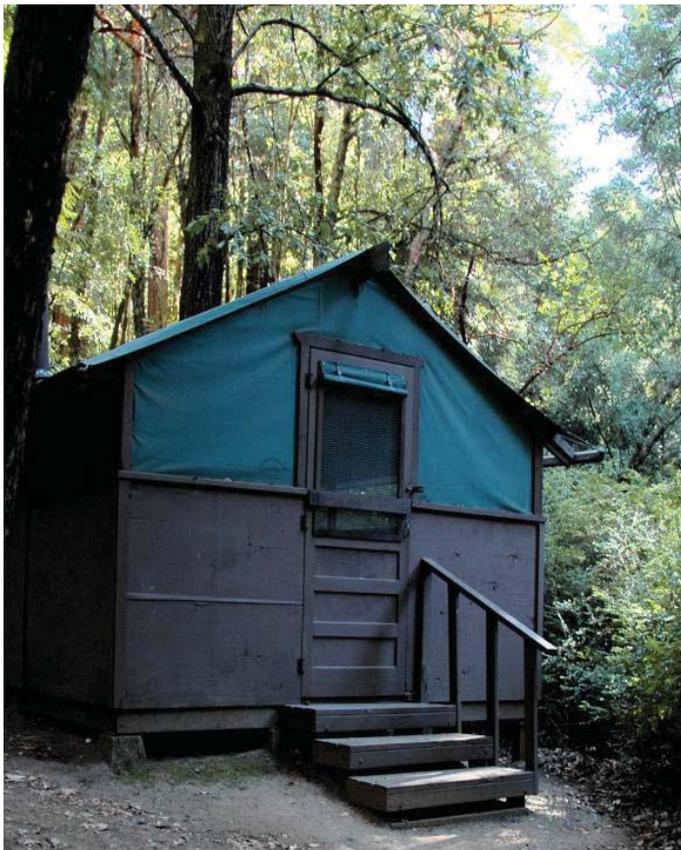
- New types of facilities offer improved features, save time in planning, construction and implementation, and are suitable for many park settings. See sidebar on page 7.<sup>3</sup>
- Alternative camping facilities reach profitability relatively quickly and generate revenue for many years, providing good ROI. A 2005 Department report<sup>2</sup> recommended a pilot program to add yurts, cabins, and tent cabins at 16 state parks. ROI calculations in this report estimated that facilities at 15 of the parks would be profitable in about one to three years.
- Accessibility features like wheelchair ramps and wheelchair-accessible interiors can be incorporated into existing designs.

#### 4 reasons to consider, continued

### 4. Californians are doing less 'traditional' camping.

Between 1992 and 2008, the percentage of Californians camping in a developed site with tent or vehicle decreased by about 28% percent: in 1992, about 54% of Californians participated in this activity at least once a year; in 2008, only about 39% did.<sup>1</sup>

With their ease and convenience, alternative camping facilities can help encourage more Californians to enjoy healthy outdoor recreation and in turn, help ensure awareness and preservation of the state's natural and cultural treasures.



Tent cabin at Big Basin Redwoods SP. Generations of visitors have stayed in these iconic cabins, which are suited to their woody setting in the temperate Northern California climate. Today's park managers have new options; see sidebar on opposite page.

### Which visitors choose alternative camping?

Characteristics of alternative campers at state parks are similar to those of traditional campers, according to the Department's recent Alternative Camping Visitor Survey.<sup>2</sup>

Most alternative campers (based on percentages of respondents):

- chose alternative camping for "better protection from weather" (44%), convenience (37%), or because they "wanted to try something new and/or different" (29%)\*
- had previously visited that particular state park (76%);
- chose this park because of the location (72%), alternative camping facilities (68%), natural/cultural facilities (49%), and/or because they had previously visited that park (48%)\*
- were California residents (95%);
- indicated that they belonged to the Caucasian ethnic group (79%);
- were seasoned (63%) or occasional (33%) campers;
- had a combined household income of \$75,000 or more (67%);
- were likely between 45-54 years old (34%) or 35-44 (29%);
- likely camped with family only (50%) or friends and family (41%); and
- came to the park in groups of 2 (27%) or 4 (22%).

The top three age ranges of campers' companions were those 35-44 years of age (20%), 45-54 (16%), and 1-9 (15%); but close behind were three other age groups, 25-34 (13%), 15-24 (12%), and 10-14 (11%).\*

\*Multiple answers were allowed.

# 3 recommendations for park managers

## 1. Add more alternative camping facilities.

More alternative camping facilities—beyond those already planned—are needed, with the highest need at parks near urban areas and/or water.<sup>8</sup> To help with costs, consider:

- partnering with others, like concessionaires, to share construction and operating costs;
- converting existing ‘traditional’ campsites to alternative camping; and
- offering consistent facilities within one park and across the system (as the State of Oregon aims to do), to help visitors plan their trips and streamline staff tasks.

## 2. Complete already-planned facilities.

Target matching funds to complete facilities already planned and/or designed; assign high priority to facilities near urban areas and/or water features.

## 3. Improve promotion, information, and education/outreach for facilities.

Recommended efforts in this area include:

- improving information online and in print so potential visitors can be aware of facilities and amenities. For example, California State Parks’ “Find a Park” web pages could include a “cabin” icon for searching, and a link to detailed, comprehensive and centralized information on alternative camping facilities and amenities. (Washington State’s online information on cabins and yurts could be one model; [www.parks.wa.gov](http://www.parks.wa.gov).)
- increasing awareness of facilities with relatively low occupancy rates, like those at rural parks;
- emphasizing facility comfort and convenience; targeting groups currently underusing facilities (for example, Hispanics, and residents younger than 35 and older than 54); and
- publicizing shoulder season availability.

## Prefab cabins offer cost advantages, design features



This 120 square-foot prefab cabin has an integrated raised foundation with built-in covered deck. [www.cabinfever.us.com](http://www.cabinfever.us.com).

Park managers can choose from a growing number of exciting prefabricated (prefab) cabin options suitable for a variety of landscape settings. (The cabins at McArthur-Burney Falls Memorial SP are prefab units.) Prefab cabins consist of pre-engineered sections built in a factory. Sections are designed for easy shipment to the job site and can be assembled by those with basic carpentry skills.

These cabins typically have a low environmental effect at the job site, and their efficient floor plans leave a minimal environmental footprint. Prefab “green” cabins, which use recycled and renewable building materials, are available.

### Source info

Find more information on the manufacturer of the prefab unit shown above and others at [www.prefabcompacthome.com](http://www.prefabcompacthome.com).

Find links to websites of selected suppliers of prefab and other facility types in the Department publication, *The Alternative Camping Facilities Suppliers List*,<sup>9</sup> available at [www.parks.ca.gov/?page\\_id=25990](http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=25990).

## New cabins at Clear Lake State Park to open in May 2012

Located in a former group camping site, eight new cabins near the lake at Clear Lake State Park are clustered to encourage group and family use and oriented so that all cabins have a lake view. The cabins were designed and constructed by the Sonoma County Probation Department and assembled onsite by California Conservation Corps staff. Parking and restrooms/showers are a short walk away. The overnight fee has yet to be determined.

Cabin elements can be modified for other settings; plans are available on request from the Planning Division.



Top: The two accessible cabins, with accessible path.

Above: Single cabin with bar-b-que and picnic table.

Left: Four cabins clustered for group use. (Cabins are shown during assembly.)

## Endnotes

1. *Survey on Public Opinions and Attitudes on Outdoor Recreation in California State Parks*. 1992-2009 editions available at [www.parks.ca.gov/corp](http://www.parks.ca.gov/corp).

2. *An Alternative Camping Pilot Program for California State Parks*. California State Parks, February 2005. Available at the Planning Division's Publications web page, [www.parks.ca.gov/?page\\_id=25990](http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=25990).

3. Planning Division staff.

4. *Alternative Camping Survey Report*. California State Parks, 2011. Available at [www.parks.ca.gov/corp](http://www.parks.ca.gov/corp).

5. *California State Park System Statistical Report 2009/10 Fiscal Year*. California State Parks, June 2011.

6. *Parks and Recreation Department Annual Performance Progress Report (APPR) for Fiscal Year (2010-2011)*, State of Oregon, 2011. Available at [www.oregon.gov/OPRD/documents/2011\\_performance\\_measures.pdf](http://www.oregon.gov/OPRD/documents/2011_performance_measures.pdf).

7. *State Park Visitor Survey of 2007-2009*. Various park-specific reports. California State Parks, 2010.

8. Department data.

9. *Alternative Camping Facilities Suppliers List*, California State Parks, October 2011. Available at the Planning Division's Publications web page, [www.parks.ca.gov/?page\\_id=25990](http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=25990).

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