

# California State Park and Recreation Commission Annual Report



Reporting Period: July 1, 2013 - June 30, 2015



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

California has 279 state parks, the largest state park system in the nation. More than 70 million visitors enjoy the memorable forests, beaches, mountains, deserts, lakes, rivers, and historic sites in our state parks each year.

One hundred fifty years ago, California established a State Park Commission, the first in the nation, when it accepted the Yosemite Grant from President Abraham Lincoln. In 2014, Californians celebrated the 150th anniversary of their state park system and the sesquicentennial of the State Park and Recreation Commission.

**Today, the California State Park and Recreation Commission (Commission) is charged with:**

- Upholding its legal mandates as specified in the California Public Resources Code;
- Advising the Department of Parks and Recreation (Department) on necessary improvements in the management of state parks; and
- Providing a forum to encourage public involvement and input on the administration of California's State Park System, and to help make the Department's management of state parks transparent to the public.

The Commission is committed to building upon the success of its predecessors and setting an example for those who will follow by working closely with the Department, the Administration, the Legislature, other stakeholder organizations, and the public. Adapting to change with commitment, adroitness, and ingenuity, the Commission can increase the effectiveness of the state park system, better protect its natural, historical, and cultural resources, and improve the visitor experience.

**The Commission focuses on the reality that today California is a very different place than it was 150 years ago:**

- California is one of the nation's most diverse states, with evolving demographics and changing recreation needs;
- Our population is increasingly concentrated in urban areas, many with limited park space and poor access to existing state parks;
- Our climate is becoming increasingly hot and dry, with more intense weather patterns and a rising sea level;
- The need for respite and renewal from our hectic daily lives, and to reap the many benefits our parks offer, has never been greater; and
- The threats to marine and water resources, historic structures and collections, animal populations, and plant communities in our parks from drought, fire, severe storms, and rising sea levels are ever more serious.

Each Commission Member is committed to the mission of both the Commission and the Department and is actively engaged in helping the Department improve the state park system.

**The 2013 - 2015 Commission members include:**

Ernest Chung – Chair 2013 - May 2015; member June 2015 - present  
 Diane Wittenberg – member 2014; Chair May 2015 - present  
 Paul Witt – Vice Chair 2013 - April 2015 (retired from Commission)  
 Myrian Solis Coronel – member 2013; Vice Chair May 2015 - present  
 Elva Yanez – member 2011 - present  
 Tommy Randle – member 2013 - present  
 Rue Mapp – member May 2015 - present  
 Anthea Hartig – member May 2015 - present

**Ex Officio members:**

Senator Fran Pavley – Chair, Senate Natural Resources and Water Committee  
 Assemblymember Anthony Rendon – Former Chair, Assembly Water, Parks, and  
 Wildlife Committee  
 Assemblymember Marc Levine – Chair, Assembly Water, Parks, and  
 Wildlife Committee

The following report outlines actions and issues addressed by the Commission during the period of July 1, 2013, to June 30, 2015.

## **CALIFORNIA STATE PARK AND RECREATION COMMISSION**

In fiscal year 2013-2014, from July 1, 2013, through June 30, 2014, the Commission met six times in Los Banos, Sacramento, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. At each of the meetings, the Commission conducted public workshops for comment on various state parks issues. These public opportunities expanded in August 2013, when the Commission began webcasting its meetings live on [www.cal-span.org](http://www.cal-span.org). Since then, video archives of all Commission meetings have been available online. The Commission provided notices in English and Spanish at its Los Angeles meeting and offered simultaneous Spanish and Chinese translation during the meeting. The Commission held public hearings on and approved the adoption of general plans of several state park units. Additionally, the Commission reviewed several large concession proposals to determine their compatibility with the park unit involved.

In fiscal year 2014-2015, from July 1, 2014, through June 30, 2015, the Commission met four times in Pacific Grove, San Diego, McClellan, and Carpinteria. The Commission continued the practice of conducting public workshops and webcasting its meetings live on [www.cal-span.org](http://www.cal-span.org). The Commission adopted one preliminary General Plan and Environmental Impact Report and reviewed concession contracts to determine compatibility with the relevant park units.

From July 1, 2013, through June 30, 2015, the Commission meetings also included workshops on topics related to the operations and management of California State Parks including: finance and budget, facilities maintenance, partnerships, management and restoration of natural resources, interpretation and education, and improving park access and relevancy for underserved communities.

Actions taken and issues covered by the Commission between the periods of July 1, 2013, through June 30, 2015, are described in detail below.



## 1. Improving the Transparency of State Park Activities and Planning

The Commission recognizes the singular importance of its mandate to provide a venue and meaningful process for the public to comment on all matters related to the California State Park System.

The Commission provides a robust public-input process that incorporates both Departmental staff analysis and recommendations as well as contributions from California residents, park visitors, and stakeholder groups. The Commission is especially sensitive to ensuring the input of people who live near or are regular visitors to state parks—they serve as eyes and ears on the ground and provide an important perspective on the day-to-day management of California’s world-class park system.



The Commission is committed to improving public participation in its meetings through enhanced access strategies and mechanisms. Additional mechanisms to increase public outreach are discussed in more detail in the following sections of this report.

## 2. Approving General Plans and Large Concessions

California's Public Resources Code requires state park units to have general plans adopted by the Commission before the development of any new facilities. General plans also serve as a guiding document for development and operation of the parks.

**During the period covered by this report, the Commission reviewed and took action on the following Environmental Impact Reports and General Plans:**

- August 9, 2013: San Luis Reservoir State Recreation Area (Adopted)
- January 24, 2014: Old Sacramento State Historic Park (voting deferred to a future meeting to gather further community input)
- May 2, 2014: Old Sacramento State Historic Park (Adopted)
- November 14, 2014: Cuyamaca Rancho State Park (Adopted)

**During the same period, the Commission reviewed the following large concession proposals and ascertained that the proposals were compatible with the classification and approved general plan for the relevant park unit.**

- August 9, 2013
  - Morro Bay State Park golf course (operated by the County of San Luis Obispo)
  - El Fandango restaurant at Old Town San Diego State Historic Park
  - Equestrian operations at Will Rogers State Historic Park
- November 8, 2013
  - Historic jewelry retailer at Old Sacramento State Historic Park
  - Marina operations at Folsom Lake State Recreation Area
- February 27, 2015
  - Overnight accommodations rentals and food service at Crystal Cove State Park
  - Development and operation of an Aerial Trail System at Lake Perris State Recreation Area
  - Overnight accommodations, food service, and retail concessions at Old Town San Diego State Historic Park
  - Overnight accommodations, food service, and retail concessions at Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park



### 3. Engaging with and Supporting the Parks Forward Initiative

The Parks Forward Commission—a multidisciplinary advisory council formed between the Resources Legacy Fund and the Natural Resources Agency in August 2013—undertook an independent assessment of California’s State Park System and developed recommendations to ensure a financially sustainable park system that meets the needs of all Californians in the twenty-first century. Parks Forward issued its final recommendations in February 2015.

On January 9, 2015, the Governor released his proposed budget, which included a strong statement about the State’s commitment to strengthen the state park system, improve visitors’ experiences, and make the services provided by the system more relevant to a broader and more diverse group of Californians.

The budget highlighted the Administration’s actions to implement many of the recommendations of the Parks Forward report, including the establishment of a Transformation Team to carry forward the report recommendations. Over a two-year period, the Transformation Team will lead the Department in developing and executing structural and sustainable reforms.

The Transformation Team has developed a Transformation Action Plan, which sets out a two-year vision for the Department by outlining a series of initiatives supporting specific goals meant to reflect the recommendations of the Parks Forward Commission and set the Department on a path to a viable future.

**The Commission recognizes the importance of the mission of Parks Forward and the Transformation Team and works collaboratively to help ensure its success. The Commission’s involvement with Parks Forward and the Transformation Team’s efforts include:**

- Jointly holding ten public workshops in Santa Cruz, Fresno, San Luis Obispo, Auburn, Eureka, San Rafael, Los Angeles, Ontario, San Diego, and Garden Grove during September and October 2013 to solicit public input;
- Numerous Commissioners participating and presenting at Parks Forward workgroup meetings on finance, partnership, public health and park access, natural resources management, cultural and historic resources management, and other topics;
- Holding informal discussions with Parks Forward staff and Commissioners on topics related to state park funding, planning, organization, and management; and
- Transformation Team participation in Commission meetings in February and May 2015, and continuing participation in future meetings.

Ken Wiseman, Executive Director of Parks Forward, has kindly noted, *“No partner has been more committed and supportive than your Commission.”* Parks Forward staff and/or Commissioners attended every Commission meeting since August 2013 to provide updates on Parks Forward.

Transformation Team leader Steve Szalay has participated in all of the 2015 Commission meetings to date to provide updates to the Commission and the public on the Transformation Action Plan.

**Working alongside the Department, the Commission has been active on many of the topical areas addressed in Parks Forward recommendations and Transformation Action Plan, including:**

- Partnerships with other organizations and agencies;
- Expanding park access for underserved communities and engaging younger generations; and
- Stabilizing and diversifying funding sources.



The Commission looks forward to continuing its work with the Department to carry out the Parks Forward and Transformation Team recommendations.

## 4. Collaboration and Participation with Other State Park Commissions

**The Department supports four Commissions:**

- California State Park and Recreation Commission
- State Historical Resources Commission
- Boating and Waterways Commission
- Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Commission

To improve the depth of understanding of Department operations across these four Commissions, the Commission began inviting members of its sister Commissions to participate in its meetings. Members of the State Park and Recreation Commission have also begun to take part in meetings and activities of the other Commissions. Representatives of the Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Commission and the Boating and Waterways Commission took part in both the March and May 2014 meetings of the Commission. The Chairs of all four Commissions also participated at the Commission dinner held March 2014 in San Francisco.

## 5. Issue-Focused Public Workshops

In an effort to engage in more substantive dialogue with the Department and the public, the Commission has included a public workshop segment at each Commission meeting since August 2013, focused on key topics of importance as detailed below:



### **Parks management issues**

The Commission is committed to helping the Department improve the management of its parks portfolio. To this end, the Commission requested the following Department presentations in order to understand key park-management issues and help analyze improvement opportunities.

### **Annual budget**

Working closely with the Department, the Commission conducted a public workshop focused on the Department's FY 2013/2014 budget. This was the first dialogue of its kind sponsored by the Commission in recent history. The Commission commends the Department for its comprehensive presentation, its openness, and its transparency regarding budgetary matters.

The Department presented a detailed description and breakdown of the sources and amounts of funding that made up its budget for the year; the uses of the funds for its operations, capital outlay, and local assistance; and the distribution of authorized staffing for its various functions. The Department also provided an overview of its budgeting process, including an annual timeline; a brief discussion of challenges and opportunities also took place.

- **Ongoing and deferred facilities maintenance**

From August 2013 to January 2014, the Commission conducted a series of three workshops to better understand the extent of the deferred facilities-maintenance backlog and needed capital projects in California's state parks.

The Department's estimated deferred-maintenance backlog totals over \$1 billion. An evaluation commissioned by FTI Consulting on behalf of the Parks Forward Commission questioned the Department's deferred-maintenance database and estimated total need. The Parks Forward Commission recommended that the Department revise its database of deferred-maintenance and capital projects.

A large contributor to the deferred-maintenance backlog is the ongoing need for maintenance and housekeeping at our state parks. The Commission worked with the Department to: (1) understand the gap in funding for ongoing maintenance and housekeeping, and (2) develop an improved process to evaluate and prioritize deferred-maintenance and capital projects.

By utilizing more accurate expenditure data, the Department revised its estimated ongoing maintenance budget for FY 2013-2014 to be \$44 million, or 38.4% of the total need of \$114.7 million. This continued budgetary shortfall will very likely contribute to an ever-increasing deferred-maintenance backlog.

The Department also presented a revised process to assess and prioritize deferred facilities-maintenance and capital projects, with improved cost estimates. This revised process was endorsed by the Commission.

- **Partnerships**

Robust, mutually beneficial partnerships are a critical element of success in the provision of park and recreation services. Effective collaboration with community-based and nonprofit organizations, schools, local and federal park agencies, and other stakeholder groups is considered a best practice among practitioners in the field.

To gain a better understanding of the types of partnerships currently managed and being developed by the California State Park System's Field Districts, the Commission held a public workshop on this topic at our March 2014 meeting in San Francisco. The presentations focused on description of the partnerships as well as the best practices and lessons learned that could be replicated as appropriate throughout the park system.

**The partnerships presented included those from the following Districts:**

- Marin/San Francisco –  
Diablo Vista/Marin District  
(now Bay Area District)
- Monterey/Big Sur –  
Monterey District
- Santa Cruz –  
Santa Cruz District
- Los Angeles –  
Angeles District
- Orange County –  
Orange Coast District



**Additionally, potential partnership opportunities in critical content areas were presented by three Bay Area non-profit organizations:**

- Environmental education – NatureBridge
- Conservation leadership development – Student Conservation Association
- Integrating public health and parks – Institute at Golden Gate

• **Improving Park Access and Relevancy for Underserved Communities**

Increasing access to the state park system so that all Californians may benefit is a priority issue for the Department, the Commission, Parks Forward, and the Transformation Team.

In May 2014, with strong participation by members of the Legislature, the Commission conducted a public workshop in Los Angeles on improving park access and relevancy. The purpose of the workshop was to provide an opportunity for the Department's peers—practitioners from other park agencies as well as park advocates—to share their experiences.



Discussing best practices were representatives from exemplary programs operated by the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust, Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority, East Bay Regional Parks, and the Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation. Examples of national initiatives that have increased park access and relevancy for underserved communities were presented by representatives of the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area and the National Park Service's Latino Legacy Initiative.

Speakers representing the Prevention Institute, Community Health Councils, Inc., Mujeres de la Tierra, and the LA Conservation Corps described their work to engage underserved groups on a range of park and open-space issues at the local level. They spoke to the potential for partnerships between similar organizations throughout California and the Department to further the common goal of improving access to state parks.

**The best practices identified by speakers for improving park access for underserved and urban populations included:**

- Build parks where people live to ameliorate park inequities.
- Acknowledge and intentionally address key barriers to access, including:
  - Transportation and physical barriers;
  - Fears, perceptions, and social and cultural norms;
  - Knowledge and awareness of parks and outdoor activities; and
  - Challenges of developing urban parks—time, costs, and institutional commitment.
- Establish and nurture meaningful partnerships to effectively leverage resources and expertise, and to expand park constituencies. Priority partners include community-based organizations.

The final presentation was made by researchers from UCLA who, at the request of the Commission, are conducting a two-phase evaluation of the Department's past and current efforts to increase park access and relevancy for underserved groups.

- **Management and Restoration of Natural Resources**

A core component of the Department's mission is to preserve and protect natural resources. The Parks Forward Commission recognized the importance of this function and made several recommendations to the Department for improving this function. These recommendations include increasing partnerships with relevant public and private agencies to manage natural resources, to emphasize and address climate change adaptation in natural resource management, and to further develop the natural resource management program within the Department.

The Commission agrees with the Parks Forward recommendations. In September 2014, the Commission conducted a workshop on the management and restoration of natural resources within the State Park System. Presentations were made by both Department staff and partners on various topics: Audubon California



participated with Department staff in a presentation on the coastal resources within state parks; Save the Redwoods League and department staff presented on forest management practices; the California Invasive Plant Council and Department staff presented on invasive exotic species; the National Park Service and Department staff presented on resource inventory and monitoring; and UC Berkeley and Point Blue Conservation Science presented on resource protection in an era of climate change.

All of the presentations were very well received by the Commission and the public. The Commission looks forward to continuing to work with the Department on these efforts.

- **Interpretation and Education**

Interpretation and education help the public understand the rich natural and cultural heritage preserved in parks across the state. The Department's Interpretation and Education Division's mission is to inspire and promote excellence in interpretation and education for California State Parks. Interpretation and education programs are essential to the Department's goal of increasing park access and remaining relevant to all Californians.

In May 2015, the Commission conducted a workshop to explore the interpretation and education programs within the Department. The workshop explored ways that interpretation and education programs are reaching underserved populations, goals for incorporating technology into interpretation and education, and opportunities for growth within this division.

Presentations were made both by Department staff and partners including the Santa Barbara Trust for Historic Preservation, Consult 4 Kids, the California State Parks Foundation, the National Association for Interpretation, and Parks Canada.

In partnership with the Department and researchers at UCLA, the Commission initiated a formal evaluation of the Department's outreach and engagement activities with the goal of ensuring that the state's natural and cultural resources and wide-ranging recreational opportunities are equitably available to all.



## RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE DEPARTMENT

The Commission looks forward to continuing to work with the Department on the strategic initiatives identified in the Transformation Team Action Plan. Currently, the Transformation Team has identified 31 strategic initiatives across subject areas including: budget and finance, human resources, modernization, relevancy, planning and innovation, partnerships, operations, and natural and cultural resources.

**The Commission offers the following recommendations to the Department, which are also addressed in the Transformation Team Action Plan. The recommendations are meant to complement the work of the Parks Forward Commission and the Transformation Team:**

### **1. Take meaningful steps to increase and improve access to state parks for underserved and urban communities.**

Improving access to the state park system and enhancing its relevancy to underserved groups is a strategic imperative for the Department. While the Department has been conducting outreach to and engagement of underserved communities since the 1970s, more must be done to improve these services at a higher caliber—with more efficiency and effectiveness and at the appropriate statewide scale.

The Commission encourages the Department to continue its prioritization of this critical issue as well as the internal evaluation of its outreach and engagement activities initiated under the Department's current administration.

### **2. Develop and implement an effective data collection system to monitor, document, and analyze park usage patterns and trends.**

The Department currently relies on camping reservations and vehicle-parking data to generate estimates of park usage. State-of-the-art methodologies to more accurately document the number of people visiting state parks and to generate associated demographic information will help the Department better meet the needs of current visitors as it develops marketing and outreach strategies to reach potential users.

A robust data collection and analysis system will also provide critical information to develop quality programming and special events designed to reach underserved communities, a younger demographic, and other population sectors.



**3. Eliminate barriers to ensure more efficient and effective partnership agreements and management.**

Despite the many examples of productive and well-functioning partnerships within California State Parks, current policies and practices make it difficult to enable partners to take on roles and functions the Department is unable to perform at many parks, due to insufficient resources.

The Commission has concluded that a more aggressive and creative pursuit of partnership opportunities, combined with greater legal flexibility to create such partnerships, would provide the Department and the public with considerably greater benefits. Formal partnership agreements with the private sector, foundations, and community-based organizations, as well as environmental and conservation groups, all need to expand.

**4. Develop a financial system that is structured around its five core functions.**

For the Department to properly manage its five core functions—recreation, facilities management, public safety, natural and cultural resource management, and interpretation and education—it needs a financial system and budgeting process that permits optimal resource allocation in managing these basic functions. An expenditure-tracking system for these core functions has been recommended by the Commission; the system is currently under development by the Transformation Team in its Service-based Budgeting initiative.

## CONCLUSION

The Commission has made significant strides over the last two years in improving its outreach to the public; identifying priority issues to examine in greater depth; adopting a workshop meeting format to assess key issues; and strengthening its relationship with the Department, the Administration, the Legislature, other Commissions, and partner organizations.

The Commission is pleased with the positive changes occurring in the state park system as a result of the dedicated efforts of the Administration, the Legislature, the Parks Forward Commission, the Transformation Team, and the Department. The Commission plans to continue to work with these and other partners to effectively achieve shared goals and objectives. The Commission is enthusiastic about expanding and enhancing engagement of the general public and organizational stakeholders, and to continuing the positive work with the Department to transform California's 150-year-old state park system into a twenty-first century model for park systems around the world.



*California State Park and Recreation Commission, 2014–15, from left to right: Myrian Solis Coronel - Vice Chair, Ernest Chung, Elva Yanez, Tommy Randle, Diane Wittenberg - Chair, Paul Junger Witt.*

