

AVENUES

AUTOMOBILE CLUB OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

WAYS

MAGAZINE

SOON TO BE
WESTWAYS

Golden **STATE PARKS**

MONITORING
SOUTHLAND
TRAFFIC

A TRIO OF
GOOD SPORTS

NOVEMBER / DECEMBER 1998





State of the Parks

The struggle to protect California's treasures is a constant, complex battle.

By Jan Golab

ANZA-BORREGO, California's largest state park, seems far more vast than its 600,000 acres. Buffered against development on three sides by the Bureau of Land Management and Cleveland National Forest, it remains wild, pristine, remote. *Borregos* (bighorn sheep) still roam the craggy, pine-dotted mountain cliffs that frame the complex desert vistas ranging from endless tracts of cacti and blazing wildflowers to palm groves and drifting sand dunes. Visitors come to be awed by the space, light, silence, and unfolding mystery of the park. Supervising Ranger Fred Jee, who has worked at Anza-Borrego for 23 years, explains the park's allure: "It's what you keep discovering. The desert habitat here is the best you'll find anywhere, bar none."

Just 100 miles east of San Diego and only a few hours' drive from 17 million Californians, Anza-Borrego is a shining example of what California State Parks battles to protect. Charged with preserving the best of California for future generations, the park system must constantly struggle with a shrinking budget, mushrooming population and development, and environmental pressures. Daily it faces myriad challenges: how to maintain parks without enough money, where to allow development and where to stave it off, how to protect the environment while still allowing visitors to enjoy the parks.

Indeed, 70 million visitors—twice the state's population—flock to California's 263 state parks each year. They visit the last of the state's unspoiled wilderness, 280 miles of its most breathtaking coastline, 2.8 million historic and archaeological artifacts, and 1,500 historic buildings, irreplaceable treasures. Despite the challenges it has faced, the State Park system



CHUCK PLACE

remains resolutely dedicated to the "inviolable right" of the people to have those treasures preserved for future generations. Though these are not the best of times for state parks, we're all fortunate that the agency takes its mission seriously.

Parks are our playgrounds, our wilderness, our history—places to escape the bounds of suburbia for open land, recreation, and to remember our past.

Money Matters

In this era of lower taxes and less government, one of the greatest challenges facing State Parks has been simply keeping the parks open. "During the recession at the beginning of the decade, we thought we were going to have to close down a lot of parks," says Ken Colombini, communications director for State Parks. "But instead, we reorganized and cut the bureaucracy, eliminating regional management levels, so that we now have 22 districts that answer to one person in Sacramento. We didn't have to close any parks or lay off a lot of people."

Still, California State Parks has put off infrastructure maintenance for so long that it has a current backlog of \$700 million in needed funds. Rangers describe run-down facilities, long marked for replacement, that keep getting neglected because something else must be fixed—such as a broken sewage line. Historic restorations and new acquisitions have been exiled to the back burner. In August, Governor Pete Wilson approved a budget that appropriates \$30 million in new funding from the state's General Fund for high-priority deferred maintenance. (The state's General Fund currently supports 35 percent of park system operations, and revenue raised at the parks, including fees and concessions, supports 34 percent.) "This new money will fund hundreds of important projects around the state," says Director Patricia Megason. "Many of our structures are 30 to 40 years old—and showing their age. We need \$700 million, and we can't do that with fee increases."

Megason believes the park system's administration must find the right balance between state General Fund support (taxpayer money) and park revenue support (user and concessionaire fees). So far, state parks have resisted adopting massive fee hikes like those made by federal parks. State parks bring close to one billion tourist dollars a year into California, yet the system's current annual budget is just \$195.4 million. "That's not much divided among 263 parks," muses one superintendent. And to make matters worse, this year's El Niño storms have



CHUCK PLACE

Previous spread: Anza-Borrego's wildflowers bloom from mid-February to April. Above: Original buildings remain at Marshall Gold Discovery Historic Park in Coloma. Left: Bustling Old Town San Diego marks the site of the first permanent Spanish settlement along the California coast. Opposite: Scenic El Matador State Beach in Los Angeles County.



“Parks are places that rejuvenate. They’re part of our public health.”

caused approximately \$14.8 million in damage in 86 parks.

Hearst Castle, the system’s crown jewel, cost \$9 million to operate and maintain last year but took in \$11 million thanks to its 825,000 visitors. “We do make money for the State of California,” says Chief Curator Hoyt Fields. Hearst Castle uses half a million dollars for building conservation every year, and another quarter of a million for art restoration. “Of course, one piece of art might cost \$175,000 to restore,” Fields explains. “Right now there are four first century B.C.–era Greek vases being worked on that will cost \$90,000.”

The Development Tightrope

Although high visitor turnout means that a park can remain solvent, the park system must still walk a tightrope to facilitate

both use and preservation, especially of historic sites. Take, for example, Old Town San Diego, the most visited state park. The park system maintains more than a dozen colorful and historic stucco, adobe, and tile structures in this beautiful square. Mariachi music and the aroma of fresh-baked *churros* waft from the lush garden courtyard containing four huge Mexican restaurants, one Italian restaurant, one Chinese restaurant, and Bazaar del Mundo’s 17 shops. Huge crowds attest to the fact that Old Town San Diego is a vibrant and festive gathering place. But some might argue that it’s overcommercialized.

Often the conflict between use and preservation is neither simple nor clear. Crystal Cove, a ’20s-era beach community of 46 cottages situated north of Laguna Beach, was purchased by State Parks in 1979 along with five miles of coastline and



One of the greatest challenges facing State Parks has been simply keeping the parks open.

2,800 inland acres. Proposals to develop this property have resulted in unending controversy. State Parks has negotiated a deal allowing Crystal Cove Preservation Partners, a consortium of developers, to build a \$20 million, 12-acre beachfront resort. The project, in which existing structures would be renovated and period-style cottages would be added, is intended to maintain the historic character of the community. CCPP would oversee the development for 55 years; State Parks would maintain ownership. But to some environmentalists and park enthusiasts, development of any kind is anathema. "It's problematic," says Parks Southern Division Chief Dick Troy, "because our interest is to make this [coastline] more available to the public, but we don't have \$20 million to invest in the property. Some people are protesting because they feel anything we do to make it a marketable resort will destroy the historic fabric of the community. This is always an issue: How much do you retain; how much do you change?"

Islands in the City

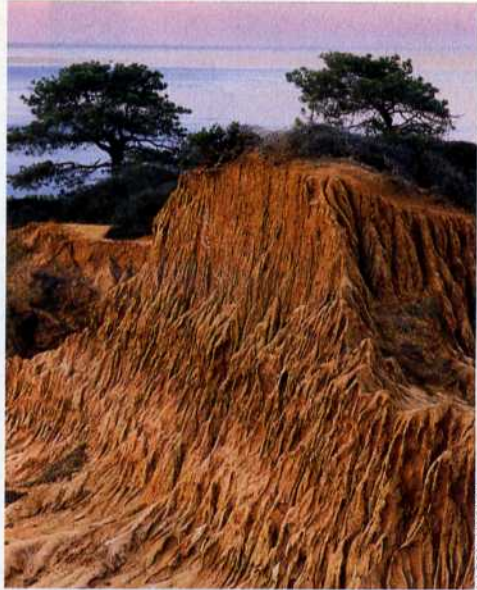
Urban encroachment currently threatens a number of parks, but how can development be stopped when the state's

population continues to increase? You don't have to be an old-timer to recall when Mount Diablo, just east of San Francisco, was way out in the middle of nowhere. Today, hikers at its peak find themselves atop an island of state parkland surrounded by urban development. Buying up land around existing parks is an obvious solution, but where the money would come from is far less obvious.

When parks are cut off from neighboring wilderness tracts they lose what biologists call connectivity, and plant and animal species suffer due to a lack of influx into their gene pools. Chino Hills State Park, 25,000 acres of land in Orange and Riverside Counties, is connected to the Cleveland National Forest by only an underpass beneath Highway 71 near Coal Canyon. This 100-foot-wide corridor, the only passageway for mountain lions, deer, and other wildlife, was saved in August from a proposed commercial development. "The only way to stop the Coal Canyon project is to buy the property," says Troy. That will happen thanks to the new budget, which includes \$3 million for acquisition of the biological corridor.

New development means more roads. The Transportation Corridor Agencies, which represent Orange County and

Opposite: Lompoc's La Purisima Mission State Historic Park is considered one of the most complete and authentic mission restorations in the West. Right: North of San Diego, Torrey Pines State Reserve is one of two natural Torrey pine habitats in the world. Below: A showy bloom from Anza-Borrego's visitors' center garden.



LARRY ULRICH

that alternative, and if it is selected and accepted by the Marine Corps, we expect mitigations. We want to be made whole for our loss. We want replacement campgrounds and facilities built somewhere else." TCA spokesperson Lisa Telles says it has commissioned an environmental impact survey for both alternatives and is awaiting the results. Telles says a decision won't be made until next year.

numerous municipalities, have proposed building a freeway in north San Diego County through San Onofre State Park, which State Parks leases from the Marines. "There's already a lot of money and support behind the project," says Troy, "but San Onofre is one of the last vestiges of undeveloped coastal canyon in Southern California. We believe it should be preserved."

State Parks has asked the TCA to consider other alternatives. One of these would call for the proposed freeway to pass through San Clemente, a prospect many of that city's residents oppose. The hard reality is that due to the demands of a growing population, something has to give. Noah Tilghman, senior parks and recreation specialist in the Resource Management Division, says there is only so much the State Park system can do. "We have told [the TCA] we don't like

Thankfully, some parks in urban areas remain remarkably wild and unspoiled. Windsurfers, fishers, and picnickers still enjoy the big breezy coves of San Francisco's Candlestick Point, and in the Southland's Will Rogers State Historic Park on Sunset Boulevard, a short hike up to Inspiration Point provides spectacular views of downtown L.A. and, on a clear day, Santa Catalina Island.

Open for All

Off-roading, hiking, mountain biking, rock climbing, boating: Popular activities such as these make high demands on the

Want to Pitch In at the Parks?

In 1996 more than 12,000 volunteers contributed almost a million hours of service to California State Parks. During their volunteer service, they took visitors on guided tours to observe nesting elephant seals at Año Nuevo Reserve. They monitored wilderness ham-radio emergency calls at Mount San Jacinto State Park. They assisted archaeologists during excavations at Anza-Borrego and erected predator enclosures for snowy plover nests in Monterey. They portrayed padres and soldiers during Living History Days at La Purisima Mission. They rode on horse, mountain bike, and off-road-vehicle patrols. They gave educational lectures, conducted campfire astronomy programs, and joined policy-setting management teams. They constructed trails, gardened, led museum tours, raised funds, and produced park publications and questionnaires. They restored lighthouses and adobes, cataloged artifacts, and maintained collections. And they participated in an array of special events, ranging from weekend spring Trail Days to the Festival of Whales Parade and the Banana Slug Derby Festival, when some even dressed up like banana slugs.



LARRY ULRICH

Volunteers work on both short- and long-term projects. Many become docents, who are trained to interpret state parks' cultural, natural, and recreational resources for visitors. Docents are considered nonpaid state employees; after 200 hours of service, they receive a pass to visit all state parks free of charge. Campground Hosts are volunteers who collect fees, aid campers and visitors, conduct interpretive programs, and handle other situations. They usually are required to own a camper or trailer in which they reside at the park for at least 90 days.

Opportunities are matched to the interests and abilities of each volunteer. A medical exam and criminal background check are required for some positions. Each park superintendent sets the volunteers' hours, usually a minimum of eight to 12 a month; hours are flexible and varied. Volunteer applications can be obtained at some park visitors' centers, or you can write or phone the volunteer coordinator in your district. Or call (916) 653-8819 for more information about volunteer programs. If you have special talents or interests, tell your volunteer coordinator. Who knows? You might end up playing a banana slug. —J.G.

environment. State parks must constantly reconcile the sometimes cross-purposes of offering high-quality recreation with environmental preservation. To accommodate Californians' continuing love affair with sport utility vehicles, rangers at Anza-Borrego and other parks have provided the public with vehicle trail maps, guided tours by private concessionaires, and educational programs on safe and responsible backcountry driving. Hard-core off-roaders usually head for places such as Hungry Valley State Vehicle Recreation Area near Gorman, but Anza-Borrego's 500 miles of vehicle trails are luring more SUV drivers each day.

The top recreational-versus-use conflict at most state parks involves hikers, mountain bikers, and equestrians. At such urban-area parks as Topanga and Malibu Creek west of L.A., Wilder Ranch in Santa Cruz, and Marin County's Mount Tamalpais and China Camp, keeping the peace requires an ongoing juggling act. The State Park system's statewide policy calls for



JERRIE FINLEY

all fire roads to be open to bikers; each superintendent must determine on which trails bikers and hikers can coexist and on which they can't. This often requires working with groups such as mountain-biking clubs to establish and enforce rules. "It involves a lot of communication and compromise," says Troy. "It's not an easy fix."

To avoid erosion and stability problems at some parks, such as Castle Rock State Park in the Santa Cruz Mountains

above Los Gatos, superintendents have had to limit access to rock climbers. "Sometimes you have to do unpopular things," explains Troy. "We take our mission very seriously. So there are areas where we allow consumptive use and others where we make sure the parks are used very lightly."

Teaching and Learning

California State Parks provides the largest educational setting outside schools. More than 17,000 school groups made field trips to state parks last year. The parks' interpretive programs bring to life the subjects schoolchildren studying California history have read about, including padres, gold miners, and early explorers. As part of the sesquicentennial celebration this year, the parks also have initiated a passport program that provides kids with booklets to be stamped at each state park they visit. (Adults might soon experience the educational side of parks as well; ecotourism might also be in the park system's future.)

Jack Shu, park superintendent in charge of community involvement for Southern California, has developed a number of pilot programs, particularly for at-risk inner-city youths, many of whom might never visit a state park on their own. One of these programs, FamCamp, works with volunteer groups, including police activities leagues, boys' and girls' clubs, and court-referral rehab programs, to organize camping trips for at-risk youths and their families. So far, FamCamp groups have made camping trips to eight state parks.

What the Future Holds

As the most ethnically diverse state in the nation, California will increasingly reflect its multiculturalism in its state parks. Currently, the state's diverse history is celebrated at Colonel Alленsworth State Park in the San Joaquin Valley, site of the first town founded by African-Americans, built in 1908. During Living History Days, docents at La Purísima, the most fully restored of California's 21 missions, adopt period dress and



LARRY ULRICH

Above: Design of Hearst Castle began in 1919. Left: Divers can explore 700 acres of diverse and protected underwater environment at Point Lobos State Reserve. Opposite: Mule team freight trains stopped at Red Rock Canyon State Park from 1868 until 1875 on their journey south to Los Angeles.



“We take our mission very seriously. So there are areas where we allow consumptive use and others where we make sure the parks are used very lightly.”

character to transport visitors back in time to the early 1800s. Many State Parks representatives believe the agency will have an increasing role in easing interaction between different ethnic groups. Shu believes state parks will eventually provide more social services, but acknowledges that this notion remains controversial. “Some rangers say we’re not a social service organization, but others got into it for this,” he explains. “I don’t believe it will cause a clash so much as it will be an enrichment. Parks are places that rejuvenate. They’re part of our public health.”

In the face of continued budget constraints and what the system’s 1997 publication *The Seventh Generation*

describes as “continuing assaults on our parks and park philosophy by proposals that are less than environmentally sound,” State Parks will stay committed to its mission. To ensure that history and the environment are preserved and that people have places to enjoy the outdoors, State Parks ardently defends all that makes California the Golden State—from Marshall Gold Discovery Historic Park, which celebrates the 1848 strike that put California on the map, to the ragged cliffs and aquamarine coves at Point Lobos, our state’s most picturesque shoreline. Into the next millennium, State Parks will continue to preserve California’s heritage—for everyone. ■