



Montana Parks, Recreation & Heritage HJ 32 White Paper

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Montana's rich heritage in cultural, natural, and recreational resources has the potential to propel Montana as a national leader in the outdoor recreation field. Recreation demand in Montana is increasing, but opportunities and funding are challenged or decreasing throughout the state. There is a lack of emphasis and integration on recreational and heritage activities at the state level to comprehensively manage demands, interests and opportunities, and implement creative solutions. A newly formed Parks, Recreation & Heritage Commission in Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks is needed as a pivotal body to coordinate recreational and heritage resource management for the state of Montana, to advocate for high quality opportunities statewide, and to grow Montana's tourism and economic health toward becoming a recognized national leader.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

Parks Division Overview

The Parks Division is located in the Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) Department, and includes two primary programs: Montana State Parks, and Recreation Programs. The mission of Montana State Parks is to preserve, enhance, and interpret a diverse representation of Montana's most outstanding natural, cultural, and recreational resources; to provide a multi-faceted treasure of personal, social, and environmental benefits; and to help facilitate sustainable economic development through tourism. The Montana State Parks system has 54 state parks that total 46,156 acres of park land, including seven National Historic Landmarks (NHL) and 11 National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). In 2010, there were almost 2.0 million park visitors, an increase of 50 percent over 2002, with resident visitation increasing by 78 percent alone (Figure 1). Overall visitor satisfaction with service and facilities also increased 94 percent over the same period.

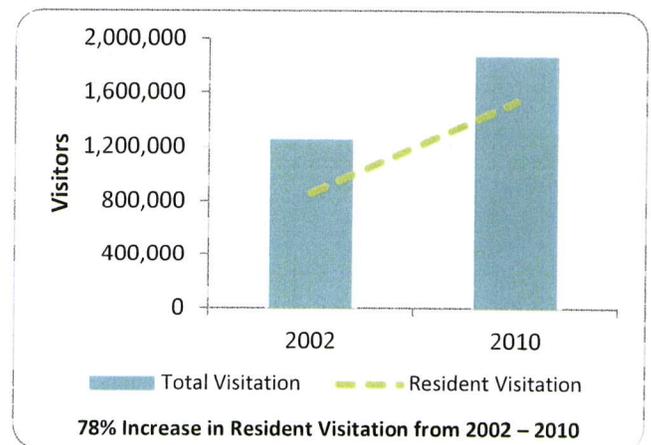


Figure 1. Montana State Park Visitation, 2002 and 2010.

Increased visitation to state parks supports stronger and healthier communities who benefit economically from park visitation. According to the University of Montana, in 2010 over \$289 million in total spending was attributable to visitation at state parks. Tourism from parks supports a broad range of businesses in Montana, including restaurants, accommodations, museums, groceries, and retail. Nonresident park visitors spent \$122.3 million, and in the process created nearly 1,600 jobs, \$41.5 million in labor income, and over \$126.7 million in industry sales. Compared to 2002 levels, higher expenditures increased employment by 36 percent, labor income by 48 percent, and industry sales by 30 percent.

In addition to Montana State Parks, the Parks Division manages five recreation programs:

1. Recreational Trails Program, a federal grants program focusing on trail development, renovation, maintenance, acquisition, safety and interpretation for non-motorized and motorized trail users on local, state and federal lands.
2. Montana Snowmobile Program, a state grants program for grooming of snowmobile trails; maintenance of sheds, bridges, and signs; plowing of trailhead parking lots; and snowmobile safety and ethics education.

3. Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) Program, a state grants program for OHV trails for maintenance of existing trails; signing of trails; noxious weed control adjacent to trails; route mapping; and OHV safety and ethics education.
4. Motorboat Facility Program, a state program to fund grants for motorboat use statewide in an effort to increase local public access to motorboating facilities.
5. Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), a federal grants program for the acquisition and development of public outdoor recreation areas and outdoor facilities for all types of recreationists on state and local lands.

A number of advisory committees exist to advise the Division on issues in Montana relating to the funding, development, maintenance, and management, including: State Trails Advisory Committee; Boating Advisory Committee; Snowmobile Advisory Committee; and OHV Advisory Committee. These committees are limited in scope but could be more valuable.

A Longstanding Challenge

In 1990 and 2002, two Governors created the State Parks Futures Committees to make recommendations about the proper role, priorities, and funding for Montana State Parks. The Committees recognized the world class recreational opportunities and significant contributions to the quality of life provided by the Montana State Parks system. But the Committees also highlighted that Montana residents and non-residents are confused about the role of the Montana State Parks system, are concerned about the deteriorating conditions at state parks, and believe that parks' needs are too frequently subordinated to the needs of the Fish & Game department. The Committees' concluded that FWP should strive to make the Parks Division a more integral partner with its fish and wildlife efforts. The parks system as a whole is falling short of its potential to educate, inspire, and inform park users of Montana's recreational and cultural opportunities and heritage, while contributing to Montana's economy. Recommendations from the two Committees have not been fully implemented, and the root cause has yet to be addressed.

Paying for Parks

Montana State Parks programs are funded by seven sources, including statutory revenue, state parks earned revenue, other state revenue (i.e. taxes), and federal revenue (Figure 2). In 2010, the majority of Parks funding was generated from light vehicle registration fees, which accounted for 35 percent of the funding sources. Park fees were second with 21 percent of funding sources. Since 1980, federal LWCF monies allocated to Montana have decreased significantly, from \$3.0 million allocated in 1979 to less than \$100,000 in 1999, a decrease of almost 97 percent in 20 years. Montana State Parks receives no general fund.

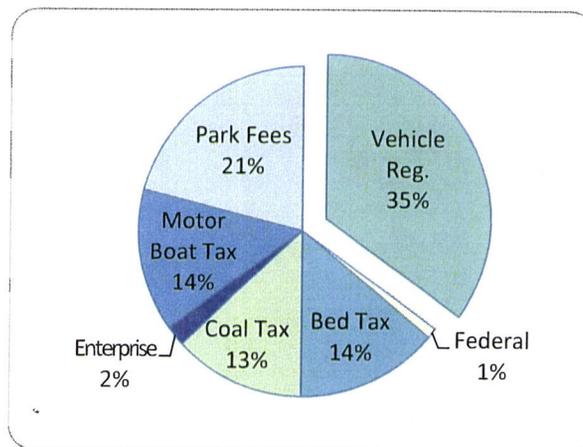


Figure 2. State Parks Funding Sources, 2010

FWP, as a department, receives over \$57 million each year from the sale of hunting and fishing equipment through the Federal Aid in Sport Fish and Wildlife Restoration Program. This constitutes nearly 65 percent of the FWP budget. Although license money is state revenue, its use is strictly limited to administering fish and wildlife management, and any diversion of state license monies results in severe penalty and loss of funding. As a result, the Parks Division is excluded from receiving any portion of this departmental funding source. Decreasing opportunities for funding sources is challenging the Parks Division's ability to meet the needs of its programs, as well as the needs of its partnering communities and agencies.

Since 1965, LWCF has been used to establish a diversity of parks and recreation opportunities throughout Montana, including development of city, county, and state parks and fishing access sites; and facilities development and improvements for community amenities like swimming pools, tennis courts, ball fields and community parks. As of 2010, 1,200 LWCF state assistance grants have benefited state and community parks across Montana, supporting local recreation and enhancing public health through recreation facilities. In addition to supporting recreation opportunities, the LWCF has also played a critical role in sustaining Montana's economy and tourism industry. As a whole, outdoor recreation industries in Montana generate \$2.5 billion in economic activity for the state every year and support 34,000 Montana jobs.

Statewide Outdoor Recreation Overview

In Montana, there are seven major agencies that provide outdoor recreation at the state and federal level, managing approximately 32 million acres of public lands that includes access for recreation. Additionally, over 30 local/county governments throughout Montana have a parks and recreation department that manage city parks and support recreation opportunities on nearby state and federal lands for activities like swimming, hiking, and biking.

In light of decreasing budgets and revenue, recreation demand across Montana has been increasing over the past decade. Visitation in Montana State Parks has increased over 50 percent since 2002, particularly among residents who increased their use by 78 percent for activities including camping, educational talks, and family reunions. From 2000 to 2010, OHV registration has tripled from 20,000 to almost 70,000 registered units in 2010. Over the same timeframe, snowmobile registration has also increased from over 23,000 units to over 45,000 units (Figure 3).

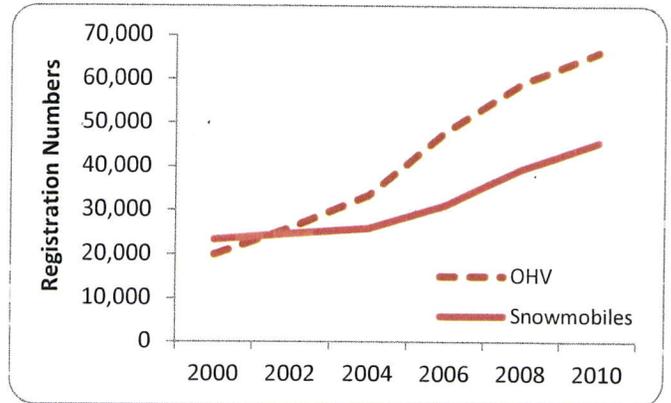


Figure 3. Registered travel units in Montana, 2000-2010.

According to Montana’s 2008 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP), the primary recreation activity for Montanans is walking, and one quarter of Montanans who walk do so 8-12 times a month. Camping, horseback riding, mountain biking, and skiing are also cited as top activities throughout Montana. Facilities such as parks and open space, playgrounds, trails, skate parks, swimming pools, and ball fields are also important facilities to serve Montanans who enjoy outdoor activities frequently. Non-motorized boating (sailing, canoeing, kayaking, rafting, rowing) has been increasing on a national trend, although FWP does not track non-motorized boating. In 2009, the US Coast Guard estimated that the number of non-motorized boat users nationally is expected to increase by 13.7 percent from 2000 to 2020 to a total of 78.8 million users nationwide.

While recreation demand has been increasing, citizens and agencies are facing considerable challenges in maintaining quality levels of recreation. In 2003, the Forest Service estimated that Lewis and Clark National Forest in Montana had 1,348 unauthorized trails extending for 646 miles. At the same time, loss of access to public trails and recreational activities across public lands was one of the most important issues to emerge for Montanans in the 2001 Montana State Trails Plan and again in the 2008 SCORP. The perception among users is that opportunity and funding are decreasing over time; however, coordination on a statewide scale can actually expand opportunity by integrating agency efforts and organized community involvement to provide high quality opportunities, overcome decreasing budgets, and provide a forum for addressing user group interests. With growing demand, the need to coordinate opportunities and management challenges at the state level across agencies becomes more paramount for all types of recreation. No forum exists for parks, recreation, and heritage resources that fully encompass the diverse challenges, opportunities, and user groups that make recreation management unique.

But this is Montana!: A Comparative Analysis

The Environmental Quality Council surveyed the Rocky Mountain states—Montana, Idaho, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico—to understand how the Montana State Parks system compares to other state parks systems in terms of number of parks, staff, operating budget, and population to provide a comparative analysis on the status of Montana State Parks. Figures 4, 5, 6 compare Montana with the adjacent states of Idaho, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming related to the number of park staff, number of state parks, total state population, and state parks operating budget.

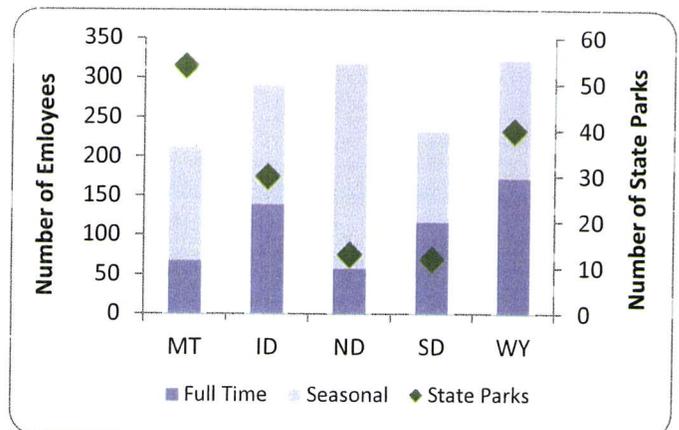


Figure 4. Number of employees and number of state parks.

For the number of parks Montana State Parks manages—54 state parks, including seven NHLs and 11 NRHPs—Montana comparatively has one of the smallest staff and operating budgets relative to adjacent states. While Montana is the seventh least populated state in the country, its park system is larger than North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming—all states that have smaller populations. Wyoming, as an example, has about half the population of Montana, a third less state parks, but a higher operating budget by \$2 million and a separate Parks and Cultural Resources Commission.

Montana has the potential to have one of the greatest state parks and recreation systems in the nation, but historically FWP has lacked resolve to address the challenges facing Montana State Parks and to provide sufficient levels of funding, staffing, and organizational structure for it to succeed. It is not a question of whether Montana can sustain a nationally recognized park system, it is a question of whether there is the priority and impetus to make it happen.

Montana Heritage Commission

Montana has a deep and rich history of heritage resources. The Legislature created the Montana Heritage Commission in 1997 to preserve and manage historic resources at three sites: Virginia City, Nevada City and Reeder's Alley. Montana Heritage Commission manages 160 acres, and has a board of 14 commissioners, three committees, and a permanent staff of seven people as of 2011. According to its website, the Montana Heritage Commission's programs require more than \$1 million per year at the current level. The Montana Heritage Commission shares funding sources with Montana State Parks, including accommodation taxes and vehicle registration fees, and both collect user fees.

The mission of the Montana Heritage Commission is important to preserving heritage resources in Montana. Just as Montana Heritage Commission manages heritage sites, Montana State Parks also manages heritage sites and helps to preserve Montana's heritage resources, including seven National Historic Landmarks as state parks—Travelers Rest, Chief Plenty Coups, Pictograph Cave, Three Forks of the Missouri, Giant Springs, Rosebud Battlefield, and Bannack—as well as another 11 National Register sites. According to the University of Montana, Montanans strongly agree that Montana State Parks are important to preserving Montana's heritage. As such, Montana State Parks is a key manager in heritage resources and shares many of the same funding sources as the Montana Heritage Commission, yet lacks the strong structure of a commission solely dedicated to managing both heritage and recreation resources.

HERE'S HOW WE FIX IT

Manage Heritage Sites as State Parks

Designate Virginia City/Nevada City and Reeder's Alley as state parks, and integrate them into the Montana State Parks system. This will consolidate resources and create a stronger network of partners to support heritage sites and state parks. This recommendation has twice been identified through the Legislature, but has yet to be implemented.

Establish the Parks, Recreation & Heritage Commission

Create a Parks, Recreation & Heritage Commission by revising the Montana Heritage Commission. The new Parks, Recreation & Heritage Commission will serve as a pivotal body to coordinate recreational and heritage resource management for the state of Montana. In addition, the Commission will advocate for high quality opportunities statewide across jurisdictional boundaries that will support tourism and economic health in Montana. The emphasis of the Commission will focus on the greater interest of managing and furthering parks, recreation, and heritage opportunities for residents and non-residents in state parks, heritage sites, and public lands in a consolidated and integrated structure and system. The Commission will continue to work within FWP to help maintain high quality hunting and angling opportunities as well.

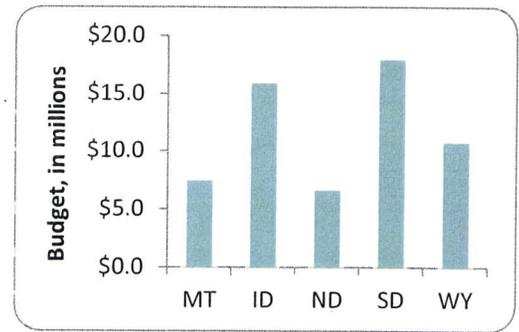


Figure 5. Population by State.

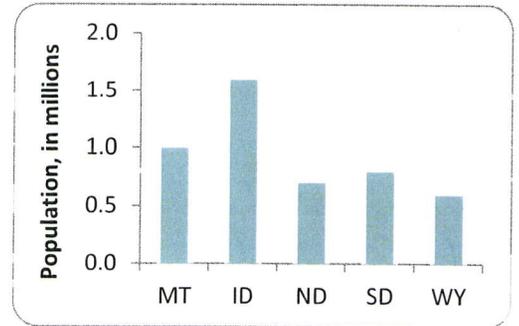


Figure 6. Park Operating Budgets by State.

The key components of the Parks, Recreation & Heritage Commission are:

Heritage Resources Management

- The Commission will integrate heritage resource sites as a major emphasis to provide a comprehensive forum for discussing and deliberating all heritage resources across state agencies.

Recreational Resources

- The Commission will assume the overall role of overseeing and determining policy, direction, and rules for recreational resources under the Parks Division, in order to provide sufficient attention and resources to recreational resource management including camping, hiking, snowmobiles, horseback riding, mountain biking, boating, and education and interpretation.

Tourism & Economic Development

- The Commission will help keep tourism and economic development as a central focus, emphasizing the economic impact of recreational and heritage resources on Montana's economy, and recognizing that visitors to state parks, heritage sites, and public lands--both residents and non-residents--contribute to the growth and sustainability of Montana's recreation industry as well as local economies and the overall quality of life in Montana.

Coordination & Integration

- The Commission will play a central role in coordinating and integrating recreational and heritage resource management on a state level across agencies and jurisdictional boundaries, and with user groups under the existing committees.

Citizen Involvement & Oversight

- The Commission will emphasize the role of citizen engagement and involvement in the planning and rulemaking process for park & recreation and heritage resource management, and will provide a forum for diverse user groups to document their interests and be a part of the solution to manage high quality and sustainable opportunities across the state.

The Parks, Recreation & Heritage Commission is the most viable solution for maintaining the legacy of heritage sites and state parks in Montana. As a result, the newly established Parks, Recreation & Heritage Commission will:

1. Ensure that Montana State Parks and the Parks Division continue to be a part of FWP, while helping differentiate Montana State Parks and its unique set of challenges and opportunities from the Fish & Wildlife Division;
2. Consolidate and integrate government in a way that is more meaningful and encourages stronger partnerships and support both within state government and with statewide partners;
3. Unite and promote parks & recreation and heritage site management under a single citizen body, giving user groups a stronger voice in the management of recreational and cultural resources in Montana; and
4. Relieve pressure off the Fish & Wildlife Commission and give Montana State Parks an opportunity to fix longstanding problems and develop into a national leader.