

# Joint Oversight Hearing on Impact and Status of State Park Closures

*Assembly Water, Parks & Wildlife Committee  
Assembly Accountability and Administrative Review Committee  
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## Shared Values

I love California's state parks. For me they are both my vocation and a special place for my family – in fact my two sons learnt to walk in state parks. These parks are not there by accident. They are there by design and through the dedication of countless citizens who helped create them and have put their faith in government to protect these places for all to enjoy.

Today as we face the first indefinite reduction in our park system's history I wanted to share with you some of the League's history, our assessment of the 16 redwood parks on the closure list, and initial thoughts about how we dig out of this hole.

Since 1918, my organization -- Save the Redwoods League -- has dedicated itself to protecting ancient redwoods and building parks for all to enjoy. Our model is simple: we buy land from willing sellers and transfer it to the state, most often at a 50% discount, for inclusion in the state park system. In fact, the League has protected 630 properties in 40 state parks covering almost 154,000 acres. Taking the closed parks alone, the League has protected 48 properties totaling some 8,310 acres. We don't have exact figures, but our donors have invested well over \$135 million in these parks. The League purchased these lands for State Parks using money donated by our members. They donate to us expecting that we are permanently protecting the redwood lands that we acquire and transfer to the State.

Accordingly, it is our practice to retain a deed restriction to ensure our donor's interests are protected. As you might imagine, over 90 years the form of restriction has varied – but in essence it is best captured using the words of one of the earliest forms of restrictions – this Grant is made to the State of California so that *"its citizens may enjoy this land in perpetuity."* It is the League's expectations, as well as that of our donors, that the State will live up to its historic, moral and legal obligation to satisfy the commitment set forth when it accepted ownership of these lands.

## Shutting the Gates

In fact, on June 30, 2012 the gates will slam shut on 70 parks. The Governor's office is calling these "permanent reductions." Of these, almost one quarter are redwood parks.

When the gates close, law abiding citizens will be locked out, but you can't simply lock out the law breakers. I cannot tell you what will happen in these closed parks – the State has never done this before. But I can tell you what is happening today in some of our open and underfunded parks.

- At **Henry Cowell State Park**, our staff worked alongside state park rangers to remove a pot garden, complete with its yards of black tubing, large garbage bins of soil, and mounds of trash on a piece of property we had previously transferred to them. This garden was a stones-throw from the main campground.
- At **Humboldt Redwoods State Park** and **Grizzly Creek Redwoods State Park** I have seen the carcass of a 1,000 year old redwood cut by thieves for split products. It is devastating to see an ancient giant butchered for a split rail fence.
- And at **Jug Handle State Reserve**, on the day after the closure list was announced, I walked a closed trail up through the Ecological Staircase and was passed by mountain bikers, off leash dogs, all the time avoiding the piles of horse manure on what was ostensibly a closed foot trail. OK, I was not obeying the closed sign – but at least I was obeying the trail rules.

When we close parks I can expect that these impacts will only be magnified. To quote a park superintendent, “The best deterrent is having the law abiding public around.” It is these law abiding citizens who will be excluded.

### Where do we go from here?

I have been thinking a lot about parks in the past months. Not only do they protect special places, but the whole institution and system is special. Few other parts of state government have such a deep history of philanthropic support. What other part of state government is equal part museum, classroom, wildlife habitat, provider of clean air and water, engine of local economic development, and world class tourist attraction? State Parks are not like Highway Patrol or schools or prisons – this difference should be recognized and inform the State as it identifies new ways to effectively operate State Parks.

The good news is people still value their parks and want to help. The challenge is under the current system they simply don’t know how to help. AB 42 was an important first step in trying different approaches and we applaud you for that bold move. It has spurred many locally-driven “rescue efforts.” But many places on the closure list have NO prospects of being saved. Our assessment of the 16 redwood parks suggests there are potential solutions for about half of them. None are certain – even the National Park Service rescue is year by year – and many parks now face an uncertain future.

When I talk to our members about what the League should do to help the parks, here is what they are telling me:

- *First*, they want to know that their money will go to support a particular park they care about.
- *Second*, they want to know that the state will not use it as cover for further cuts – they want to know their support adds values, not merely supplants funding.

- *Third*, they want us to try new approaches: in essence they are telling us they don't want to throw more money at a broken system – they want to help change the system to meet the immense challenges it is facing. If the old model was characterized by the state doing it all, they want a new model where the park is a hub of activity for citizens who care.

Because this is uncharted territory we don't yet know what these new models will look like, but there are examples we are looking to. In San Francisco, the Golden Gate National Recreation Area is supported by a powerhouse non-profit that raises money, yes, but also provides front-line services in the park. In England, The National Trust has dropped the velvet ropes that traditionally barred people from truly experiencing their stately homes and parks and started to tell people, "YES!" Too often our parks are characterized by a litany of "NO."

So what is the League going to do?

- *First*, we object to these deep cuts. Unfortunately, if the Department of Parks and Recreation is required to take a \$33 million cut over two years on the heels of more than 25 years of declining budgets, the reality is they need to look at closure and realignment. Of course, cutting parks was not a budget necessity; it was a choice the administration made. \$33 million is a rounding error in the state budget -- *it's barely enough money to keep the state running for 3 hours* (about the time scheduled for this hearing). In fact, closing parks will deepen the budget hole as sales tax receipts around closed parks decline. We believe that for all these reasons, these cuts are a shortsighted response to a difficult budget.
- *Second*, the League's focus is on ensuring that the natural resources are protected, even in closed parks. The biggest threat is from wood theft and illegal drug cultivation, and the significant threats to public safety that accompany them. We are ready to work with the state to protect these resources, but are ultimately holding the Governor and our elected officials accountable for their fate.
- *Third*, we will work with local groups to step up and help out. We believe the best deterrence against natural resource damage is a strong local presence in the park. If these local groups can continue to provide public access, even better. The League supports that.

So what are we asking the legislature and administration to do?

- A. Commit to protecting existing levels of general fund support even in the tough times ahead. Further cuts will leave DPR with no ability to help itself. Such a commitment would also provide the incentive for the Department, its partners and our donors to find creative ways of bringing new resources to the parks.
- B. Give the Department the authorities it needs to become more entrepreneurial and to help itself by generating additional revenue through mission-related activities. Parks are perhaps unique in

all of state government in that people will happily pay to use them if they are provided services. This needs to be acknowledged and they need to be run differently.

- C. Call for a new plan for state parks involving new roles for the public, private and non-profit sectors. How can we harness the energy of the public, private and non-profit sectors to not just plug the current budget gap, but to start digging out of the enormous backlog of deferred maintenance present today and to build the parks our children and grandchildren need?

This work is different and more challenging than at any point in the long history of state parks. But our focus at the League remains the same – ensuring the state’s magical redwood groves are protected and made accessible to the public. We know we cannot do this work alone. It’s going to take strong leadership and a willingness to do things differently from within the administration, the unwavering support of the legislature, and the willingness to let the legion of park supporters in as full partners. Let’s get going.

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