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Private Donors Step Up to Keep California State Parks Open

By: Kenneth Artz

August 8, 2012

Private donors are stepping up to help California keep its state parks open, allowing state officials to forego plans to close 70 of California's 278 state parks.

Low Attendance, Revenues

The Parks and Recreation Department had targeted the 70 state parks for closure due to low attendance and low revenues. Parks and Recreation director Ruth Coleman said with proposed budget cuts over the next two years, the state could no longer afford to operate all the parks within the system. Private donations will allow the state to keep the parks open at least through the end of the year.

California is second to Alaska in terms of the most acreage set aside for state parks. Low attendance and low revenues, however, have many wondering whether the state has set aside too much land for state parks.

Advocates of extensive state parks failed in a recent attempt to raise more tax money for California's parks system. In November 2010, voters rejected Proposition 21, an \$18 registration fee hike for vehicles that would have raised an estimated \$500 million for state parks.

Present System Unsustainable

H. Sterling Burnett, a senior fellow with the National Center for Policy Analysis, says even though private donors have stepped up to the plate for now, California's state park system is not sustainable in its current form.

"Every acre set aside as parkland is taken off the tax rolls in a time when the state faces a massive budget deficit and cities are toppling like dominoes to bankruptcy. As it now stands, the parks are subsidized by the taxpayers in an era when the state is \$48 billion in the red. To me, that's crazy," Burnett said.

Burnett says privatization offers a viable long-term solution.

"If at least some of these parks were sold to private interests, businesses, jobs, and tax revenue would be created. In a time when we are worried about creating jobs, the state legislature is instead worried about keeping parks open," Burnett explained.

"I don't question whether they have the right to have a state park system, but I do question whether it's wise to have such an extensive number of parks. If it's wise to do so, how many parks do you need?" Burnett asked.

Jon Coupal, president of the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association, agrees.

"When legislators threaten to shut things down, they always come up with the money at the last moment and later use this as an excuse to raise taxes. And when the voters don't approve the taxes, then they threaten all sorts of doom and gloom," said Coupal.

Heartland Institute science director Jay Lehr wondered why people want evermore land taken away from the people and turned over to government.

"Not only is freedom preserved when people own their own property, but individuals are more likely to be good stewards of land than are government bureaucrats," said Lehr.

Presenting Another Model

Leonard Gilroy, director of government reform at the California-based Reason Foundation, recommends a public-private partnership for state parks.

“The U.S. Forestry Service already has over 25 year’s worth of successful experience with public-private partnership. By allowing private companies to take over day-to-day operations of the state parks, California can take a revenue-using public park and turn it into a revenue-generating asset for the state,” Gilroy said.

California recently signed its first corporate agreement with American Land & Leisure Co., which will oversee daily operations of three state parks for five years. Three other state parks also are slated for private management. American Land & Leisure will run all concessions, visitor services, and security, and will assume the parks' legal liabilities while the state maintains ownership of the park lands.

“This is a big first step for California,” said Gilroy. “Although many people worry about private companies turning state parks into Disneyland or building a McDonald’s on them, that will never happen because the private companies have contracts that state specifically what they can or cannot do. For all intents and purposes, they will look, breathe, and act like California state parks.”

Economic Benefits Possible

Gilroy noted private companies are likely to operate state parks in a more economically prudent manner.

“The labor model changes the minute a private company starts running state parks. For instance, a lot of highly paid park rangers are employed by the state, and they’re there year-round. They have expensive health and retirement plans, but a lot of what they do could be considered menial work such as picking up trash or cleaning bathrooms. A private company can hire seasonal and part-time workers, allowing the park rangers to do more important things at the park,” said Gilroy.

“California’s state parks are looking at \$1 billion in deferred maintenance costs, so we’re going to have to be creative if we want to keep them open,” Gilroy added. “State park systems around the country are all in the same boat—the money just isn’t there anymore. And what’s left is being fought over in a game of budgetary football, where the parks don’t stand much of a chance of winning. So if the choice is between shutting them down or allowing private companies to operate them, then I’m sure people will make the right decision.”