

INSTITUTE OF OUTDOOR RECREATION AND TOURISM

WHICH STATE PARK SYSTEMS ARE MOST COST EFFICIENT AT PROVIDING OUTDOOR RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES? Lael Gilbert, Jordan W. Smith, Ph.D., & Yu-Fai Leung, Ph.D. May 19, 2017 IORT-PR-2017-02**ABSTRACT**

This fact sheet reviews which U.S. state park systems have been most, and least, cost efficient in producing outdoor recreation opportunities within their state between 1984 and 2014.

From the crisp smell of myrtlewood in Washington to the green waterways that are home to manatees in Florida, state parks in the US fill a vital niche for protecting and managing popular outdoor recreation settings. Directors and managers at these parks are asked to provide high-quality outdoor recreation opportunities to visitors – a task that is becoming increasingly difficult since operating budgets for state parks across the country have steadily declined. Everyone has had to tighten their proverbial belts. The challenge to state park managers is to use budgets to manage more visitors with the best possible service, while keeping costs as low as possible.

Recent research from the Institute looks at which state park systems in the US have been the most and the least cost efficient over the past three decades (Smith & Siderelis, 2016). The Institute's Director, Dr. Jordan W. Smith, and his colleague examined which states have improved efficiency and which states have struggled (Figure 2). When comparing the best and the worst systems, they also identified which planning and management decisions seemed to result in better operating efficiency overall.



Figure 1. Great Salt Lake State Park in Utah.

The economic model used for this analysis looked for state park systems that used the least amount of money to produce the most benefit (more visitation, better resource management, and more personnel employed). The researchers used indirect measures for these factors: visitation levels, investments in projects, and employee-hours worked. These measures were chosen because they are universal to all 50 state park systems and can be found in public databases. The researchers assumed that the more efficient parks would be able to do more of these things with each dollar spent.

