

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.

rom 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 highquality 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.

IORT-PR-2017-02 1



The authors found decision-making trends among states that had the best track records for efficiency. Systems that worked to generate more visitation per acre had long-term reductions in inefficiency. These systems also allowed for more investments in one-time capital improvements and used more employee labor-hours per acre to maintain their parks.

It is important to remember that there is not a simple reason that a state park is efficient or not. For instance, if visitor numbers plateaued, or if a state reduced the size of their park system without adjusting the budget, that would register as

inefficiency. The same would be true for a shift in the hours worked by seasonal staff in response to a change in state policy. The analysis illustrates which states have been consistently good or bad at using their operating budgets over time. We can look to systems that have consistently demonstrated efficiency to discover more ways to provide high quality outdoor recreation opportunities to visitors under increasingly limited operating budgets.

REFERENCE

Smith, J. W., & Siderelis, C. (2017). Temporal trends in the operating inefficiencies of US state park systems. *Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism*, 18, 105-112.

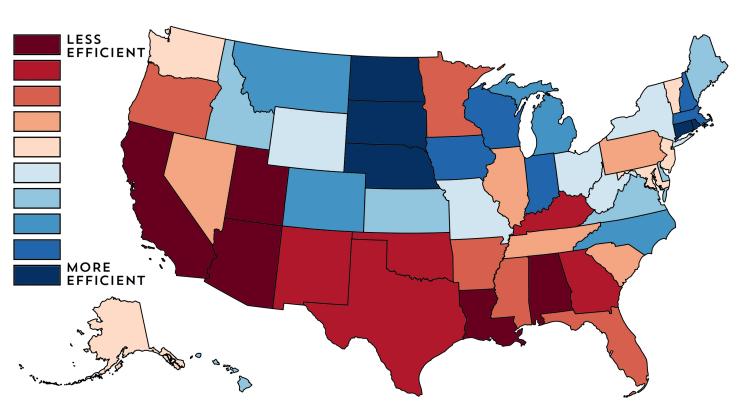


Figure 2. The efficiency of each state park system is shown.

Utah State University is committed to providing an environment free from harassment and other forms of illegal discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age (40 and older), disability, and veteran's status. USU's policy also prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in employment and academic related practices and decisions. Utah State University employees and students cannot, because of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, or veteran's status, refuse to hire; discharge; promote; demote; terminate; discriminate in compensation; or discriminate regarding terms, privileges, or conditions of employment, against any person otherwise qualified. Employees and students also cannot discriminate in the classroom, residence halls, or in on/off campus, USU-sponsored events and activities. This publication is issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Kenneth L. White, Vice President for Extension and Agriculture, Utah State University.

IORT-PR-2017-02