SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT: THE PRACTICAL REALITIES OF SELF-SUFFICIENCY IN STATE PARKS MANAGEMENT

KC Bloom, PhD
Associate Professor
Sport & Movement Science Department
Salem State University
352 Lafayette St
115 O'Keefe Bldg.
Salem, MA 01970
(978) 542-6559
kbloom@salemstate.edu

Abstract
Since the 1990s, self-sufficiency has become a popular notion when addressing the financial management of state park systems in the United States. When associated with these state park systems, the increasing use of this term marks a movement to make state parks less reliant on government appropriations and more reliant on user fees and other funding mechanisms (Fretwell and Frost, 2006). While it is understood that state revenues and budgets have largely been stagnant or decreasing over the last twenty years while costs have continuously increased, the increased use and discussion of this term as related to state park systems as well as the lack of research into the practical realities of this notion in state park management is concerning. Recently, articles discussing the self-sufficiency status of state park systems in South Carolina, Washington, West Virginia, and Oklahoma as well as a number of other states have been published in a variety of news sources (Anderson, 2014; Associated Press, 2013, December 1; Miller, 2012). These articles highlight the continued movement of state park systems into a more self-sufficient state of being without discussing the reasons why state park systems have become increasingly reliant on state funding and why most state park systems cannot truly ever become self-sufficient. Nor do these articles suggest other ways of valuing state park systems that make them worth the cost of the state appropriations.

Beginning with the development of state park systems via political means rather than practical planning to the lack of true visitation data in numerous state park systems and the ties between budgets, unions, and spending/employment laws, this study will discuss the reasons why self-sufficiency is a difficult goal for most state park systems to achieve. This study will seek to provide managers with different means of valuation with which to discuss the importance of state park systems and to address the notion of budgetary shortfalls in those systems.

1.0 Development & Values of State Parks

Following the development of the National Park Service in 1916, there was a strong interest in protecting public lands. Many states, in an attempt to add lands to the national park system, created proposals in the hopes that those lands would be selected for addition to the system. At the same time, it was clear that there was a need for individual park systems to be placed under state management (Bloom, 2008).

In 1920, the National Park Service called together a number of state park enthusiasts in an attempt to create a movement for the setting aside of public recreation areas that were to be managed at a state level. This meeting was known as the National Conference on State Parks (Coleman, 1967, pg. 4). During this meeting, the National Park Service Director, Stephen T. Mather, encouraged the development of state recreation areas within each state comparable in purpose to the National Park Service (Sharpe et al., 1994, pg. 17). After this initial meeting, lobbying occurred throughout many states and, between 1920 and 1940; thirty-six states had established agencies for administering state park systems. By 1940, only Arizona had no agency officially designated as being responsible for the acquisition, development, and administration of state parks (Coleman, 1967, pg.7). By the mid-1960s, every state had a state park system.

As described by Colonel Richard Lieber, the first director of the Indiana Department of Conservation, in an address to the Ohio Valley Regional Park Conference in 1928, a state park is "a typical portion of the States' original domain; a tract of adequate size, preserved in primeval, unspoilt, 'unimproved,' or 'beautified' condition. It is a physical expression of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness… that must have either scenic or historic value or both, and is dedicated to the public for the intelligent use of its leisure time… They are rich store-houses of memories and reveries. They are guides and counsels to the weary and faltering in spirit. They are bearers of wonderful tales to him who will listen; a solace to the aged and an inspiration to the young" (Michaud, 1956).

Given Leiber's description, the values that all state park systems and the facilities therein represent include those that are recreational, environmental, educational, social, health, and economic in nature. These values are at the heart of the reasons why park systems were originally developed. They are also at the heart of a conflict: the continued valuation of state parks via simplistic means such as self-sufficiency ratings versus the valuation of state parks based upon their much more diverse and complicated true value.

2.0 The Self-Sufficiency Movement in State Parks

Self-sufficiency can be defined as "the state of not requiring any aid, support, or tax revenue, for operations of an agency." As such, it includes the ability to generate enough on-site revenue to cover operating expenses (Caneday et al., 2013). Beginning in the 1990s, self-sufficiency has become an increasingly popular notion and a fairly standard way by which state park systems are measured and discussed. As such, many state park systems detail some form of self-sufficiency when reporting about their operations. Additionally, many state parks systems have also been mandated to become self-sufficient. In the last five years, for instance, South Carolina State Parks have been mandated to become self-sufficient (Smith, 2012, January 28). Governor Walker in Wisconsin has recently proposed to remove all general-purpose revenue from the operation of Wisconsin state parks, trails and recreation areas in the 2015-2017 state budget (Hall, 2015, February 17). Numerous other states have been faced with similar mandates including Arizona, Washington, West Virginia, and Oklahoma. While these states have been faced with these mandates, only one state (New Hampshire) has a park system that is self-sufficient. New Hampshire was mandated to become self-sufficient in 1991. The system managed to become self-sufficient largely through operating as a seasonal system with limited infrastructure, the provision of differential pricing, partnerships, and a supportive visitor base (PERC, 1997; PERC, 2006).

When looking at the notion of self-sufficiency in state parks, it is quite apparent that this notion, while still popular, is not a possibility. As it currently stands, park self-sufficiency rates are generally low with only 5 state park systems being at lease 80% self-sufficient (Source: Caneday et al., 2013):

State Park Self-Sufficiency Percentages

Percentage Self-Sufficient	100%	80-100%	60-80%	40-60%	20-40%	0-20%
# of States	1	5	8	16	12	5

*CT, ME, RI and WY use no park-generated revenue in operating expenses

As noted by the National Conference of State Legislatures (2012), state parks have not been shown to be self-sufficient. The Washington State Parks Commission was mandated to write a report about how the agency "plans to make the park system self-supporting" (WPC, 2012). Among its findings, the report noted the "costs of doing business" as a state agency hamstrung any efforts to be self-sufficient due to the need to follow procurement rules and governmental procedures, collective bargaining agreements, statutory restrictions on the replacement of employees with volunteers, employment practices, and the inclusion of public opinion in decision making processes (WSP, 2012). Additionally, Phil McKnelly, former NC State Park Director and former executive director of the National Association of State Park Directors (NASPD), has stated that out of the handful of states that have tried to make their state parks self-sufficient, most have failed. NASPD estimates that only 39 percent of state park operating expenses are paid for with park-generated revenue (Hall, 2015, February 17).

Given these findings, it is clear that self-sufficiency is not a strong possibility for most park systems. Instead, it has largely acted as a politically-motivated management strategy that does not work with state park system constraints and does not work to promote the true values of state park systems.

3.0 Promoting the Values of State Parks

The true value of state park systems lie in the recreational, educational, environmental, social, health, and economic benefits that they provide (Oh and Hammit, 2010; Stein et al., 1999; Trust for Public Lands, 2009). While many of these benefits are noneconomic, each of these benefits ultimately has economic ramifications. Understanding and promoting those economic ramifications may have a tremendous impact on the ability of state park managers and directors to begin to further the conversation about the value of state parks beyond the notion of self-sufficiency. Among the tools that mangers and directors may use to begin discussing the notion of the values of state parks more broadly (but still based in economic terms) include: A. Economic Impact Studies;and B. Contingent Valuation and Travel Cost Method Studies.

Economic Impact Studies
Every state park has an economic impact on not only the economy of the local area but also on that of the state. For every visitor that travels to a state park, there are potentially gas, food, and other travel costs that go into the local and state economies in the form of tax dollars. Each visitor in turn also impacts employment, labor force, goods and services within those localities and states. Agencies that present these kinds of data in the form of an economic balance sheet to their stake- holders, demonstrating their contribution to economic development, are likely to reposition themselves favorably in the minds of legislators and the general public. Indeed, in the formative years of this field, the economic impact of parks on local communities was central to justifying and positioning them as facilities in which governments should invest tax funds (Crompton, 2010).

Contingent Valuation & Travel Cost Method Studies
These two valuation techniques look at economic benefits as indicators of the exchange value recreationists place on use of recreational resources such as beaches, historic sites, parks, and trails (Huppert, 1983). Through the estimation of the economic benefits of goods and services, these methods allow for reasonable comparisons between costs and benefits in the policy evaluation process. Largely, they are based around the notion of visitors "willingness to pay" for goods and services. Contingent Valuation is used to estimate economic values for all kinds of ecosystem and environmental services. It is one of the only ways to assign dollar values to non-use values of the environment—values that do not involve market purchases and may not involve direct participation. These values are sometimes referred to as "passive use" values. They include everything from the basic life support functions associated with ecosystem health or biodiversity, to the enjoyment of a scenic vista or a wilderness experience, to appreciating the option to fish or bird watch in the future, or the right to bequest those options to your grandchildren. The travel cost method is used to estimate economic use values associated with ecosystems or sites that are used for recreation (Freeman, 2003; King et al, 2000). It can be used to estimate the economic benefits or costs resulting from:

- changes in access costs for a recreational siten
- elimination of an existing recreational site
- addition of a new recreational site
- changes in environmental quality at a recreational site