

North Carolina's State Parks: Disregarded and in Disrepair

By Bill Krueger and Mike McLaughlin

More than seven million people visit North Carolina's state parks and recreation areas each year—solid evidence that the public supports its state park system. But for years, North Carolina has routinely shown up at or near the bottom in funding for parks, and its per capita operating budget currently ranks 49th in the nation. Some parks are yet to be opened to the public due to lack of facilities, and parts of other parks are closed because existing facilities are in a woeful state of disrepair. Indeed, parks officials have identified more than \$113 million in capital and repair needs, nearly twice as much as has been spent on the parks in the system's 73-year history. Just recently, the state has begun making a few more gestures toward improving park spending. But the question remains: Will the state commit the resources needed to overcome decades of neglect?

Wedged between an interstate and a major highway in the narrowing strip of undeveloped property that separates the bustling cities of Raleigh and Durham lies a refuge from commercialization called William B. Umstead State Park.

The 5,400-acre oasis has become an easy retreat to nature in the midst of booming growth. But park Superintendent Edwin Littrell says decades of underfunding by the state are taking their toll on a park that serves more than a half-million visitors a year.

Park rangers across North Carolina are in the same predicament. They struggle to keep up appearances, but the money just isn't there.

"With the use of a lot of innovative and creative methods of maintaining and operating the parks, we are just barely keeping our heads above water," says Littrell. "Fairly frequently we are taking a big gulp of it and eventually, we are going to drown."

Visitors probably don't realize that about half the trails at Umstead—10 miles out of a 22-mile system—have been closed to the public because they are in such poor shape. They don't see the park's water lines, which were built more than 40 years ago and lose about 5,000 gallons a week through leaks. They don't see Littrell trying to figure out how to position his staff of five rangers to

patrol two separate sections of the park, pick up trash, clean restrooms and bathhouses, and maintain dozens of deteriorating buildings. "I've got a total of 166 buildings—most of them built between 1933 and 1943," says Littrell. "I've got buildings with five generations of patches—places where patches were put on the patches that were holding the patches on the patches that were put on the patches. It's estimated that over \$8 million is needed just to repair this park, and I haven't seen a piece of it yet."

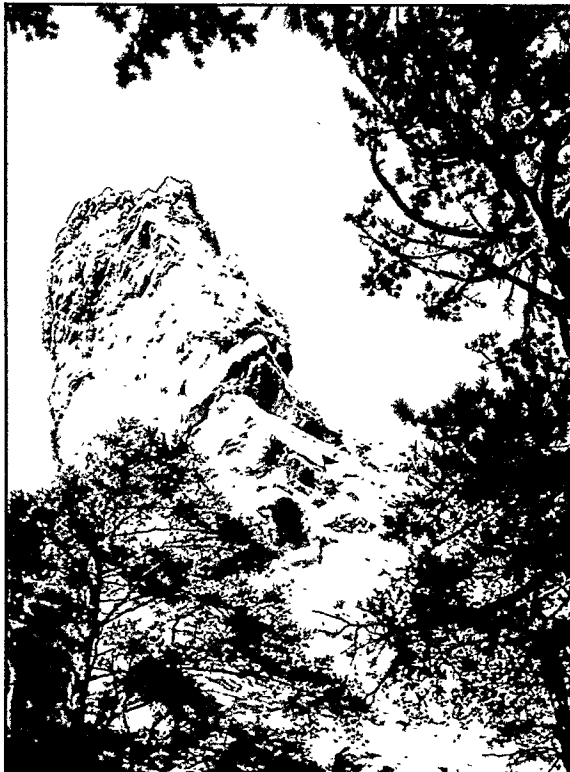
Park superintendents throughout the state park system recount similar horror stories. Supporters of the parks say they have suffered over the years from inadequate funding, haphazard management, and struggles between the General Assembly and the executive branch. The problems have been well documented.

A 1968 report by the Research Triangle Institute established the need for expansion of park holdings and laid the groundwork for the General Assembly to add 10 parks during the 1973 session and enlarge the state's 10 existing parks.¹ Yet a 1973 report by the Legislature's Fiscal Research

Bill Krueger is a reporter covering state government for The News and Observer of Raleigh. Mike McLaughlin is associate editor of North Carolina Insight.

Division found the parks in a woeful condition of disrepair.² *New Directions*, a 1979 report by the Legislative Study Committee on State Parks, laid out an ambitious five-year plan outlining land acquisition goals and park-by-park needs for roads, utilities, facilities, and new staff.³ But *Parks and Recreation in North Carolina 1984*, a report compiled by the Department of Natural Resources and Community Development, found the state had again fallen short. The report cited a host of needs, including more staff, land acquisition to protect the integrity of the state parks, a more extensive trail system (the report noted that 72 percent of existing trails were located within the mountain regions, where less than 13 percent of the state's population resides), and a more aggressive program of designating Natural and Scenic Rivers to preserve them from development.⁴ Subsequent reviews found the plight of the park system had gone from bad to worse. "North Carolina's parks and recreation system is in generally deplorable condition, is a burden to the full development of the state's tourism industry, and is inarguably a worst-case example of the abuse of a public trust and the abdication of responsibility," the State Goals and Policy Board says in

Hanging Rock State Park is one of the state's oldest and most popular attractions



North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation

its May 1986 report to Gov. Jim Martin.⁵ The report goes so far as to suggest that the state use prison labor to get its ailing park system up to snuff.⁶

The parks have enjoyed increased attention since the board's 1986 report, but State Auditor Ed Renfrow still concluded in an audit released in January 1988 that "the basic system needs for repairs and renovation and park development are so extensive that continued increases in funding will be required to protect the state's investment and implement reasonable development plans."⁷ As Renfrow notes in the audit report on the management of the state park system, state officials have identified more than \$100 million in capital improvements needed at existing parks. Renfrow calls for a "significant commitment by the General Assembly over several years" to increased funding for parks.⁸

Attracting more than seven million visitors a year, North Carolina's park system stretches from the almost 1,500 acres in Mount Mitchell State Park in the west to the 385 acres of Jockey's Ridge State Park in Nags Head on the coast. The system, begun in 1915 with the establishment of Mount Mitchell State Park, now consists of 54 units and 124,532 acres. That includes 29 state parks, nine natural areas, and four recreation areas (See Table 1, p. 34).

But many of those properties either are closed to the public or in only partial use because of inadequate facilities. Mitchell's Mill is a 67-acre state park in eastern Wake County that few people have enjoyed because state officials have not been able to find the money to clear trails there. So it sits, unmarked, with its entrances blocked to vehicles by large stones. The same goes for Rolling View Recreation Area at Falls Lake in Durham County.

Starving the Parks

Although it ranks 21st in total state park acreage, North Carolina ranks 49th among the states in per capita funding for its state parks, according to the National Association of State Park Directors Annual Information Exchange. While other southern states such as Georgia and Tennessee spend \$2.85 and \$6.36 per person on parks, respectively, North Carolina spends a meager \$1.12 a person. Neighboring South Carolina spends \$3.96 a person, and Kentucky, which views parks as an economic development tool, spends \$13.72 a person. Only Virginia, at \$1.06 a person, spends less than North Carolina, and the national average is \$4.08 (See Table 2, p. 42).⁹ "The state park system in North Carolina has always been in last place," says William W. Davis, director of the state Division of

Parks and Recreation. "There's only one way, and it's up. Anything we do is an improvement. The concept of a state park system in North Carolina has not been well defined. It's been a citizen effort, not a state effort."

Indeed, were it not for the generosity of well-to-do property owners and the public works projects of the Depression, North Carolina might find itself with but a handful of state parks. As much as 70 percent of the system was acquired through donations to the state. Most of the visitors centers, campgrounds, and rangers' residences were built in the 1930s and 1940s by the federal Civilian Conservation Corps and the Works Progress Administration. The list includes those at Umstead, Hanging Rock State Park in Stokes County, and Morrow Mountain State Park in Stanly County.

Since then, efforts to nurture a state park system have been minimal. From 1915, the year the system was established, through 1973, a mere \$24,250 was spent by the state to acquire land for state parks. The public purse snapped open during the administration of Republican Gov. Jim Holshouser, with \$11.5 million appropriated by the legislature for land acquisition in 1973-1974, and \$5.5 million appropriated for park land in 1974-1975. Yet funding for park lands slowed to a relative trickle during the two terms of Democratic Gov. Jim Hunt and did not pick up again until Republican Gov. Jim Martin took office in 1985.¹⁰ (For more on differences in funding for state parks in Democratic and Republican administrations, see *The Two-Party System in North Carolina*, a special report published in December 1987 by the North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research and the University of North Carolina Center for Public Television.)

In the park system's 73-year history, only \$38.3 million has been spent for land acquisition and \$27.2 million has been spent to develop the parks—a total of \$64.7 million. "Historically, funding has been up and down," says Bill Holman, a lobbyist for the Conservation Council of North Carolina and the N.C. chapter of the Sierra Club.



North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation

Canoeists at Merchants Millpond State Park in Gates County

"Parks didn't have a high priority for several years. It is a park system with tremendous potential but in poor condition."

The public has in recent years been beset by reports of maintenance woes brought on by underfunding of state parks, including sewage running down Mount Mitchell, boat docks collapsing at Carolina Beach State Park, and methane in the bathrooms at Waynesboro State Park in Wayne County.¹¹ The well-publicized problems in the parks have led to a host of calls from Tar Heel editors for more money. *The News and Observer* of Raleigh, for example, in April 1987 said, "North Carolina should be shamed by the lack of care given its state park system," and said the legislature had "for far too long treated the state park system as an unwanted stepchild."¹² The *Winston-Salem Journal*, in an editorial printed a month later, called North Carolina's per capita funding of its state park system an "embarrassing disgrace."¹³

Davis says the paltry funding of parks has been in part due to limited legislative involvement in the creation and funding of park units. The Council of State, an 11-member panel of statewide elected officials, typically accepted donated land to be assigned by the executive branch to a state agency for management, says Davis. "There was no local delegation involvement or committee system involvement, so they said, 'Tough potatoes. We're not going to give you money to capitalize.'"

In addition, says Davis, the state's agrarian heritage has worked against the full development of

Table 1. North Carolina's Parks and Recreation System

Unit	Size	Public Access	Activities	Capital Needs
Parks (29)				
1. Bay Tree Lake ¹	609 acres	no	none	\$ 335,165
2. Boone's Cave	110 acres	yes	b,f,h,p	18,668
3. Carolina Beach	1,720 acres	yes	b,c,f,h,p	1,843,136
4. Cliffs of the Neuse	748 acres	yes	b,c,f,h,p,s,v	2,471,757
5. Crowders Mountain	2,083 acres	yes	c,f,h,p	3,127,977
6. Duke Power	1,447 acres	yes	b,c,f,h,p,s	7,386,921
7. Eno River	2,064 acres	yes	b,c,f,h,p	3,211,981
8. Fort Macon	389 acres	yes	f,h,p,s,v	6,720,000
9. Goose Creek	1,327 acres	yes	b,c,f,h,p,s	2,838,361
10. Hammocks Beach	892 acres	yes	c,f,h,p,s	451,852
11. Hanging Rock	5,852 acres	yes	b,c,f,h,p,s	1,538,010
12. Jockey's Ridge	393 acres	yes	h,p,v	463,560
13. Jones Lake	1,669 acres	yes	b,c,f,h,p,s	2,277,427
14. Lake James ²	565 acres	yes	b,c,f,h,p,s	706,997
15. Lake Waccamaw	1,508 acres	yes	c,f,h,p,s	4,172,436
16. Medoc Mountain	2,287 acres	yes	b,c,f,h,p	4,459,100
17. Merchants Millpond	2,762 acres	yes	b,c,f,h,p	2,609,200
18. Morrow Mountain	4,693 acres	yes	b,c,f,h,p,s,v	6,897,085
19. Mount Jefferson	555 acres	yes	h,p	1,480,500
20. Mount Mitchell	1,677 acres	yes	c,h,p,v	416,875
21. New River ³	531 acres	yes	b,c,f,p	3,566,995
22. Pettigrew	850 acres	yes	b,c,f,h,p	3,717,884
23. Pilot Mountain	3,703 acres	yes	b,c,f,h,p	7,883,672
24. Raven Rock	2,805 acres	yes	c,f,h,p	11,762,984
25. Singletary Lake	649 acres	yes	c,f,h,s	2,813,767
26. South Mountains	6,586 acres	yes	c,f,h,p	2,205,458
27. Stone Mountain	13,378 acres	yes	c,f,h,p	2,675,584
28. Waynesboro	138 acres	yes	f,h,p	195,776
29. William B. Umstead	5,229 acres	yes	b,c,f,h,p,s	7,784,219

NOTES:

¹Bay Tree is now an underdeveloped state park. When facilities now planned are built, Bay Tree Lake will be designated a state recreation area. acquisition to five acres in fee simple ownership and 1,260 acres in easements.

²Lake James State Park is scheduled to open for public use in the spring of 1989. Public access and activities listed will be available at that time.

³Natural and Scenic Rivers legislation limits future

KEY
 b.....boating c.....camping f.....fishing
 h.....hiking p.....picnicking s.....swimming
 v.....visitors center / museum

Land Needs*	County
**	Bladen
**	Davidson
**	New Hanover
21 acres	Wayne
1,656 acres	Gaston
**	Iredell
945 acres	Durham, Orange
**	Carteret
258 acres	Beaufort
**	Onslow
2,221 acres	Stokes
**	Dare
**	Bladen
**	McDowell, Burke
0 acres	Columbus
211 acres	Halifax
138 acres	Gates
**	Stanly
**	Ashe
**	Yancey
5 acres	Ashe, Alleghany
0 acres	Washington, Tyrell
**	Surry, Yadkin
2,577 acres	Harnett
**	Bladen
1,480 acres	Burke
4,382 acres	Wilkes, Alleghany
**	Wayne
349	Wake

—continued on page 36

* The Division of Parks and Recreation is currently updating its priority list for future land acquisition needs. The figures under the column "land needs" are based on a 1978 priority list and are presented to generally illustrate future needs. State parks officials estimate total land acquisition needs are in excess of 23,000 acres.

** Land needs currently being evaluated.

the state park system. "Farmers have difficulty envisioning the need to set aside land for parks," he says. A generous allotment of federally controlled public lands may also have obviated the need for state parks in the minds of some elected officials, says Davis. Substantial portions of the Great Smoky Mountains and the Blue Ridge Parkway lie within the boundaries of North Carolina. The state is also home to four national forests that provide camping and hiking opportunities and to miles of pristine beaches along the Cape Hatteras and Cape Lookout National Seashores. No other southeastern state can boast of such precious federal resources, and many of these treasures were acquired with the generous support and cooperation of state government. "The greater federal presence . . . eased the pressure on the state," says Davis. "Cape Hatteras was at one point a state park. The state made a conscious decision that the state park system was not up to handling it (and transferred the land to the federal government). The Smokies, the state had to buy the land."

North Carolinians who live in or near urban areas also have access to parks operated by 159 city recreation departments and 59 county recreation departments—perhaps the most expansive network of local parks in the nation. Such parks help make up for the lack of state parks, particularly in the Piedmont Triad cities of Greensboro, Winston-Salem, and High Point. The closest state parks to these areas are in Stokes (Hanging Rock Park) and Surry counties (Pilot Mountain). The lack of state park facilities in the region prompted the General Assembly to toy with the creation of a Triad State Park in the late 1970s, but representatives of local government never could agree on what kind of park they wanted, or where to put it. When one representative suggested that a state-owned theme park be developed in an area near Kernersville, the idea was hooted down and the proposal for a Triad State Park was dropped.

Jim Stevens, Davis' predecessor as state parks and recreation director, says North Carolina has lagged in park funding because other states got a head start. "We've been playing a game of catch-up," says Stevens. "Many older systems received more funding earlier in their existences than we have." In 1929, in fact, the General Assembly set out a policy that where possible, "park acquisition would not be funded by the state, but would be purchased or donated by 'public spirited citizens.'"¹⁴

That slammed shut the state coffer for four decades, but Kirk Fuller, a former public informa-

Table 1. North Carolina's Parks and Recreation System, *continued*

Unit	Size	Public Access	Activities	Capital Needs
Recreation Areas (4)				
30. Falls Lake	950 acres	yes	b,f,p,s,	\$ 103,158
31. Fort Fisher	287 acres	yes	f,h,s,v	418,612
32. Jordan Lake	1,925 acres	yes	b,c,f,h,p,s	2,836,241
33. Kerr Lake	3,000 acres	yes	b,c,f,h,p,s	5,393,654
Natural Areas (9)				
34. Bald Head Island	1,249 acres	no	h	NA
35. Bushy Lake	1,341 acres	no	h	NA
36. Chowan Swamp	6,066 acres	no	h	NA
37. Dismal Swamp	14,344 acres	no	h	NA
38. Hemlock Bluffs	85 acres	no	h	NA
39. Masonboro Island	106 acres	no	h	NA
40. Mitchell's Mill	83 acres	no	h	NA
41. Theodore Roosevelt	265 acres	yes	h,v	NA
42. Weymouth Woods	676 acres	yes	h,v	409,635
Rivers (3)				
43. Horsepasture River	13 miles	no	b,f	NA
44. Linville River	13 miles	no	b,f	NA
45. New River*	26.5 miles	yes	b,f	NA
Trails (1)				
46. Mountains-to-Sea ⁴	210 miles	yes	h	NA ⁴
Lakes (8)				
47. Bay Tree Lake***	1,418 acres	(See line 1)		
48. Jones Lake***	224 acres	(See line 13)		
49. Lake James***	6,510 acres	(See line 14)		
50. Lake Phelps*** (Pettigrew)	16,600 acres	(See line 22)		
51. Lake Waccamaw***	8,938 acres	(See line 15)		
52. Salters Lake*** (Jones Lake)	315 acres	(See line 13)		
53. Singletary Lake***	649 acres	(See line 25)		
54. White Lake	1,068 acres	no	b,f	NA

NOTES:

⁴The N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation is seeking right-of-way access on private land to link sections of the trail.

*The Division of Parks and Recreation is currently updating its priority list for future land acquisition needs. The figures under the column "land needs" are based on a 1978 priority list and are presented to generally illus-

trate future needs. State parks officials estimate total land acquisition needs are in excess of 23,000 acres.

** Land needs currently being evaluated.

*** Lake or river is part of a park or recreation area. If the name of the park or recreation area differs from the lake or river, the park name follows in parentheses.

Land Needs*	County
NA	Wake, Durham
**	New Hanover
NA	Chatham, Wake,
NA	Vance, Warren
**	Brunswick
785 acres	Cumberland
**	Gates
**	Camden
**	Wake
**	New Hanover
55 acres	Wake
**	Carteret
**	Moore
NA	Transylvania
NA	Burke
**	Ashe, Alleghany
**	NA
**	Bladen

KEY

b.....boating c.....camping f.....fishing
h.....hiking p.....picnicking s.....swimming
v.....visitors center / museum

Source: N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation
Chart prepared by Melissa Jones, N.C. Center intern

tion officer for the Division of Parks and Recreation, says the attitude of North Carolina officials toward purchasing land shifted in the late 1960s and early 1970s. "It was a realization of a movement across the country that the nation was losing unique natural areas and that the state could not depend on the goodwill of the people," says Fuller. "It had to come in and purchase unique natural areas to preserve them."

Still, Stevens says during the 40-year funding drought, the state was able to assemble an impressive portfolio of parks and natural areas, and the result was a bargain for North Carolina citizens. "We haven't spent a tremendous amount of money, and at the same time, we've made quite a bit of headway," he says.

Another shortcoming of the largely donated system is that the parks are not equally distributed among legislative districts. Rep. David Diamont (D-Surry), for example, has five state parks in his northwestern North Carolina district, while the majority of state lawmakers have none, says Davis. Diamont's five-county 40th House District includes Pilot Mountain, New River, Mount Jefferson, Hanging Rock, and Stone Mountain parks, and he is an aggressive advocate of the state park system. "In Kentucky," says Davis, "every legislative district has a state park. In Georgia, every legislative district has a state park. As a result, the legislature is more responsive." North Carolina's fragmented network of state parks means fewer pork barrel appropriations for capital projects and less general fund support for operating expenses.

The funding shortfall is felt on the frontlines, where rangers at understaffed parks struggle to keep the state's facilities open and presentable to the public. Kerr Lake State Recreation Area, opened in 1952 on land leased from the federal government, has in recent years been among the state's most heavily visited parks. The park features seven campgrounds at separate locations along the shores of Kerr Lake. But park Superintendent Robert Kirk says electrical hookups are outdated and not strong enough to power the homes on wheels the campgrounds must serve. He says waterlines are brittle and often rupture. And then there are the sagging ceilings and peeling paint on bathhouses that leave visitors with a poor impression and force the closing of some facilities deemed structurally unsound. "Some of the buildings are so bad we had to condemn them and close them down," says Kirk, "and people are increasing in number, not decreasing. We need to be adding buildings. This is what the legislature is giving for



Condemned picnic shelter at Kerr Lake State Recreation Area in Vance and Warren counties

their constituency.” Kirk says Kerr Lake facilities need a complete overhaul, with new electrical and water systems for the campgrounds and renovation or replacement of bathhouses, picnic shelters, and refreshment stands.

“Last summer, a little girl was just walking across a campsite barefooted, and she was getting shocked just walking across the ground” due to a short in an electrical hookup, says Kirk. “It’s really discouraging, to tell you the truth, but this is what the citizens are getting for their tax dollars.”

Promises for Parks

There are indications that the long-neglected state parks are beginning to get some attention. A 1985 legislative study commission identified \$50 million in property that should be acquired to complete and protect existing parks. In response, Governor Martin embraced a \$50 million bond referendum. The legislature instead set aside \$25 million, although only about \$16.5 million went for its avowed purpose. In the 1987 legislative session, the General Assembly appropriated \$3.8 million for capital improvements, an increase of more than \$1 million over the \$2.75 million budgeted for the 1986 fiscal year, which had represented more than a two-fold increase over the 1985 appropriation.

Sen. Tony Rand (D-Cumberland), the Democratic nominee for lieutenant governor, has made a campaign promise of spending \$20 million on land acquisition and capital improvements over the biennium that follows the 1988 election. “I’ve talked about when I am lieutenant governor doing every-

thing I can for state parks,” says Rand. “It’s a shame to let something that pretty and important to our people languish as it does.”

“We’re going to get off the bottom in per capita spending,” says Sen. Henson Barnes (D-Wayne), chairman since 1985 of the legislative Study Commission on State Parks. “In a few short years, North Carolina is going to be offering an excellent park system to the people of the state.” Barnes’ study commission is scheduled to make recommendations to the 1989 session of the General Assembly. He says he expects those recommendations to include a means of putting the park system on a better financial footing. “The bottom line is

money,” says Barnes. “To build a good business, to build a good home, to do anything, you’ve got to first assess what the needs are. Once you assess the needs, you’ve got to determine how to access the money supply. The legislature is just like other folks. Show them a place to go, and they will find a way to get there.”

Barnes says the recommendations likely will include “some small tax,” with the revenue dedicated strictly to park use. According to Davis, 29 states have revenue sources specifically earmarked for parks. These sources include taxes, fees and licenses, donations, bonds, and lottery proceeds, and they provide a stable source of funding. Barnes specifically mentioned an increase in the tax for deed transfers, which is \$1 per \$1,000 in real property transactions. But the key to completing the parks puzzle, says Barnes, is increased public awareness of the need for more money. That will pressure elected officials to move the parks higher on the agenda when the budget pie is divided. “The parks have built a constituency in North Carolina, and it’s for a good cause, too,” says Barnes. “For a number of years, the park system had no constituency pushing it, supporting it.”

Holman says, “There is growing public concern about the conditions of state parks.” And while he says he finds the prospects for the system to be encouraging, he acknowledges that “it may take awhile” for the system’s potential to be realized. “What is needed is for the Governor and the General Assembly to give a high priority to the state park system—a large appropriation for many years,” says Holman. “One thing environmental-

ists have sought—so far without success—is a dedicated source of revenue for parkland, game-lands, and natural areas. Several states use a land [or deed] transfer tax.”

Another option might be expansion of user fees with the stipulation that the money be plowed back into the state parks. (A 1987 bill sponsored by Barnes would have required that fees generated in the parks be channeled into a fund for operations, capital improvements, and land acquisition. But the bill was referred to the Senate Finance Committee and never acted upon.) Renfrow’s audit notes that in a comparison among 13 southeastern states,

North Carolina’s state parks in fiscal year 1986 generated the least amount of revenue as a percentage of operating budget.¹⁵ North Carolina remained last among the southeastern states in fiscal year 1987, when the state through various fees and charges to users took in revenue equal to 16.4 percent of its \$7.2 million budget. That compares to Louisiana’s 19.3 percent and Virginia’s 24.8 percent at the low end of the scale, and, at the top of the scale, Delaware at 72.4 percent, Kentucky at 62.3 percent, and South Carolina at 61.6 percent. Renfrow offers a caveat that many neighboring states provide resort-style facilities such as lodges and golf courses that boost both operating costs and revenues and make comparisons between states difficult. But he notes that at \$7 a day for a site with full hookups and \$5 for a primitive site, North Carolina’s camping fees are about 40 percent below the private market.¹⁶ The State Goals and Policy Board, in its May 1986 *Report to the Governor*, recommended increased user fees for such things as cabins, campsites, and boat rentals as one means of boosting park revenue.¹⁷

Park advocates say potential is limited for expansion of user fees beyond those already in place. “There are only a few parks that would justify the luxury of user fees,” says Holman. “At some parks, it would cost more to collect than you would raise. At Mount Mitchell and Jockey’s Ridge, you could collect a lot of revenue. Conservation groups have not taken a position in support of or opposition to entrance fees. It’s an ongoing debate.”

A major increase in fees and charges, says Holman, could shut the park entrance gates to some



Jack Betts

Crumbling grill and eroding shoreline at Kerr Lake State Recreation Area

of the state’s less affluent citizens. “You don’t want to exclude people from enjoying the parks,” says Holman. “You want the parks to be open to all because a lot of private facilities are expensive. You need some places where just regular folks can go, camp out, have a picnic, and have an outdoor experience.”

Barnes says the parks could turn to user fees in selected areas, but adds, “In general we want to say the parks should be like clean air and clean water—they should be freely enjoyed by all North Carolina citizens.”

The Development Debate

Recent discussions about state parks have focused on how to use the little money available. The primary question has become whether to use the money to maintain and develop existing parks or to buy more land before land prices become prohibitive throughout much of the state. State parks officials say at least 23,000 additional acres are needed to protect existing parks. Stevens says in a series of nine public hearings conducted across the state in 1984, the chief priority expressed by those attending the hearings was maintaining the natural integrity of the park system. Acquiring enough land to provide buffers from development is one means of doing that, says Stevens. Environmental groups tend to favor land acquisition, while current state parks officials contend that more must be done to maintain and open to the public land already in the system. “You can always develop facilities later,” says Holman. “Often you can’t buy

the land later. It doesn't make much sense to build a picnic area or a new campground in a park if someone puts in a landfill or a high-rise condominium just across the creek."

Davis says, "To simply buy land and do nothing with it is not stewardship," but he and Holman agree that in the scrap for funds, the issue has been improperly posed as an either-or question. "The answer to that is both," says Davis. He says there are a number of areas in which land acquisition is incomplete and park integrity is threatened by development. At Carolina Beach State Park, for example, condominiums are being proposed on a parcel of land bounded by park property. Commercial development along U.S. 70 threatens Umstead State Park, and in Burke County's South Mountains State Park a private horse farm is planned so that riders can venture onto public lands. "There'll be hell to pay for the water quality," says Davis.

Besides buying up land, Holman says the state should encourage the counties to use zoning powers to protect the integrity of the state parks. "One county proposed siting a landfill near a state park, and that's not a compatible use," says Holman. "Another county allowed the siting of a drag strip near a state park . . . and Wake County allowed a rock quarry on the west side of Umstead."

There is also debate over what types of parks are wanted in North Carolina. The state typically has sought to provide roads, campgrounds, and visitors' centers at its parks, a dramatic contrast to Kentucky, where many parks are highly developed with cottages, golf courses, and gift shops. Environmentalists argue the need to maintain a delicate balance between development for public use and conservation. Ray Noggle, president of Friends of the State Parks, a citizen support group that lobbies the legislature on park-related issues, says North Carolina already has tilted too much toward the pursuit of fee-generating facilities such as swimming lakes. "The people in the field, I think they're first class," says Noggle. "Downtown, they think the best way to serve the people is to turn the parks into Disneylands and make money."

"Nowhere in the budget does it call for building a resort," says Davis. "It's to provide a road, provide a trail, provide a rest room. It's not like we want to build Taj Mahals. We don't need motels and gas stations. But we do need recreational activities so people will want to stay."

Barnes says North Carolina is not aspiring to anything as elaborate as the Kentucky parks. "We do want a pleasant place for the people of North Carolina to go," he says. "We want them to have access to good, clean facilities." As simple as that sounds, state park officials say the parks are in such poor condition that they have identified \$113.5 million in capital and repair needs. Environmentalists say the list is exaggerated but concede there are pressing needs. Holman says visitors to the state's parks are often disappointed to find no picnic areas, or portable toilets instead of rest rooms. Davis points to examples such as Hanging Rock State Park, where soil erosion has caused drops as deep as six feet on trails. Guard rails and other road improvements are needed at both Pilot Mountain and Morrow Mountain, he says, and at Lake Waccamaw State Park, there are no flush toilets. "They probably have the only handicapped-accessible pit privy in the state," says Davis.

Additional needs identified by state officials include \$463,000 to renovate the septic tanks at Cliffs of the Neuse State Park, \$950,000 to develop a picnic area at Stone Mountain State Park, \$1.4

—continued on page 44

Cliffs of the Neuse State Park in Wayne County



North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation

Table 2. Comparison of State Parks Systems, By State

	Total Acreage	Rank	Annual Visitation	Rank	Operating Budget Per Capita	Rank	Revenues	Percentage of Operating Revenue From Fees	Rank
Alabama	48,377	38	6,099,318	31	\$ 3.7818	22	\$ 8,798,779	56.98%	10
Alaska	3,110,268	2	5,289,607	36	9.2109	3	55,045	1.14	50
Arizona	37,040	43	2,088,101	45	1.5939	47	1,394,500	25.84	34
Arkansas	43,982	40	7,147,970	28	6.7284	5	8,799,355	54.77	11
California	1,268,955	3	72,856,593	1	4.8701	17	32,254,633	23.94	38
Colorado	287,309	6	7,924,132	24	2.3781	37	8,634,696	110.16	1
Connecticut	181,223	17	7,706,224	26	3.1143	31	2,282,174	22.82	41
Delaware	11,122	49	2,737,618	43	5.9912	9	2,916,220	72.43	5
Florida	278,442	7	14,290,383	14	1.7499	45	10,458,784	49.71	16
Georgia	61,001	33	13,310,355	15	2.8553	32	8,569,297	48.23	17
Hawaii	24,881	46	20,199,842	11	4.3259	19	1,192,871	25.46	35
Idaho	46,808	39	2,280,752	44	2.5327	36	815,075	32.25	29
Illinois	363,338	4	35,190,355	7	1.9619	41	2,123,292	9.34	48
Indiana	54,062	34	9,884,728	20	1.7979	42	7,434,438	74.76	4
Iowa	52,025	37	10,023,624	19	1.7741	43	2,161,831	43.00	20
Kansas	36,918	44	4,451,523	37	1.7723	44	1,928,985	43.96	19
Kentucky	41,501	41	24,210,000	9	13.7210	1	31,858,033	62.30	7
Louisiana	37,999	42	740,243	50	1.1500	48	990,463	19.31	43
Maine	71,761	32	2,071,752	46	3.2832	27	1,266,344	32.49	27
Maryland	215,945	14	6,890,264	29	3.3621	25	5,534,799	36.30	25
Massachusetts	265,903	9	12,239,770	17	3.1973	30	6,050,019	32.32	28
Michigan	252,626	11	22,845,271	10	2.1338	39	13,951,023	71.07	6
Minnesota	3,441,061	1	6,001,004	32	2.7119	34	4,596,000	39.91	23
Mississippi	22,490	47	4,433,670	38	3.5169	24	4,245,655	45.99	18
Missouri	106,682	27	12,442,359	16	3.2344	28	2,323,952	14.08	47
Montana	52,261	36	4,195,200	39	3.5420	23	466,733	16.29	46

Table 2. Comparison of State Parks Systems, By State, *continued*

	Total Acreage	Rank	Annual Visitation	Rank	Operating Budget Per Capita	Rank	Revenues	Percentage of Operating Revenue From Fees	Rank
Nebraska	147,948	19	8,412,954	23	\$ 4.6904	18	\$3,956,632	52.92%	13
Nevada	144,188	20	3,103,696	42	3.2005	29	756,918	23.49	40
New Hampshire	29,862	45	3,905,900	40	6.4813	7	6,818,757	99.53	2
New Jersey	299,599	5	9,599,129	21	2.6160	35	5,212,947	25.97	33
New Mexico	118,951	25	6,790,527	30	3.9061	21	2,231,100	38.08	24
New York	258,390	10	37,514,000	4	5.6118	12	22,632,000	22.63	42
North Carolina	124,532	21	7,151,518	27	1.1259	49	1,181,883	16.37	44
North Dakota	16,198	48	949,818	48	2.3608	38	639,811	40.33	22
Ohio	193,000	16	68,164,424	2	3.3462	26	9,999,926	27.71	31
Oklahoma	95,470	28	15,655,812	13	5.5695	13	5,605,568	30.76	30
Oregon	89,494	30	37,156,000	5	6.7247	6	6,223,000	33.97	26
Pennsylvania	276,250	8	36,303,046	6	2.8051	33	5,474,577	16.35	45
Rhode Island	9,223	50	5,807,250	33	5.5677	14	1,464,651	26.68	32
South Carolina	79,260	31	7,803,469	25	3.9639	20	8,359,667	61.58	8
South Dakota	113,370	26	5,578,819	34	6.8906	4	2,531,983	51.83	14
Tennessee	120,238	22	24,343,492	8	6.3584	8	15,661,589	50.73	15
Texas	224,667	13	19,925,396	12	1.6298	46	11,107,411	40.59	21
Utah	94,848	29	5,349,791	35	5.8699	10	2,322,155	23.55	39
Vermont	170,678	18	785,797	49	5.6152	11	2,801,402	91.04	3
Virginia	53,747	35	3,634,956	41	1.0651	50	1,557,965	24.78	36
Washington	233,596	12	46,685,652	3	4.8808	16	5,322,902	24.03	37
West Virginia	206,185	15	9,128,716	22	10.3222	2	10,462,431	53.43	12
Wisconsin	119,224	24	11,275,097	18	2.1223	40	6,096,550	59.76	9
Wyoming	119,364	23	1,855,819	47	4.9164	15	101,254	4.20	49

Source: National Association of State Park Directors, *Annual Information Exchange*, April 1988
 Chart prepared by Kim Kebschull, N.C. Center for Public Policy Research Intern



*Visitors Center at Fort Macon State Park
in Carteret County*

million to develop a visitors center at Umstead State Park, \$1.1 million to renovate the shoreline and trails at Morrow Mountain State Park, and \$1.2 million to develop trails at Eno River State Park. The list includes the construction of several visitors centers, cabins, campgrounds, and picnic areas.¹⁸

Thomas Rhodes, secretary of Natural Resources and Community Development, has threatened to shut down parks in past years if the General Assembly refused to allocate more money for repairs. Parts of some are closed for lack of money for repairs or completion.

"Our parks are pretty much in rundown and dilapidated condition," says Davis. "We get numerous complaints." But Davis says the 1988 General Assembly appropriated \$1 million in discretionary money for repairs and renovation, the first time such money had been appropriated without earmarking it for a specific project.

Staff Shortage

The park system also suffers from staffing shortages, a problem exacerbated by high turnover among rangers. Davis says rangers often are lured away by city and county park systems that offer up to 25 percent higher starting pay and a lighter work load. "They get basically the same salaries as people who are attendants at the rest areas and I resent that," says Bob Conner, immediate past president of Friends of the State Parks. "Many of them are college graduates. I think they deserve

better. Some of them qualify for food stamps, and I don't think that's anything to be proud of." (The starting salary for a Park Ranger I is \$14,436 and tops out at \$22,136, while the starting pay for a Rest Area Custodian I is \$13,332 with a maximum salary of \$20,412, according to the Office of State Personnel.)

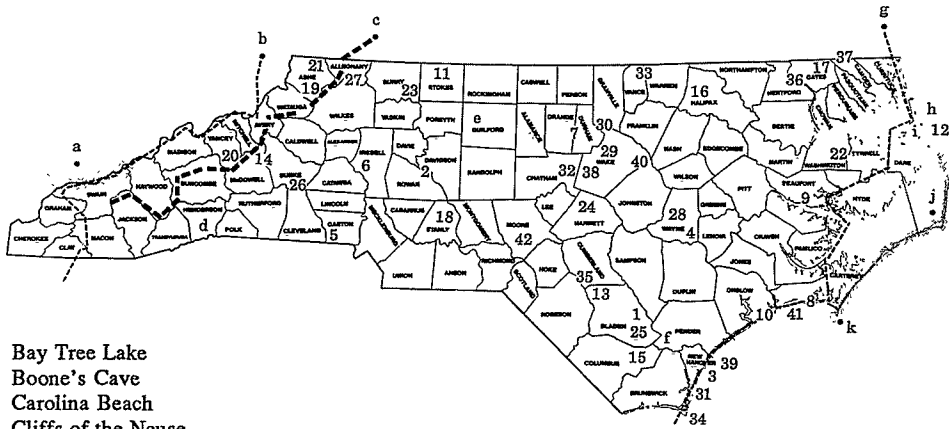
There are 103 field rangers, meaning that most parks are staffed by three or fewer rangers. Six parks have only two rangers, yet the gates are open seven days a week and, in the summer months, 13 hours a day. The long days, combined with restrictions requiring a

40-hour work week, demand that some parks at times be kept open with only part-time or seasonal workers on duty. Indeed, there are almost as many people running the state zoo in Asheboro as there are operating the entire state park system. (The North Carolina Zoological Park is operated by 141 full-time employees, while the Division of Parks and Recreation has 178 full-time employees, according to NRCO officials.) Park rangers grouse about the understaffing but still manage to keep the parks open. "We can get by," says Jody Merritt, superintendent at Fort Macon State Park on Bogue Banks, where a pre-Civil War fort and a public beach draw more than a million annual visitors. "You cut a man's arm off and he'll get by . . . That's what we had to do for years and years. It just depends on at what degree you want to function."

Only four district naturalists are employed throughout the state park system, and most of the interpretive programs in the parks, such as nature walks, children's programs, and historical tours, are conducted by seasonal employees. "As far as natural facilities and natural areas, we have the finest park system in the United States," says Merritt. "We just need to expand facilities and interpretive services to the public. The schools are starting to demand it."

Rhodes recently told legislators that the system badly needed 22 maintenance workers to help repair state parks. "That could free rangers to be more responsive to other needs," Rhodes told lawmakers. Funding for the maintenance workers was

Figure 1. Existing National Parks, State Parks and Recreation Areas in North Carolina



Parks

1. Bay Tree Lake
2. Boone's Cave
3. Carolina Beach
4. Cliffs of the Neuse
5. Crowders Mountain
6. Duke Power
7. Eno River
8. Fort Macon
9. Goose Creek
10. Hammocks Beach
11. Hanging Rock
12. Jockey's Ridge
13. Jones Lake
14. Lake James
15. Lake Waccamaw
16. Medoc Mountain
17. Merchants Millpond
18. Morrow Mountain
19. Mount Jefferson
20. Mount Mitchell
21. New River
22. Pettigrew
23. Pilot Mountain
24. Raven Rock
25. Singletary Lake

Recreation Areas

26. South Mountains
27. Stone Mountain
28. Waynesboro
29. William B. Umstead

Natural Areas

30. Falls Lake
31. Fort Fisher
32. Jordan Lake
33. Kerr Lake
34. Bald Head Island
35. Bushy Lake
36. Chowan Swamp
37. Dismal Swamp
38. Hemlock Bluffs
39. Masonboro Island
40. Mitchell's Mill
41. Theodore Roosevelt
42. Weymouth Woods

National Park Areas

- a. Great Smoky Mountains
- b. Appalachian Trail
- c. Blue Ridge Parkway
- d. Carl Sandburg Home
- e. Guilford Courthouse
- f. Moores Creek
- g. Intracoastal Waterway
- h. Wright Brothers Memorial
- i. Fort Raleigh
- j. Cape Hatteras
- k. Cape Lookout

Figure does not include state lakes, state rivers, or state trails. See Table 1, page 34, for detailed information about these and other units.

Source: N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation

included in Governor Martin's 1988-1989 fiscal year budget request but was deleted by the legislature when Martin's revenue estimate fell short. Davis says the positions could have been added despite the revenue shortfall. "The legislature was able to find millions upon millions of dollars for other projects that were not included in the Governor's budget to begin with, let alone eliminated or not considered," he says. "Salaries and benefits for the 22 positions amounted to less than \$440,000. In a state budget of \$10 billion, that is not a significant amount."

Parks officials had hoped freeing rangers of maintenance duties would help persuade the State Personnel Commission to upgrade salaries for rangers. Davis says the commission bases salary

grades on duties rather than titles, and cleaning toilets, picking up paper, and collecting camping fees does not command a hefty pay check. Yet the rangers are solely responsible for lands worth millions of dollars and may be called upon in an emergency 24 hours a day.

The weekend of May 15, for example, Park Ranger John Speed at Kerr Lake's Hibernia Recreation Area was up at 7 a.m. fishing out a T-shirt someone had flushed down the bath house plumbing. At midnight, he was chasing drunks and rowdies out of the park. "For what we do, really, the pay stinks," says Kirk, "for all the responsibilities we are asked to have to handle—from car accidents to drownings to fights. A lot of it they have to try to take care of along with their day-to-day responsi-

bilities.”

Renfrow suggests in his audit of the system that if sufficient funds are not made available to meet the parks' needs, some parks should be closed or ownership of them should be transferred to local governments. He says new parks should not be created until needs in existing parks are met.¹⁹

To some who have followed the progress of the park system, the answer to many of its woes lies in an act of the General Assembly in 1987. Lawmakers enacted the State Parks Act, which requires for the first time that the General Assembly approve all additions of land to the park system.²⁰ The act also requires that approval of those additions be accompanied by appropriations for their development and operation. Davis says the act will help steer the future development of the system. He says involving the General Assembly will help assure that future parks don't suffer the funding shortfalls experienced by existing parks. "It's giving them overview—giving them the opportunity to buy in," says Davis.

Yet no one is suggesting the parks' needs will be solved easily or quickly. "We're not even making our fair-share contribution to travel and tourism in attracting people to come to our area and see our natural resources," says Davis. "Facilities have stayed the same, infrastructure has stayed the same, staff has stayed the same—we're sort of like the McDonalds of state parks. We serve millions for very little money." □ ◡ □

FOOTNOTES

¹ Michael Rulison, *Planning for State Parks and State Forests in North Carolina*, prepared by the Research Triangle Institute for the Department of Administration, December 1968.

² *Study of the State Parks*, report by the Fiscal Research Division of the General Assembly, December 1973.

³ *New Directions: A Plan for the North Carolina State Parks and Recreation System, 1979-1984*, prepared by the Department of Natural Resources and Community Development and the legislature's State Parks Study Commission.

⁴ *Parks and Recreation in North Carolina 1984*, A report prepared by the Department of Natural Resources and Community Development for distribution at public hearings on the future of the state parks system conducted across the state in 1984, pp. 1-12.

⁵ State Goals and Policy Board, *Report to the Governor*, May 1986, p. 55.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pages 40, 60, and 61.

⁷ Office of the State Auditor, *Performance Audit Report: Management and Operation of the State Parks System*, January 1988, p. 6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁹ Rankings compiled by the State Division of Parks and Recreation based on the *National Association of State Park Directors Annual Information Exchange*, April 1988.

¹⁰ Jack Betts and Vanessa Goodman, *The Two Party System in North Carolina*, A joint report by the North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research and the University of North Carolina Center for Public Television, December, 1987, pp. 40-41.

¹¹ "N.C. Ranks Last in Spending for Parks," Associated Press article published in the *Winston-Salem Journal*, May 24, 1987, p. B-6.

¹² "Time to End Parks Neglect," *The News and Observer* of Raleigh editorial page, April 28, 1987.

¹³ "An Embarrassing Disgrace," the *Winston-Salem Journal* editorial page, May 27, 1987.

¹⁴ Kirk K. Fuller, "History of North Carolina State Parks: 1915-1976," *Histories of Southeastern State Park Systems*, Association of Southeastern State Parks Directors, Oct. 1977, p. 128.

¹⁵ *Performance Audit Report*, pp. 14-17.

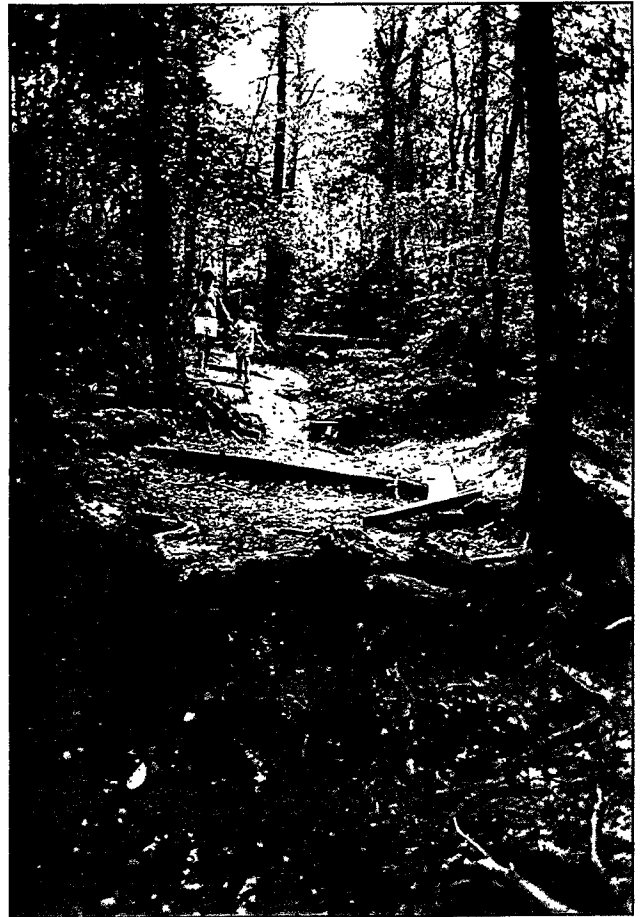
¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁷ State Goals and Policy Board Report, p. 63.

¹⁸ Biennial list of capital needs and projected costs prepared by the state Division of Parks and Recreation, Department of Natural Resources and Community Development, for the State Budget Office, April 28, 1988.

¹⁹ *Performance Audit Report*, p. 8.

²⁰ Chapter 243 of the 1987 Session Laws, State Parks Act, now codified as N.C.G.S. 113-44.



North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation