

Seeking Common Ground: Establishing Interpark Partnerships¹

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Abstract: As Californians struggle to maintain their parks during tight economic times, closer partnerships between providers must be sought to protect the resources of many parks while also maintaining desirable levels of service. A process is discussed that has been used by the USDI Park Service and the California Department of Parks and Recreation in reviewing park goals, administration and management of interpretive, recreational, natural and cultural resources of 11 parks within 3 joint clusters, with common recommendations for interagency cost efficiencies and improved public service. This ongoing effort may point the way for increased cooperation between State and Federal and other levels of park management.

Beginning in May 1993, discussions between the Directors and staff of the California Department of Parks and Recreation (CDPR) and the USDI National Park Service (NPS), Western Region led to a decision to explore potential joint operational improvements and cost savings that might be achieved between adjacent State and National Park units.

This initiative was undertaken as a result of public comment received in spring 1993, during the California State Park and Recreation Commission's Statewide public workshops on the status of California's park and recreation needs. It was also partially in response to a proposal by NPS for a temporary transfer of management responsibilities for the three State park units within the Congressionally authorized boundary of Redwood National Park.

In 1968 when Congress authorized what ultimately had become the 106,000-acre Redwood National Park, it made provisions for accepting by donation any or all of Jedediah Smith, Prairie Creek and Del Norte Coast Redwoods State Parks within its boundary, envisioning the potential for single agency management under the National Park Service. In 1978, an interim management transfer of the three State parks to NPS for a 15-year period was negotiated and readied for signature, but was not consummated by NPS for several reasons, including the sudden increase of its responsibilities in Alaska as a result of an Executive Order by President Jimmy Carter. In recent years, the possibility of a 5-year interim transfer of management or fee ownership of the State parks to NPS was raised again.

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The issue of transfer holds a high level of local interest in Humboldt and Del Norte Counties. The local perception is that the Federal government has not delivered on its projection for improved rural economic growth resulting from Redwood National Park creation and expansion (Kiestler 1993). Projected attendance projections and daily visitor expenditures have not materialized. Recently, despite tough local economic times, the consolidation theory has been advanced by some local leaders, who have suggested that single agency management would accelerate public acceptance of the Redwood National Park as a destination, resulting in longer visits and more local spending. Unfortunately, this suggestion was perceived by some as a threat, and resulted in the creation of an adversarial relationship between the National and State Parks as well as their constituents. This heightened uncertainty and limited conditions for cooperative projects and management.

The California Park Service and the National Park Service have a long history of working together. An example of this cooperation is the transfer of some park units such as those at the Marin Headlands, Stinson Beach and the historic ships as building blocks to create the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. Consequently, despite the increasing interagency friction in the northwest corner of California, both agencies recognized that they had units in close proximity in other locations that could benefit from similar cooperation. Such cooperation was particularly needed, not only because of recent budget constraints for park managers but because park management focus in the National Park Service had shifted in the creation of newer California park units. This shift was from a strictly "within the park boundary," single agency management approach, to an emphasis on empowering interagency and public-private partnerships both within and beyond park boundaries. Also, the rate of encroaching development had created an urgency to coordinate agency resources to protect joint park values. Therefore, both agencies agreed to start an assessment of operational efficiencies and cost saving possibilities where state park units occurred within some congressionally-authorized boundaries. In addition to the north coast redwood parks, the San Francisco Bay Area parks were reviewed, including Angel Island State Park and Golden Gate National Recreation Area, and the Malibu coast parks, composed of Malibu Creek, Point Mugu and Topanga State Parks, Leo Carrillo State Beach, and Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area.

Methods

To explore the potential of increased cooperation, NPS and CDPR appointed "The California Coordinating

Committee on Operational Efficiencies.” Membership consisted of in-house park management professionals with matched representation from CDPR and NPS. The 10 individuals who were to make up the committee membership were chosen for their professional objectivity and breadth of practical park management knowledge. Collectively they represented several hundred years of park-related experience from throughout the United States and California as rangers, naturalists, and superintendents, park evaluation personnel, and high-level managers. In an effort to maintain objectivity, however, deliberate efforts were made to select individuals who had never served in the subject parks.

We were assigned to act as the staff liaisons to facilitate the committee’s efforts. The committee’s charge was to independently and objectively develop and review the appropriate factual and intangible elements relevant to the efficient administration, provision of necessary common support facilities, resource protection and visitor management within the authorities and purposes for which the various units were established. To give the committee direction and support, a joint work program and schedule were quickly developed by the staff liaison from each service and agreed upon by the Western Region Director of NPS and the Director of CDPR. The purpose of this process was to objectively evaluate the management of these park groups and to make recommendations for the best management of these units so as to maximize efficiencies for park administration, resource management, facility maintenance, law enforcement, visitor information, sharing of interpretive facilities, services, and staff.

Both agencies recognized the need for public involvement from this project’s inception because a significant amount of correspondence and verbal comment on the redwood park consolidation issue had been received. Consequently, in August 1993, the committee began soliciting public input on issues it could address. Unfortunately both media and public response was very limited.

In preparation for individual park reviews, each involved CDPR and NPS park superintendent was requested to review his or her responsibilities and to prepare a briefing paper covering prescribed categories for each of the units administered. Each paper was to give a description of the park, its purpose, usage, established park management and themes, an inventory of visitor facilities and developed areas, staffing and operating budgets, and major issues facing each unit. Each superintendent was also asked to prepare a preliminary list of recommendations for joint efficiency and cost saving initiatives. The superintendents were encouraged to discuss their recommendations with their counterpart in adjacent National or State Parks. This consultation occurred to a greater or lesser degree in each park cluster and was a foreshadowing to the committee of the existing level of interagency cooperation. When completed, the briefing papers were organized along with maps, other background materials, and a detailed schedule that was then distributed to each member of the committee in advance of their field review of the units.

On-site park reviews by the coordinating committee of the north coast redwood and Malibu coast parks occurred during the week of August 29 to September 2, 1993. Because of time constraints the San Francisco Bay area review was limited to a slide orientation. The other reviews consisted of individual park and site tours conducted in common by the superintendents of each cluster. All reviews included individual presentations by each superintendent of the main issues and threats facing the units in their care, a description of ways they were currently cooperating with their adjoining park counterparts, and recommendations on how these efforts might be improved. These presentations were followed by intensive questions and answers between the committee members and the individual superintendents. The committee met nearly every day in private after the field reviews and superintendent presentations. At these meetings, based upon the briefings, site tours and professional insights, the committee started to identify park-specific efficiencies. At the last meetings, its members also agreed to recommend improved NPS-CDPR agency-wide information sharing and collaboration mechanisms. In its deliberations, the coordinating committee carefully considered how each alternative might affect the local economy.

Results

The joint coordinating committee was impressed with the professional commitment of all park employees to protect resources, complete their respective missions, and show concern about park threats that were reflected in the overall condition of the individual parks. Generally, the committee found more similarities in common problems and commitment to resolution than they did in differences. This approach led to their conclusion that both agencies would benefit if agreements at the headquarters level were negotiated to enable and invigorate programmatic cooperation and sharing of solutions so as to avoid having to individually “reinvent the wheel.” Although differing levels of existing cooperation at each of the park clusters were observed, the committee agreed that greater efforts at the superintendent levels to meet regularly and map out programs for joint interpretation programs, shared facilities, goal development and implementation would result in greater trust and cooperation at all levels of the park staff structures.

Despite some initial minor differences, in general the level of consensus among the committee members was extraordinary as to their observations, findings, and recommendations. Although this diverse group from two separate park cultures, had common interests, some feared that their positions and conclusions might be radically different, necessitating the preparation of minority reports. Fortunately, this was not the case, and the staff liaisons, based upon the committee’s discussion and direction, were then able to draft the committee’s report and recommended actions; these actions were designed to provide better protection for each park’s natural and cultural resources in a

more complete ecosystem context and to improve the park visitor's information and in-park experience, while providing the best return on the taxpayer's dollars. The report went through three in-house draft reviews involving committee members and the involved park superintendents. The revised draft report was then presented to Donald Murphy, Director of the California Department of Parks and Recreation, and Stanley Albright, Western Regional Director of the National Park Service. With some very minor changes, they approved the draft recommendations of the report.

The following highlights cover the coordinating committee's joint agency and park specific recommended actions.

Agency-Wide

The committee found and strongly expressed their belief that cooperation is most successful when it is formalized by written agreements and accountability measures between multiple levels of different agencies. Agency level coordination is needed to invigorate park-to-park as well as agency-to-agency programmatic cooperation. From the headquarters level, through the park superintendents to the maintenance foremen and the trail crew bosses, all must be empowered to work together. But to be most effective at successive levels, cooperation must start on a day-to-day basis at the superintendent's level with positive direction and oversight from headquarters providing incentive and accountability. Accordingly, the following initiatives were recommended:

- The directors of the two park agencies should sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that directs the superintendents of the three park clusters to identify and implement cooperative initiatives.
- Key program staff from both agencies should be brought together to address agency-wide cooperative initiatives including: dispatch for emergency response, 1-800 public park information numbers, visitor orientation training, concessions management, signage, park visitor information packaging, visitor safety, control of exotic species and feral animals, response to gangs and graffiti, coordination with tour operations, etc.
- In an effort to assure that the agreed upon actions are carried forth in a timely manner, a schedule of implementation is proposed, with twice yearly progress reports. At the end of a 3-year period, NPS and CDPR would conduct an analysis to determine the overall success of the coordination program and make recommendations for any corrections needed.

North Coast Redwoods

Consolidation of the three State parks under the single management of the National Park Service was considered by the committee to be neither necessary nor desirable. The consensus of the committee was that the condition of these parks is good to outstanding, because of significant progress

in resource restoration and visitor improvements, such as combined park resources and recreation experiences of all four redwood parks that result in an internationally significant park. However, Federal and State budgets can fluctuate, with Federal funding levels healthier in some years and State funding faring better in others. The two major park agencies that operate side by side have a larger, more effective voice in coping with threats and providing services with their combined staff expertise and support bases. Further, the three State park units almost pay their own way, largely due to entrance fees, higher campground revenues, and staffing levels. Consequently, cost savings to the CDPR would have been very limited if management were turned over to the NPS. The agencies concluded that the financial reality is that park resources and visitor experiences would be best served by the most cost effective use of both NPS and CDPR budgets. Rather than transferring these parks from the State Park System, the committee suggested that focus should be on strengthening partnerships.

It was agreed that the National and State Park superintendents should jointly prepare a Memorandum of Understanding addressing the management of these four units. The detailed goals and operating principles for the joint accomplishment of specific tasks include the assignment of responsibilities for common park functions, resource management, road and trail maintenance, interpretive programs, signage, alternative visitor transportation, public information, maintenance, and additional recreational opportunities such as coordinated trail development and signing, interpretive programs, joint visitor center staffing and environmental education. Cost efficiencies should be reinvested in park operations. Other recommendations included:

- Locate a State park liaison, with management authority over the three State parks, at the National Park headquarters to act as ombudsman for State park matters and to assure closely coordinated operation of the four redwood parks.
- Expand resource management activities of Redwood National Park to include the three State redwood parks to include the entire park ecosystem. A CDPR resource management liaison position will be established to work with NPS on shared resource protection issues.
- Prepare an updated park-wide general management plan to provide an integrated blueprint for all four park units and the adjacent communities.
- Target a needed planning effort to provide additional recreational opportunities and allow use of less accessible parts of the park within acceptable park resource carrying capacities so as to help fulfill the promise of the Redwood National Park as a destination park and stimulate the economy of the local communities.

San Francisco Bay Area Parks

The committee decided that the two park superintendents should convene senior managers and key program

staff to pursue mutual initiatives with priority to stabilizing, rehabilitation and fund-raising for historic structures, removal techniques for Scotch broom and eucalyptus, and efforts to package and promote visitor service on Angel and Alcatraz Islands.

In addition, the superintendents should explore potential cost efficiencies between other units in the Bay Area, including Mt. Tamalpais and Samuel P. Taylor State Parks and Muir Woods National Monument.

Malibu Coast Parks

The committee recommended that State and National Park superintendents should renew inter-park cooperative processes to include program staff and the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy.

It was also suggested that a centralization of geographic information systems (GIS) functions should be evaluated, as well as development proposal reviews, resource management functions, visitor information services, adoption of uniform trail, brush clearance, and sign standards, and establishment of an interagency visitor center.

As previously reported, in addition to the above recommendations, each of the six superintendents had prepared specific cooperative joint efficiency and cost saving initiatives as part of their briefing materials for the committee's August/September site visits. These initiatives were recommended as starting points for each area's management interaction.

Reaction to the Report

The "Draft Report: California Coordinating Committee on Operational Efficiencies" was mailed to known interested members of the public, environmental groups, Chambers of Commerce, locally elected officials and the media. Open houses, which provided opportunities for the public to discuss the report and its recommendations with its authors, were scheduled for the week of February 7, 1994. About 20 individuals attended each of the three public meetings held. Some conservationists voiced frustration with the limited public involvement and still favored transfer of interim management of the three State redwood parks to NPS. Several individuals expressed their concern about the complexities of making such a partnership effort successful. Many others voiced very constructive ideas for implementation of the report and supported coordinated management. Their general attitude seemed to be "put old differences and rivalries behind us, and let's get on with working toward common goals." A subsequent opportunity for public review and written comment through the end of February was provided before the report was finalized. Comments received were reviewed and should be included in an addendum to the final report, which is expected to be completed in the spring 1994.

The first ever all-staff meetings of National and State Park employees have been held in the North Coast Redwood and the Malibu Coast park clusters. (The latter meeting also

included the employees of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy.) We attended the North Coast Redwood meeting, where the staffs were briefed on the report in the morning and spent the afternoon in six program groupings brainstorming potential cost efficiencies and other implementation of the report's recommendations. Although some staff were concerned about how the report may affect them personally, most experienced a high level of excitement, interest and anticipation about the prospect of working more closely together. In this case at least, the implementation process was clearly task oriented and the managers must be swift to stay ahead of their eager employees. Consequently, the park Superintendents have already met to draft their MOU and initiate discussions of a coordinated work plan in anticipation of the summer season. The draft MOU is also being prepared at the interagency level.

Recommendations

For those interested in adopting a similar partnership process, several basic ingredients are recommended for success based upon our experience.

- Solicit written, top level buy in and agreement at the start.
- Clearly state the purpose. A clear exposition of the purpose of the effort will not only give direction, but may assuage fears of some of the participants.
- Give the effort specific focus and goals that are in both agencies' mutual interests, such as operating efficiencies and cost savings that can be reinvested in park resources and visitor services management.
- Open the process. Strive to make the process as fair, balanced, objective and open to employees and the public as you can. Building trust is critical to gain cooperation and achieve success.
- Make it a cooperative effort. Think in terms of incentives for the park managers to work together. Inform and involve the park managers at the onset and throughout the process. Let them make their best case and explore and present initial recommendations.
- Assign independent inter-staff liaisons. Staff liaisons must be committed, patient, and process and people oriented. They will staff the process and keep it moving. It is crucial to appoint the right people and that liaisons have access to decision makers.
- Agree on a work plan and schedule for the process, and include a public involvement strategy from the beginning.
- Recruit the best people from each agency so that the coordination team is balanced. Look for a balance of park management experience and insight, a strategic sense and awareness of policy and budget realities. Make sure both the park superintendents and headquarters managers are included. Select people who are not directly vested in the specific park issues and who are open to a wide range of innovative solutions.

- Consider an outside member. While not used in this program, a member of the committee from outside of the two involved organizations might have added to its objectivity, veracity, and credibility.
- Follow through. Keep promises, expectations and commitment on a timely basis. Follow-through establishes the credibility of the process.
- Communicate. Inform everyone of progress, decisions or delays. This not only fosters a positive team sense, but works to relieve the anxiety of the unknown.
- Accountability. Establish an oversight, appeals, and trouble-shooting process. Set forth management performance standards, require reporting of results periodically, and have an evaluation program for accountability.

Conclusion

We are greatly encouraged by the cooperation and success shown by the development of this joint report. In spite of fire, earthquake, and mud flow, park superintendents are already meeting and working to find ways to allow their programs to mesh, holding joint, all-staff meetings and sharing training and resource information.

We are confident that the effort in preparing this report will point the way for increased cooperation and efficiencies between the State and Federal levels of park management. Although the committee's report already suggests that other opportunities existing within the park clusters should be reviewed, other possibilities may also arise from this report. Its implementation may serve as a pilot program, particularly if pending Congressional legislation for the expansion of Point Reyes National Seashore is passed and if the California Desert Bill is enacted. But this report may also serve as a model for cooperation between the State and local, and Federal and local levels as well. In this period of economic stress, when park agencies at all levels are struggling to maintain their park systems, such partnerships will serve as an important method for continued service to the public, and they will preserve the resources that our parks are designed to perpetuate.

References

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