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Those Precious Jewels

Part I: History and Extent of State Parks of the U.S.¹

A Research Brief in the IRIS Series²

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² The Internet Research Information Series (IRIS) is an internet accessible science report series covering outdoor recreation statistics, the National Kids Survey, natural lands research, and other human-dimension and demographics research related to natural resources. This research is a collaborative effort between the USDA Forest Service's Southern Research Station and its Forestry Sciences Laboratory in Athens, Georgia; the University of Georgia in Athens; and the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, Tennessee. <http://www.srs.fs.usda.gov/trends/#> and <http://warnell.forestry.uga.edu/nrrt/nsre/IrisReports.html>

Those Precious Jewels---Part I: History and Extent of State Parks of the U.S.

Introduction

This IRIS Report is one of a series of short reports about state parks across the 50 states of this country. We hope to cover state parks by the numbers, ecosystem representation, visitation trends, and other aspects in subsequent reports in the state park series. The primary source is our larger, more comprehensive publication that came out this year (2013) entitled, *Recreation and Protected Land Resources of the United States* (http://www.srs.fs.fed.us/pubs/gtr/gtr_srs169.pdf).

A wee history

Origins of the state park systems and of the role of states in providing outdoor recreation opportunities were written by Herbert Evison in an



anthology to the 1930 National Conference on State Parks. The following is quoted from that anthology--- “It was not until automobiles became fairly numerous, and sufficient good or fair roads had been built to permit ready access to areas at a distance from centers of population, that the State-park movement may be said to have been fairly launched. Such State parks as had been established by that time had generally been created to preserve some outstanding feature or scenic area, such as the Niagara Reservation in New York or the Yosemite Valley in California....”

“It is during the past decade that the establishment of State park systems has become widely recognized.... In the old days park advocates would say, "Here is an area so outstanding in its beauty that it ought to be saved for the public." Today we say, "Here is a public, vast in numbers, with modern means of transportation, good roads, and leisure, more and more cramped by the

growth of cities, to whom contact with the beauty of nature and opportunity for the simple types of outdoor recreation are inure and more necessary....”

“Let us find and preserve some of what is left of our unspoiled out-of-doors, so that our people today and tomorrow may have a chance to know what it is like and to enjoy it....there are two types (of administration) which are most general.... One is the commission or board, concerned almost wholly with parks, such as is found in Kentucky, Rhode Island, Iowa, New Mexico, Texas, Washington, and South Dakota. The other is the conservation department headed either by a single conservation commissioner, as in New York and Massachusetts, or by a conservation commission....”

Every state has a division or agency that is dedicated to outdoor recreation and education. This usually refers to a *state park* system. “System” is the correct terminology given that these organizations are comprised of much more than state parks alone. Most of the state park systems have invested in facilities and services. Mostly state parks are managed specifically to provide outdoor recreation opportunities for state residents. But, some are also attractions for tourists and their associated spending. There are two other state organizations that provide resources for outdoor recreation, but they do so as a by-product of their primary missions: *state forest commissions* and *state wildlife and fish agencies*.

Data for State Park Systems.--In 1938, the National Park Service prepared a report on Recreational Use of the Land in the United States. That report concluded that “Today (1938), 46 of the 48 States possess State areas ... set aside wholly or primarily for recreational use. Their holdings total approximately 38 million acres. The 1930 National Conference on State Parks estimated approximately 45,000,000 visits in that year. The 1938 report indicated attendance in 1933 of approximately 61 million. By 2008, visitation had reached 748 million.

For our national Assessment of State Parks, we used two principal sources of state park system data. First is the National Association of State Park Directors (NASPD), which lists first among its five goals “to provide a common forum for the exchange of information about state park programs.” This national “Annual Information Exchange” (AIX) is managed in partnership with North Carolina State University. The inventory data we used for our publication that came out this year covered the period July 1, 2008 through June 30, 2009. The AIX compiles information

about inventory (land and water), facilities, visitation, capital expenses, financing, personnel, and park support groups. A second source of data used was an individual park inventory across the 50 states conducted during 2009 by our research group. Basic data about the size (acreage), location (latitude/longitude), and site type or classification were collected on every U.S. state park system unit based on available information from state government websites, printed materials, and e-mail queries. As far as we know, this is the only source of data available at the individual state park level.

State Park System Stats

State areas designated as parks represent one-third of the units in state park systems in the United States, but, they represent nearly two-thirds of the total acreage (Fig. 1). State recreation areas make up more than half of the total U.S. acreage. Nationwide, historic sites comprise 9 percent of all state park units, but, as one might expect, they make up less than 1 percent of the total acreage. In many states, historic sites are administered through travel and tourism, cultural resources, or other agency divisions, rather than through the state park system.

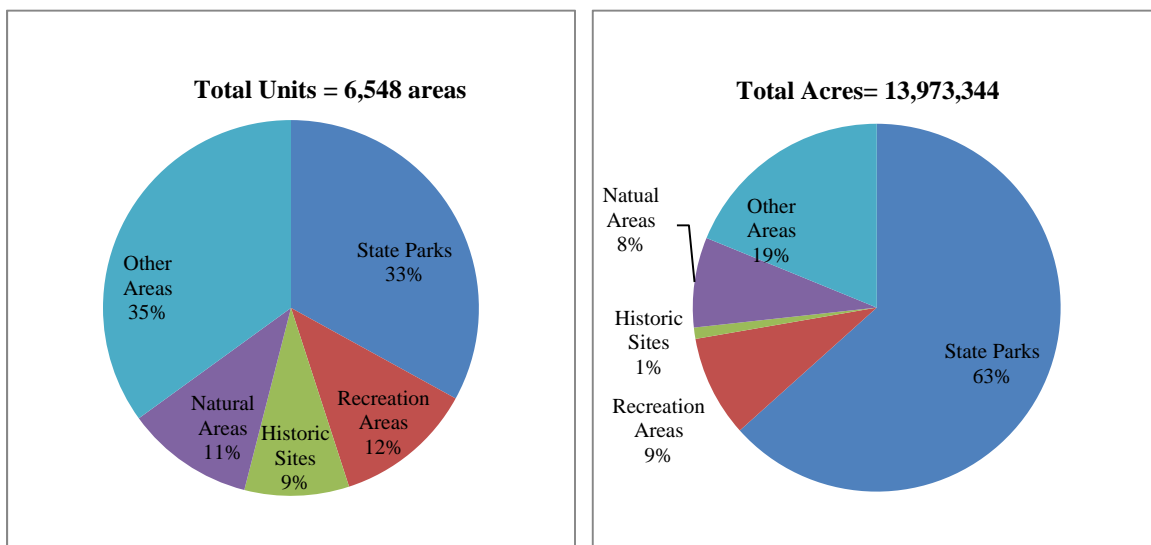


Figure 1—Percentage of state park system units and acres by type of area, 2009.

Note: Natural areas include environmental education sites & areas classified as scientific sites. Other areas include forests, fish and wildlife areas, and other miscellaneous types of state park sites.

About 57 percent of all state park system units in the nation are located in the North, which has twice as many areas as any other region. This number is skewed somewhat by New York, which

reported more than 1,000 state forests and fish & wildlife areas that are managed by their Department of Environmental Conservation. The North and Pacific Coast Regions lead with a near-identical 5.2 million acres, each having about 37 percent of the total U.S. system. Almost 70 percent of all U.S. state park system areas and slightly more than half of all acreage are in the two eastern regions.

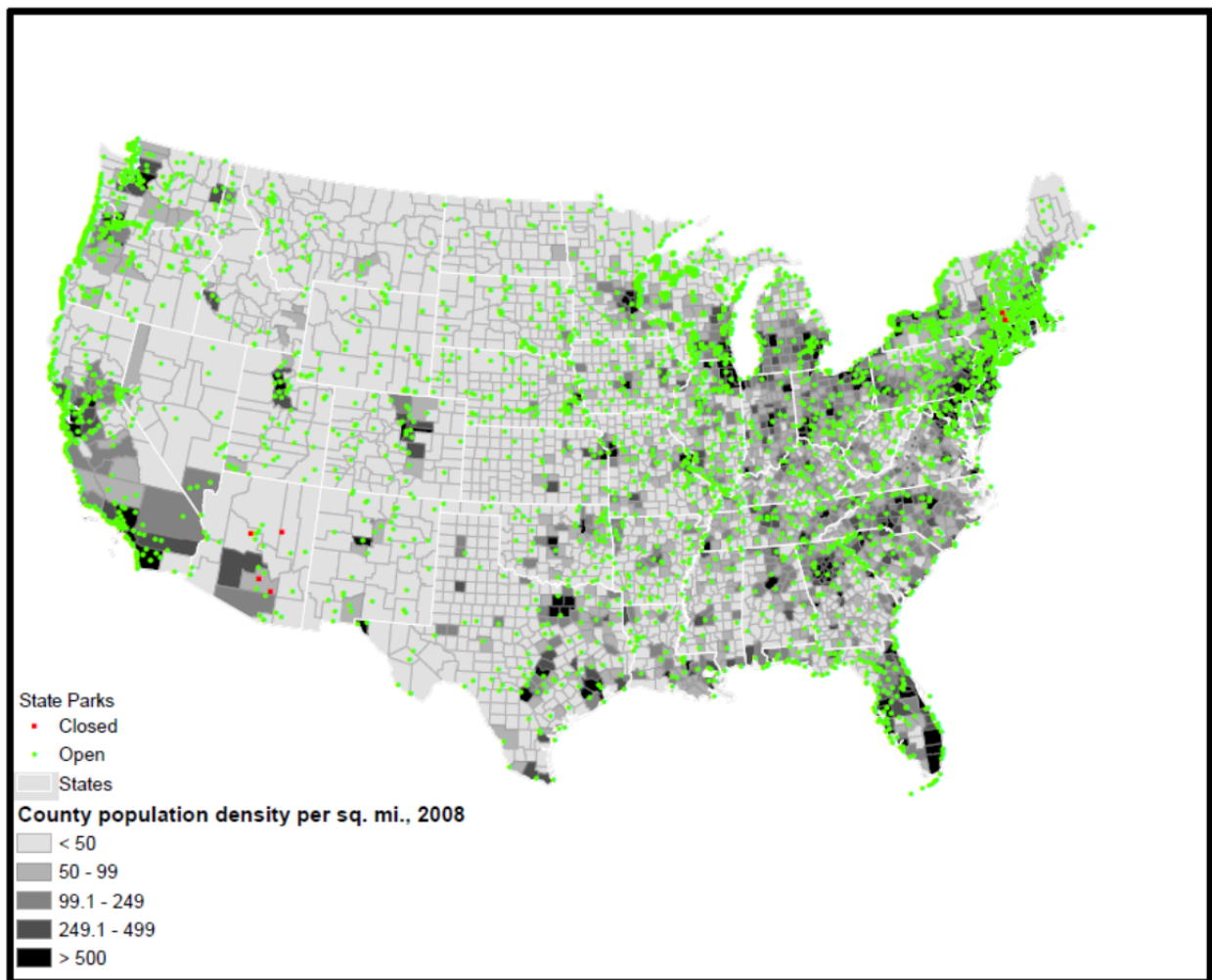


Figure 2—State park system units in the coterminous United States (2009) and county population density (persons per square mile), 2008. Source: 2009 State Park Inventory study. USDA Forest Service, Southern Research Station Athens, GA.

Though the total state park system acreage is just a fraction, about 2 percent, of the acreage of federal land in the United States, the key to its importance is location and accessibility. State park system units exist in all 50 states and are generally evenly distributed geographically within each state. Many of the Nation's state park units are located close to counties with high populations (Fig. 2). The large number of urban-proximate parks is complemented by an equally

large number of units in rural areas, where their contribution to local and regional economic development is significant.

Available Forestry and Recreation information:

Southern Research Station's Compass Live - <http://www.srs.fs.usda.gov/compass/>

The Natural Inquirer's "Time Out – How Much Time Do Kids Spend Outdoors" - <http://www.naturalinquirer.org/Time-Out--How-Much-Time-Do-Kids-Spend-Outdoors-i-34.html>