

HISTORY OF THE STATE PARK SYSTEM

The roots of New Hampshire's state park system can be traced back as far as 1881. That year a Board of Inquiry was appointed through an act of the Legislature to investigate the indiscriminate cutting of timber throughout the state. Among other things the Board of Inquiry recommended the formation of a permanent commission to deal with forestry problems on a long-term basis.

The State Forestry Commission was established in 1893¹/ By then the state had already acquired what was to become its first state park property, Miller State Park in Peterborough, New Hampshire. Early on the Commission recognized and promoted the importance of forests as multiple-use areas valued not only for their sawlogs but also for their recreational uses.

The State Forestry Department was established in 1909 through the work of the Commission in cooperation with organizations such as the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests. Under the Forestry Department the state's land acquisition policy was geared towards forestry, preservation, and public enjoyment of scenic and natural features. Little was done to enhance public access to public lands, and only occasional scenic views were maintained along highways.

During the Great Depression of the 1930's the federal government became very involved in making improvements to many state-owned park properties. The Federal Civilian Conservation Corps and Works Progress Administration programs through their job-creating programs built shelters, bathhouses, and trails on ten state forest properties. To administer these new areas, the Forestry Commission was expanded to include recreation, and renamed the Forestry and Recreation Commission, still overseeing the work of the Forestry Department. In 1935 Russel B. Tobey was appointed administrative assistant in charge of parks.

Besides Miller State Park, the state park system in 1935 included Forest Lake State Park in Dalton, Franconia and Crawford notches in the White Mountains, beaches in Sutton, Bristol, Wolfeboro, Laconia and Hampton, Mount Monadnock in Jaffrey, and two-community oriented parks, Bellamy in Dover (since turned over to the city) and Kingston. The state's first supervised campground opened in 1936 at Moose Brook, the land having been acquired by gift two years earlier. Although the parks were operated summer months only, the beginnings of a statewide system offering various kinds of recreational opportunity were in place.

Between 1935 and the outbreak of World War II the system continued to acquire new park properties, by gift, purchase and transfer. Beginning in 1937, visitors were charged nominal fees to support maintenance and growth. User fees, rents and charges covered two thirds of the operations and maintenance costs in 1940.

Anticipating a continued growth in attendance at state parks, cost efficiencies from a proposed administrative reorganization, and of the aerial tramway installation at Franconia Notch, a ten-year fiscal plan for the development and operation of state park system was developed.^{2/} The New Hampshire State Planning and Development Commission, author of the fiscal plan, projected eventual reimbursement to the General Fund for park operations and development. It also saw the gradual accumulation of a reserve of \$250,000 for large-scale developments. Good publicity and a promotion of the state parks during the period contributed to record attendance.

World War II brought a temporary halt to park expansion. Attendance fell, parks were closed or operated on a part-time basis, and maintenance was deferred. Only one park, Bear Brook in Allenstown, was added to the system and that due to a federal transfer to the State.

Reorganization of the Forestry Department took place following World War II. Russell Tobey was named Park Director heading the new Division of Recreation, comparable to the Division of Forests. The new Parks Director was responsible for "[executing] all matters pertaining to the design, development, administration, operation and maintenance of recreational facilities and services for public use, on all state public areas of recreational significance such as parks, forests, reservations and historic sites." He was further charged to cooperate with the federal government and others for development or promotion of recreation facilities and services within New Hampshire, including parkways and scenic routes, wayside picnic areas (then under Department of Highways jurisdiction), and hunting and fishing.

By 1945 the state's parks offered opportunities for swimming, picnicking, hiking, fishing, and camping, activities which ranked highest among a sampling of 1,000 New Hampshire residents surveyed in 1938. Skiing followed shortly with a rope tow on Mt. Prospect at Weeks State Park in Lancaster. Fewer than half the park users were residents in 1940, although many nonresident visitors summered in New Hampshire.

In time, the parks system acquired additional wayside areas, natural areas, historic sites, and recreational areas. Through another reorganization in 1950 the Division of Recreation assumed responsibility for the former Shore and Beach Preservation Committee and the Cannon Mountain Tramway Commission. Introduced to the ski industry and year-round park operations in 1948 when ski runs and a chairlift were opened on Mt. Sunapee, control of the tramway drew the Division further into winter recreation and the park system's first explicitly commercial ventures.

Expansions within the system were complemented by staff expansions within the Division and new opportunities for visitors. The first natural history interpretation center, a joint venture between the State and Audubon Society of New Hampshire, opened at Bear Brook State Park in the 1950's. Spurred by competition from private ski areas, the Division sharpened its promotional activities with clambakes, barbeques, square dances, park booklets, press releases, and films advertising summer and winter recreational opportunities.

The park system growth continued to be partially supported by income from rents, charges, fees and appropriations. By the early 1950's the Legislature had adopted an unofficial pay-as-you-go policy for park operations. All park operations were to be covered by income from previous seasons. However, this system of depository income into the State Recreation Fund proved insufficient and too volatile.

In 1961 the Forestry Department was again reorganized into the Department of Resources and Economic Development, and an unprecedented \$9,000,000 bond issue to improve and expand park holdings was passed. To help guide the investment of this money, all parks, waysides, and historic sites were classified as either resource areas or recreation areas. Recreation areas were to be developed and managed for optimum financial return. Resource areas were to be managed for preservation.

The Federal Land and Water Conservation Fund was created in 1965. This matching grant program was intended in part to support conservation land acquisitions and outdoor recreation development by the states. New Hampshire's first five projects to benefit from grants from this program were: chairlift, slopes and parking at Mt. Sunapee State Park; acquisition of 2,739 acres and development of beach, a playfield and other facilities at Pawtuckaway State Park; a 5-acre acquisition at Silver Lake State Park; a

master plan and snowmaking at Franconia Notch State Park and the first update of the New Hampshire Outdoor Recreation Plan. Over the years the Department of Resources and Economic Development has received over \$8.9 million for similar park acquisition and development projects from the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

Major park openings during the 60's included Greenfield State Park in Greenfield, Clough State Park in Weare, and Pawtuckaway State Park in Nottingham. Major acquisitions were the Mount Washington summit and Pisgah State Park in southwestern New Hampshire.

When Russ Tobey retired in 1971, the state park system contained thirty-three parks, five historic sites, ten wayside areas, and the Hampton Sea Shell. From an essentially custodial philosophy towards public lands under the Forestry and Recreation Commission, the Parks Division became increasingly service-oriented.

Under George Hamilton's five-year tenure as Parks Director, the trend was continued. Selected park employees were trained at the University of New Hampshire in natural and historic resources interpretation. Despite budget constraints, interpretive programs were initiated at Odiorne Point State Park and Monadnock State Parks. Trails for motorbikes, snowmobiles and hikers were created. Camping and picnicking facilities were expanded. Two additional ocean beaches in North Hampton and Rye opened in 1981, and three more wayside areas were acquired. A naturalist position was created within the Division of Parks and Recreation, and interpretive programs were initiated at White Lake, Greenfield, Pawtuckaway, Franconia Notch, Mt. Washington, and the Robert Frost Farm. A therapeutic recreation specialist position was created, initiating the annual Mayfest and Octoberfest celebrations for the handicapped and aging populations.

Budget cuts in 1981 due to a depressed economy eliminated the naturalist and therapeutic recreation staff. Several parks were put on part-time schedules, fees were upped, and seasonal employees were eliminated from low use areas.

A detailed, self analysis of the state park system in 1985 painted a very bleak picture of things needing to be done: toilets to be fixed; trees to be planted; fences to be mended. The Division of Parks in its 1985 Report on the Condition and Trend of the State Park Properties found "a serious deterioration in landscape quality and facility upkeep at virtually every unit of the state park system." It highlights "one of the major contributing factors to the general decline in park upkeep: a system-wide reduction in park staffing over the past twenty years, from a staffing base which was already inadequate to attain the Division's desired standards for park maintenance and resource management."^{3/}

"Parks '90" is the theme of the current Division of Parks push to get the state park system back into what it considers top form by 1990. The Division proposed and the Legislature funded sharply increased operations and capital budget requests for fiscal years 1986 and 1987.

Coinciding with the "Parks 90" project initiation was the Legislative sunset review of the state park system. Extensive and in depth review of the Division of Parks concluded that the park system was on course but that certain aspects of the system needed special attention. The Legislative review raised the question relative to the financial solvency or self-sufficiency of the park system continued to be expressed. By statute the state park system should protect valuable natural areas and provides recreational opportunities for state residents. It also is viewed as

custodian for several historic sites, scenic areas and scientific areas.