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# State Park Operations

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## SUMMARY

*Overall, DNR does a good job of managing Minnesota's state parks. The Parks and Recreation Division uses reasonable standards and a fair process for allocating resources to individual parks, sets priorities for interpretive services based on an assessment of resources and use, solicits public input, and fosters positive working relationships with other agencies. But the division has not emphasized the resource management and preservation portion of its mission as much as recreation and interpretive services.*

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**T**he Parks and Recreation Division has a multi-part mission to provide a state park system which preserves and manages Minnesota's natural, scenic, and cultural resources for present and future generations, while providing outdoor recreational and educational opportunities in natural settings.<sup>1</sup> This chapter examines how the division addresses each part of its mission. We addressed the following questions:

- **How well are Minnesota's state parks managed?**
- **Does the division have a process to adequately identify maintenance needs and estimate the operating costs of state parks?**
- **How are volunteers used in state parks? Are there constraints on the use of volunteers?**
- **Are current camping facilities able to meet demand?**
- **How many state parks have naturalist programs? Do these programs meet public demand?**
- **How does the division balance preservation of natural resources with the provision of outdoor recreation?**
- **How are security and enforcement services provided in state parks?**
- **How does the Department of Natural Resources advertise and market state parks?**

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<sup>1</sup> Parks and Recreation Division, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, *1995-2005 Strategic Plan* (St. Paul, 1995), 6.

To answer these questions we reviewed division policies, procedures, and plans for managing parks, establishing park budgets, using seasonal staff and volunteers, providing interpretive and enforcement services, and promoting parks. We interviewed division staff working in the central and regional offices, made formal site visits to a sample of 19 parks to interview park managers and other staff and observe operations, informally visited an additional 12 parks, and conducted a mail survey of park managers. Finally, we analyzed park operating standards and examined data on volunteers, campground reservations, and enforcement activity.

We conclude that:

- **Overall, the Parks and Recreation Division manages Minnesota's state parks reasonably well given the resources available to the division.**

As discussed in Chapter 1, park users are satisfied with Minnesota's state parks. Since 1987, over 90 percent of both day users and campers surveyed by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) have responded that they were satisfied with their visits to state parks.

During our formal and informal visits to state parks around the state, we observed clean bathrooms, orderly campgrounds, and well-maintained grounds. On the surface, the state parks presented a pleasing appearance that made the visitor feel comfortable. We also encountered friendly and busy park staff. Through our interviews with over 80 division staff, we met committed people who take pride in their jobs and the parks they manage.

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**State parks  
appeared  
generally well  
maintained.**

The division uses many techniques and processes that we would expect to see in a reasonably well-managed agency, including:

- A process for setting priorities, making budget decisions, and allocating staff and operating budgets to individual parks based on park activity information;
- A 1995 *Interpretive Services Plan* that identifies a mission and goals and sets priorities for educational programming in state parks;
- A process to revise individual park management plans;
- Numerous techniques to solicit input from the public, park users, park stakeholders, and local governments;
- Cooperative working relationships with other DNR divisions and state agencies; and
- A variety of mechanisms to facilitate communication between field and administrative offices within the division.

Despite these positive indicators, we found that there is room for improvement in state park operations. We found that the division has not emphasized resource management and preservation as much as providing recreation and interpretive services.

The remainder of this chapter examines state park operations, including the park operating standards and budget process, use of seasonal staff and volunteers, camping, interpretive services, resource management and preservation, enforcement, marketing, and planning.

## STATE PARK STANDARDS AND BUDGET PROCESS

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the division incurred expenditures of nearly \$24 million in 1999 to operate state parks. The division uses “minimum operating standards” to allocate a portion of its appropriation to individual parks. This report uses the term “operating standards” when referring to the “minimum operating standards.” This section describes the operating standards and examines how they are used.

### Background

The division initially implemented its operating standards in 1989 to provide greater equity and consistency when allocating resources to individual parks.<sup>2</sup> The standards are the division’s attempt to move away from the prior practice of setting individual park budgets based on historical experience. A division committee developed the standards after researching other park systems and incorporated many features of a standards system used in the Province of Ontario, Canada.<sup>3</sup>

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**Park “operating standards” are used to set priorities and allocate resources to parks.**

The operating standards serve three purposes. First, the standards describe tasks that must be accomplished in each park. Second, the division uses the standards to estimate budget needs for each park. Third, the division uses the standards to set priorities and allocate available funds to individual parks. These items are discussed in turn.

First, the operating standards describe the tasks that must be accomplished in each park and identify an expected level of performance for each task. For example, the standards indicate that campground sanitation buildings should be cleaned twice a day during periods of peak use. The frequency of tasks ranges from daily to semi-annual procedures. Table 2.1 lists examples of the operating standards. The necessary tasks are assigned to four different operating periods throughout

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<sup>2</sup> Parks and Recreation Division, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, *1992-93 Job Classification Study* (St. Paul, 1993); Ron Hains, “Operational Standards: A Case History,” *Park and Grounds Management*, February 1991, 8-9; and Ron Hains, Parks Operations Manager, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Interview, May 14, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> The committee that developed the standards identified the necessary tasks in state parks. Park worker input, along with time and motion studies, were used to determine how much time was needed to complete each task. In the early 1990s, the division reevaluated the standards and reassessed the time required for tasks. In 1992-93, it also revised park classifications to provide better groupings of parks based on size, attendance, resources, budget, staffing, and services provided.

**Table 2.1: Examples of State Park Operating Standards**

<u>Category and Objectives</u>	<u>Selected Operating Standards</u>
<p><b>Administrative and Clerical Support:</b> To provide administrative and clerical support for park operations.</p>	<p>Provide parks with administrative support by a park manager 12 months per year.</p>
<p><b>Public Contact:</b> To ensure park fees are collected when park is open (gates not locked); provide entry control; receive and process campground reservations; and provide public service.</p>	<p>Have contact stations in [Group A and B] parks open 12 hours per day on weekends (Friday-Sunday) and 8 hours per day on weekdays during <b>peak</b> period.</p> <p>Have contact stations open 24 hours total per weekend (Friday-Sunday) and 8 hours on holidays during <b>moderate</b> period.</p> <p>Have contact stations open 16 hours per weekend (Saturday, Sunday) and 8 hours on holidays during <b>winter</b> period.</p>
<p><b>Sanitation and Building Cleaning:</b> To ensure that all public restrooms, including vault and pit toilets, are maintained in a clean and sanitary condition.</p>	<p>Clean campground sanitation buildings twice daily during <b>peak</b> period and once daily during <b>moderate</b> period. (Allow 10 minutes per toilet stool, shower, urinal, or set of 1 to 3 sinks per day during peak period and 5 minutes per unit per day during moderate period.)</p>

SOURCE: Parks and Recreation Division, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, *Minnesota State Parks Operating Standards, FY95: Details of Standards* (St. Paul, 1994) 3, 6, 16.

the year that correspond to the level of park operations, the amount of public use, and seasonal conditions:<sup>4</sup>

1. **Peak operating period**, generally from Memorial Day through Labor Day weekends, represents the highest level of operation for all park facilities, services, and programs to meet maximum user demand.
2. **Moderate operating period** (or spring and fall), generally from Labor Day weekend to October 15 and May 15 to Memorial Day weekend, involves the operation of all park facilities and services, although public services may be reduced to reflect lower user demand.
3. **Winter operating period**, from December 15 to March 1, applies when specific winter recreation facilities are provided and maintained, such as groomed cross-country ski trails.
4. **Low-use operating period**, any time not designated as peak, moderate, or winter, involves reduced services to reflect low demand.

Specific operating periods vary in length from park to park, depending on patterns of public use and revenues generated.

<sup>4</sup> Parks and Recreation Division, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, *Minimum Operating Standards, FY95: Detail of Standards* (St. Paul, 1995), 1-2.



Some state parks provide opportunities for winter recreation.

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**To allocate resources, DNR groups parks based on size, attendance, budget, staffing, and other factors.**

The division analyzed each park's level of activity based on size, number and types of facilities, number of visitors and staff, revenues raised, and resources managed. Each park was then assigned a score, ranked, and put into groups. Table 2.2 shows the parks in each group, with Group A consisting of the most heavily used parks and Group E containing the least used parks.

The second purpose of the operating standards is to establish budget needs for each park and for park field operations as a whole. The standards are applied to each park and an estimated number of staff hours needed to operate the park are calculated. In fiscal year 1999, DNR estimated that 873,293 hours would be required to accomplish all tasks in all state parks. The hours for individual parks ranged from 73,611 at Itasca to 1,256 at Monson Lake.<sup>5</sup> Administrative and clerical, public contact, sanitation and building cleaning, and building and facility maintenance services accounted for nearly 60 percent of total hours needed in 1999. The staff hours for each park are divided between permanent full-time and seasonal staff and the costs of salaries and benefits are used to estimate park operating budget needs. These figures represent hours "needed," not the hours funded.

Finally, the division uses the operating standards and an "operational funding decision matrix" to set priorities and allocate available funds to individual parks based on what services will be provided at each park. The division also uses the matrix to identify and communicate to legislators and other decision makers what

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<sup>5</sup> The following state parks and recreation areas are not included in the operating standards: Glendalough, John Latsch, Cuyuna Country, and Garden Island. The DNR Forestry Division managed Franz Jevne state park until June 1999 when it was returned to the parks division management. Consequently, it is not part of the standards. The Legislature has appropriated \$150,000 annually during the last two bienniums for the operation of both Glendalough and Cuyuna Country.

**Table 2.2: Park Groups Used for the Operating Standards**

Most ←———— Activities, Facilities, and Revenues —————→ Least

Group A 15 Parks	Group B 19 Parks	Group C 9 Parks	Group D 17 Parks	Group E 4 Parks
Forestville/Mystery Cave	Afton	Banning	Beaver Creek Valley	Carley
Fort Snelling	Blue Mounds	Bear Head Lake	Big Stone Lake	George Crosby
Gooseberry Falls	Camden	Buffalo River	Charles A. Lindbergh	Manitou
Interstate	Father Hennepin	Cascade River	Glacial Lakes	Monson Lake
Itasca	Flandrau	Crow Wing	Grand Portage	Schoolcraft
Lake Bemidji	Fort Ridgely	Lac Qui Parle	Great River Bluffs	
Lake Carlos	Frontenac	Nerstrand-Big Woods	Hayes Lake	
Jay Cooke	Hill Annex Mine	Temperance River	Judge C.R. Magney	
St. Croix	Lake Bronson	Sakatah Lake	Kilen Woods	
Sibley	Lake Shetek		Lake Louise	
Soudan Underground Mine	Maplewood		Lake Maria	
Tettegouche	McCarthy Beach		Moose Lake	
Wild River	Mille Lacs Kathio		Old Mill	
William O'Brien	Minneopa		Rice Lake	
Whitewater	Minnesota Valley		Split Rock Creek	
	Myre-Big Island		Upper Sioux	
	Savanna Portage		Agency	
	Scenic		Zippel Bay	
	Split Rock Lighthouse			

NOTE: Parks in each group are listed in alphabetical order. John Latsch, Franz Jevne, and Glendalough state parks and Cuyuna Country and Garden Island recreation areas are not included in the operating standards.

SOURCE: Parks and Recreation Division, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

tasks can be accomplished with the division's appropriation. Table 2.3 shows the matrix containing the operating standard staff hours for fiscal year 1999. The top part of the matrix consists of seven funding levels and the services provided at each funding level. The funding levels, which are based on the operating periods described earlier, further divide the peak and moderate periods into day-use and overnight activities.

The bottom part of the matrix identifies funding priorities by park group. The division has assigned top priority to primary services for the five groups, as indicated by the number in the upper left corner of these boxes (priorities #1 through #5). The next priorities are summer day-use and overnight activities for Group A parks (which have been assigned priorities #6 and #7). Based on the matrix, the division has assigned summer day-use activities in Group C parks a higher priority (#11) than spring and fall day-use activities in Group B parks (#13). Given the division's priorities, the most heavily used parks are least affected by funding shortfalls.

In fiscal year 1999, the division funded priorities #1 through #21 and partially funded spring and fall camping for parks in Group B (priority #22), but it did not fund other priorities. Specifically, it *did not* fund spring and fall camping for

**Table 2.3: State Park Operational Funding Decision Matrix, 1999**

Services	Funding Level 1 Primary Services	Funding Level 2 Memorial-Labor Day Day-Use Activities	Funding Level 3 Memorial-Labor Day Overnight Activities	Funding Level 4 Spring and Fall Day-Use Activities	Funding Level 5 Spring and Fall Overnight Activities	Funding Level 6 Winter Activities and Other Services	Funding Level 7 Low-Use Period Services
Administrative Clerical	Administration and Clerical at 20% of Annual Cost	Administration and Clerical at 45% of Annual Cost	Administration and Clerical at 75% of Annual Cost	Administration and Clerical at 90% of Annual Cost	Administration and Clerical at 100% of Annual Cost		
Public Services		• Public Contact at 50% • Day-Use Facility Custodial Services	• Public Contact at 100% • Overnight Facility Custodial Services	• Public Contact at 50% • Day-Use Facility Custodial Services	• Public Contact at 100% • Overnight Facility Custodial Services	• Public Contact at 100% • Custodial Services • Lifeguards	• Intermittent Public Contact • Intermittent Custodial Services
Interpretive Services		Full-time Naturalists and Tour Guides	Seasonal Naturalists and Tour Guides at 100%			Interpretive Interns, Interpretive Center Hosts and Special Events	
Resource and Facility Protection	Resource and Facility Protection at 25% of Annual Cost		Resource and Facility Protection at 75% of Annual Cost		Resource and Facility Protection at 100% of Annual Cost		
Trails	Trail Maintenance at 25% of Annual Cost	Trail Maintenance at 50% of Annual Cost		Trail Maintenance at 75% of Annual Cost		Trail Maintenance at 100% and Winter Grooming	
<b>STATE PARK STANDARD HOURS</b>							
Group A 15 Parks	#1 68, 141	#6 99, 962	#7 131,440	#10 45,436	#12 33,200	#26 26,999	#31 7,516
Group B 19 Parks	#2 42,301	#8 60,310	#9 84,742	#13 25,579	#22 22,366	#27 21,882	#32 5,495
Group C 9 Parks	#3 14,167	#11 19,380	#14 29,512	#18 8,547	#23 8,562	#28 5,288	#33 2,023
Group D 17 Parks	#4 17,055	#15 23,809	#16 31,777	#20 8,621	#24 7,934	#29 6,344	#34 3,426
Group E 4 Parks	#5 1,204	#17 1,668	#19 2,621	#21 586	#25 509	#30 253	#35 247
							<b>TOTAL 873,293</b>

Parks with  
Most  
Activity,  
Facilities,  
and  
Revenue

↓  
Parks with  
Least  
Activity,  
Facilities,  
and  
Revenue

SOURCE: Parks and Recreation Division, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

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**The operating standards are reviewed regularly.**

parks in Groups C, D, and E, winter activities for all parks, and low-use period services for all parks. According to the division, spring and fall overnight activities for parks in these groups have not been funded for years. In the past, however, parks in Groups C, D, and E have provided spring and fall camping with permanent full-time parks staff even though it was not funded.

The state parks operations manager works with a standards committee to continually review the operating standards.<sup>6</sup> The operating standard hours are reviewed the second year of each biennium in preparation for the next biennium's budget proposal. The committee also reviews the staff hours distributed to parks and considers park manager requests for changes to the standards. In 1999, the committee examined operating periods for individual parks based on park revenues generated. Any adjustments to standard hours based on this analysis probably would not be implemented until 2002.<sup>7</sup>

## Assessment of the Operating Standards

In 1999, the division used the operating standards, the matrix, and an examination of park supply and expense costs, to allocate about \$16 million, or 67 percent of the division's total budget, to state parks. This represented the cost of permanent and seasonal park staff and supplies and equipment for individual parks. It did not include unemployment, workers compensation, and other expenditures paid from the central office.

In 1993, the Financial Audit Division of our office reviewed the state park operating standards and concluded that the division substantially met its objectives of establishing a more equitable budget allocation system.<sup>8</sup> We asked park managers to assess how adequately the operating standards reflect the work requirements of the parks they manage and found that:

- **Most park managers said that the operating standards adequately reflect the seasonal work requirements of the parks they manage.**

Seventy-two percent of park managers surveyed responded that the operating standards were a moderately or completely adequate assessment of seasonal work requirements.<sup>9</sup> Park managers told us that they thought the operating standards were fair and allow people to see and understand how park budgets were determined. Park managers emphasized, however, that from their perspective the operating standards should be fully funded. Some park managers had specific complaints about the operating standards including: the hours provided for trail

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<sup>6</sup> The committee consists of the parks operations manager, an operations coordinator, regional park operation specialists, two park managers, and staff from resource management, interpretive, and information services.

<sup>7</sup> Parks and Recreation Division, *1992-93 Job Classification Study* (St. Paul, 1993); and Ron Hains, Parks Operations Manager, Interview, May 14, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Office of the Legislative Auditor, Financial Audit Division, *Department of Natural Resources Selected Scope Financial Audit for the Year Ended June 30, 1992* (St. Paul, 1993), 17.

<sup>9</sup> The question was: "How adequately would the minimum operating standards reflect the seasonal work requirements of this park if they were fully funded?" Office of the Legislative Auditor, State Park Managers Questionnaire, August 1999.



maintenance, mowing, or other services were not adequate; the standards were not fair to smaller parks; and not enough dollars were provided for equipment.

While some people may disagree with how the operating standards have been used to set priorities or with other aspects of the standards, we conclude that:

- **The Parks and Recreation Division's use of operating standards to allocate staff and operating budgets to individual parks based on park activity information is a reasonable way to identify and set funding priorities.**

The operating standards are reasonable because they use objective data and criteria to differentiate between operating time periods and levels of park activity, and to allocate staff and operating budgets to individual parks.<sup>10</sup> The standards involve a fair and open process and are regularly reviewed. Analysis indicates that the standards are working as intended; generally, park budgets are based on the level of activity in each park. We compared 1999 park budgets with park revenues and total and overnight visits. Park revenues showed the highest correlation to park budgets, followed by overnight visits.

However, we also found that:

- **The Parks and Recreation Division does not track to what extent the park staff accomplish the tasks outlined in the operating standards.**

We were not able to analyze actual implementation of the operating standards because the division has not tracked employee hours at a level that corresponds with the operating standards since implementation of statewide accounting system (Minnesota Accounting and Procurement System or MAPS) in 1996. Once park managers are given a budget with a specified number of staff hours, they have discretion to operate the park. Some managers told us they may use more hours than allocated for visitor needs or weather-related services (such as mowing or removing trees after a wind storm). DNR staff told us that park regional managers and regional park operations specialists are responsible for tracking how well park managers are accomplishing park management tasks.

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**Eighty-six percent of staff hours that DNR claims to need for parks were funded in fiscal year 2000.**

## **Fiscal Years 2000-01 Budget Issues**

In fiscal year 2000, 86 percent of the 881,088 needed staff hours were funded (see Table 2.4), compared with 87 percent in fiscal years 1998 and 1999. According to division estimates, the operating standards matrix was \$1.8 million short of full funding in fiscal year 1999 and \$2 million short in fiscal year 2000.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> A 1996 Michigan performance audit report recommended that Michigan's parks division use "state park activity information for allocating staff and other resources to state parks." Michigan Office of the Auditor General, *Performance Audit of the Parks and Recreation Division, October 1, 1993 through January 31, 1996* (Lansing, MI: 1996), 4-5.

<sup>11</sup> The division also refers to "division operating standards" which detail the need for additional central office, park, interpretive, resource management, and other staff. Based on these standards, in 1997 the division estimated its overall operations were underfunded by \$7.7 million. Parks and Recreation Division, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, *Minnesota State Parks Division Wide Operating Standards* (St. Paul, 1997).

**Table 2.4: State Park Operating Standard Needed and Funded Staff Hours, 1998-2000**

	<u>FY1998</u>	<u>FY1999</u>	<u>FY2000</u>
Hours needed	868,878	873,293	881,088
Percentage change		0.5%	0.9%
Hours funded	755,189	762,194	761,018
Percentage change		0.9%	-0.2%
Percentage of needed hours funded	86.9%	87.3%	86.4%

NOTE: The increase in base hours and hours funded between 1998 and 1999 reflects a special legislative appropriation to staff the Fort Snelling State Park visitor center.

SOURCE: Office of the Legislative Auditor's analysis of Parks and Recreation Division park operating standards data, 1998-2000, unpublished.

**In addition, unanticipated costs due to inflation and other factors resulted in a budget "shortfall" for state parks in 2000.**

The Governor's 2000-01 budget recommended an additional \$1.1 million each year of the biennium for state park operations. The budget narrative said that approximately 80 percent of the increase would fund an additional 23 full-time-equivalent positions in seasonal labor, with the remainder used for supplies and equipment.<sup>12</sup> The Legislature approved an additional \$850,000 each year of the biennium. In June and July, division administrative staff realized that unanticipated inflation and other cost increases would total \$1.15 million, resulting in a \$300,000 budget shortfall in fiscal year 2000.<sup>13</sup> To balance the budget, division management decided to delay filling several vacant positions (saving \$100,000), cancel a park manager training session (saving \$50,000), and close fall and spring camping at 20 of the least used state parks (saving \$150,000). According to the division, the decision to reduce services in this manner was made to affect the fewest park users. The decision to close camping was announced in early July, requiring 44 changes in reservations.

Some community and park support groups reacted strongly to the decision to close fall and spring camping at state parks in their area. Representatives from these groups lobbied legislators and DNR. Some groups raised money and negotiated with DNR to keep camping available. In September 1999, the division announced that camping at two parks, Lake Maria and Glacial Lakes, had been restored through financial contributions from local organizations or individuals. Camping at Upper Sioux Agency, Lake Louise, and Charles A. Lindbergh also was partially restored through donations.

The division used the operating standards and other factors to make the decision to close camping at the 20 parks in Groups D and E. Based on available funding, the division determined that services could be provided up to priority #19 of the matrix in fiscal year 2000; spring and fall day-use activities (priorities #20 and

<sup>12</sup> 2000-01 Minnesota Biennial Budget (St. Paul, 1999), D-171, D-231.

<sup>13</sup> Examples of fiscal year 2000 unfunded liabilities include: increased health insurance, \$350,000; supplies and equipment inflation, \$190,000; fleet management increase, \$150,000; increase in unemployment, \$60,000; reduced savings from alternative work programs, \$90,000; and miscalculation of leap year salaries, \$50,000.

#21) would not be funded for parks in Groups D and E. This cut in seasonal staff hours left park managers alone to manage the parks during the fall and spring. Division managers asked managers of the affected parks to focus on providing services and security for park day-users and carrying out building maintenance, and resource management responsibilities, instead of providing camping services.

We analyzed fall and spring camping activity for the 20 least used parks in 1998 and found that:

- **The Parks and Recreation Division's decision to close fall and spring camping in the 20 least used parks affected relatively few park users statewide.**

In 1998, there were about 16,000 overnight visits to the 20 least used parks between fall and spring.<sup>14</sup> This figure represented about 18 percent of all overnight visits for the 20 parks (88,220), 9 percent of the fall through spring overnight visits to all state parks (174,500), and fewer than 2 percent of all overnight visits to Minnesota state parks (913,770) in 1998. However, for some individual parks the impact was more significant. For instance, the 1,970 fall through spring campers at Lake Maria represented nearly 47 percent of the park's total overnight visits in 1998. From a system wide perspective, however, these numbers are relatively small. We also found:

- **Differences in the staff hours allocated to the most heavily used and the least used parks have become more pronounced with the recent reduction in hours for the 20 least used parks.**

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**Fewer staff hours were allocated to lesser used parks in 2000.**

In fiscal year 1999, the proportion of standard staff hours funded by park ranged from 98.7 percent for Soudan Underground Mine to 75.3 percent for Afton. In fiscal year 2000, the top percentage remained the same, but the bottom of the range dropped to 67.9 percent for Lake Louise. Table 2.5 compares the number and proportion of staff hours funded by park group and DNR region for 1999 and 2000. Between 1999 and 2000, the average share of staff hours funded decreased 10 percent for the least used parks (Groups D and E), while remaining steady for the more heavily used parks. In addition to a decrease of 1,176 in total hours funded in 2000, funding decisions shifted hours from the lesser used parks to support the more heavily used parks.

Division staff anticipate an additional budget shortfall in fiscal year 2001 because of inflation. If this occurs, the matrix will be used to set priorities and decide what services will be provided in individual parks during the 2000 park season. Division staff emphasized that this decision-making process will keep the integrity of the park system intact and affect the fewest park users.<sup>15</sup>

The recent reduction in services at state parks and an anticipated future budget shortfall highlight the need to consider alternatives to the current financing of state parks. A range of options for addressing future state park budget shortfalls

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<sup>14</sup> Our analysis used May 22 through September 6, 1998 as the dates for summer camping activity. Grand Portage State Park is the only one of the 20 parks that does not provide camping.

<sup>15</sup> Bill Morrissey, Parks Director, and other administrative staff, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Interview, October 8, 1999.

**Table 2.5: State Park Operating Standard Staff Hours Funded by Group and Region, 1999-2000**

Park Group	Hours Funded		Percentage of Hours Funded		
	FY1999	FY2000	FY1999	FY2000	Difference 1999-2000
Group A	385,311	388,668	92.4%	92.4%	0.0%
Group B	217,903	221,206	83.0	83.5	0.6
Group C	64,469	65,091	82.4	82.3	-0.1
Group D	88,422	80,455	81.7	73.8	-9.7
Group E	6,089	5,598	85.9	77.3	-10.0
<b>DNR Region</b>					
Region 1 (Northwest)	153,265	152,592	87.6	86.4	-1.4
Region 2 (Northeast)	173,526	173,059	90.1	89.3	-0.9
Region 3 (North Central)	138,104	139,572	86.6	86.0	-0.7
Region 4 (Southwest)	119,050	119,169	82.8	82.4	-0.5
Region 5 (Southeast)	105,991	104,284	88.9	86.7	-2.5
Region 6 (Metropolitan Area)	72,258	72,342	86.7	86.7	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>762,194</b>	<b>761,018</b>	<b>87.3</b>	<b>86.4</b>	<b>-1.0</b>

SOURCE: Office of the Legislative Auditor's analysis of Parks and Recreation Division park operating standards data, 1999 and 2000, unpublished.

are presented below. Our evaluation did not analyze implementation or cost impacts of these options. Any single option may not provide the cost savings needed to correct a shortfall in total. Therefore, it is anticipated that several options may need to be combined. DNR used this approach in the summer of 1999 when it reduced costs in 20 state parks and administrative costs (salary savings from a vacant position) in the central office. The Legislature and DNR could consider the following options.

1. **Status quo.** Continue to use the division's operating standards at existing funding levels. Maintaining the status quo will not address the financing problems discussed above. This option would reduce the level of visitor services in Minnesota's state parks.
2. **Divest and transfer.** If the least used parks cannot be adequately supported, then the Legislature could divest some of the parks that might not meet the statutory criteria in the Minnesota Outdoor Recreation Act. This could involve working with local units of government to explore transferring smaller parks, or parks with more of a regional clientele, to interested cities or counties. There may be limitations to this option if parks were created or expanded with Federal Land and Water Conservation (LAWCON) funds, which require the land to be used for recreational purposes but does not require the state to manage the recreational unit. Another possibility could involve managing smaller parks in cooperation with cities and counties. This option might involve reducing the number of state parks.

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**DNR and the Legislature have several possible strategies for addressing park budget “shortfalls.”**

3. **Land bank or mothball.** Close some of the least used parks to public use for a period of time, but preserve the land for future use and maintain it for resource management purposes only. This is not a feasible option if a park was created or expanded using LAWCON funds.
4. **Convert or transfer.** If a park possesses the features required, consider converting it to other uses such as a scientific and natural area, state wildlife area, or forestry campground. Another possibility could involve working with the Minnesota Historical Society to explore transfer or joint management options for existing parks with significant historical and cultural resources, such as Soudan Underground Mine. This option might involve reducing the number of state parks.
5. **Re-do the operational funding decision matrix.** Currently, the matrix gives the most heavily used parks priority over the least used parks. If this priority were changed, however, the effects of budget shortfalls could be more evenly distributed among all parks. If the operating budgets for more heavily used parks are reduced, it would likely result in a reduction of services that would affect a larger number of park users. However, this option is not consistent with our finding that the division’s process for setting priorities and allocating budgets to state parks is reasonable and fair.
6. **Cut costs in other areas of the Parks and Recreation Division.** In addition to using the operating standards and the matrix to reduce budgets of individual state parks, the division’s budget shortfalls could be partially offset by reducing the budget for administration services provided by the central and regional offices. Administrative budget reductions probably would not be sufficient to balance the division’s budget; therefore, this option likely would need to be combined with an option that reduces park budgets. Since the division’s administrative functions provide support and direction for the operation of state parks, reductions in administrative services could affect the ability of parks to provide consistent, quality services to park users.
7. **Increase funding.** The Legislature could provide more funding for state park operations enabling the division to provide an increased level of service at more parks. While this may be a reasonable option now, when the state budget enjoys large surpluses, it may be difficult to sustain in the future when fiscal conditions are less favorable.

Some of these options have been discussed previously at both the state and federal government levels.<sup>16</sup> The division’s *Minnesota State Park Land Study* (1999—public review draft) suggests a process and criteria for evaluating new state park proposals. These methods also could be used to examine existing parks and suggest modifications to the current park system. (This study is discussed later in this chapter.) Implementing some of these options may not be politically feasible. Local units of government have not been interested in joint ventures unless the state provided remuneration. Local communities have a strong allegiance to the state parks in their areas, as witnessed in reactions to the recent

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<sup>16</sup> U.S. Government Accounting Office, *National Parks: Park Service Needs Better Information to Preserve and Protect Resources* (Washington, D.C.: 1997) 7; and Minnesota Department of Administration, *Minnesota State Parks: Management and Operational Costs and Funding System* (St. Paul, 1994), 37-39.

campground closings. In the past, local communities have fought to maintain state park status and level of service.

## SEASONAL STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS

In addition to its full-time staff, the division relies on over 550 seasonal and part-time employees, or approximately 180 full-time-equivalent positions, to operate state parks. These positions consist of: 1) part-time union-represented state employees; 2) participants in the Work Experience Program (WEP); and 3) participants in a needy-elderly work program. WEP and needy elderly workers are not state employees. The cost of seasonal, part-time staff represents over 20 percent of the division's budget. We looked at how the division has managed its seasonal labor to reduce costs.

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**The Parks and Recreation Division has used a worker training program to reduce some labor costs.**

The average cost of a part-time employee represented by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) was \$15.07 per hour in 1999, including salary, health insurance, retirement, and social security benefits.<sup>17</sup> Part-time employees are eligible for unemployment, sick leave, vacation time, and holidays. In 1994, in an attempt to reduce seasonal labor costs, the division started WEP, a worker training program for unemployed and underemployed people. Between 1994 and 1998, the cost of WEP to the division was \$7.25 per hour—\$5.25 per hour for wages and \$2.00 for social security, liability insurance, and administrative costs paid to Greenview, the WEP program's contractor. Hourly costs increased to \$8.75 in 1999 when the pay rate increased to \$6.50 per hour. For the past 25 years, the division has also used low-income or needy-elderly workers in some state parks. The cost to the division for the needy-elderly program was \$8.54 per hour including \$6.50 per hour for wages and \$2.04 for fringe and administrative costs in 1999. The needy-elderly hours were assigned to 35 state parks, while the WEP hours were allocated to 57 state parks.

Full-time park staff consistently represented between 45 and 46 percent of all labor hours funded through the operating standards between 1996 and 2000. Part-time employees accounted for 42 to 44 percent of the hours, with WEP representing between 7 and 9 percent. According to the division, the WEP program saved the division approximately \$364,000 in calendar year 1998. We found that:

- **The Parks and Recreation Division's ability to develop alternatives to reduce the cost of seasonal staff has been limited by the terms of an agreement negotiated with an employee labor union.**

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<sup>17</sup> An employee must work 14 hours or more per week (or 35 percent of the normal work week in the employee's bargaining unit) and be employed 67 or more working days in any calendar year to be covered by the AFSCME agreement. Agreement between Minnesota State Employees Union AFSCME, Council No. 6, AFL-CIO and the State of Minnesota, July 1, 1997 through June 30, 1999, 1.

State laws have required the division to negotiate with AFSCME on the structure and implementation of the Work Experience Program.<sup>18</sup> The negotiated agreement contained more restrictions than the division first envisioned, resulting in a more limited worker training program.

DNR and AFSCME negotiated memoranda of understanding regarding WEP for the 1993-95 and the 1995-97 contract periods. In 1997, the parties extended the WEP memorandum of understanding that was in effect through 1997 for the 1998 and 1999 state park operating seasons. The agreements include language on hours, overtime, season length, appointments and terminations, and position descriptions. For example, the agreement says WEP participants cannot be scheduled to work overtime, WEP hours cannot exceed 30 percent of total hours per park, WEP participants cannot work in a state park if union-represented staff are on seasonal layoff, and WEP hours would be reduced before AFSCME bargaining unit employee hours, if layoffs or reductions in hours occur because of budget shortfalls.<sup>19</sup>

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### **The worker training program ended in 1999.**

In 1998, the Work Experience Program had difficulty recruiting participants at the relatively low hourly wage offered. In early 1999, DNR and AFSCME negotiated an amendment to the WEP agreement to: 1) increase the hourly wage from \$5.25 per hour to \$6.50 per hour for the 1999 season; 2) limit WEP expenditures for the 1999 season to \$554,596 or an amount not to exceed the budgeted amount for the 1998 season; and 3) end WEP after the 1999 season and, beginning with the 2000 season and beyond, use state employees to provide these hours of labor.<sup>20</sup> DNR is negotiating with the Department of Employee Relations to create a new state position at a cost per hour comparable to WEP for the 2000 park season.

## **Volunteers**

In 1998, volunteers contributed over 155,000 hours to Minnesota's state parks. The division uses two types of volunteers: 1) the traditional volunteers who offer service for free and 2) participants in work programs who are paid by agencies or programs other than the division, or "paid labor." We looked at how the division uses volunteers and whether there are any limitations on their use. Generally, we found that most parks use volunteers but there are some constraints on when and how volunteers can be used.

DNR solicits volunteers through its Internet web site and quarterly newsletter that advertises a wide range of opportunities, such as campground host, program presenter, and tree seedling monitor. Campground hosts welcome campers, answer park-related questions, explain park rules, pick up litter, and keep the

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<sup>18</sup> Laws in 1993 and 1995 stated that the DNR Commissioner may not operate a work training program unless the terms and conditions of employment had been negotiated with the exclusive bargaining representatives of employees. *Minn. Laws* (1993), ch. 172, sec. 5, subd. 5 and *Minn. Laws* (1995), ch. 220, sec. 5, subd. 5.

<sup>19</sup> Memorandum of Understanding, 1996 Work Experience Program, April 2, 1996; Bruce Potthoff, Labor Relations Director, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, to Bob Buckingham, Business Representative, AFSCME Council No. 6, March 31, 1997, memorandum.

<sup>20</sup> Bruce Potthoff, Labor Relations Director, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, to Bob Buckingham, Business Representative, AFSCME Council No. 6, March 24, 1999, memorandum.

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**A variety of volunteers are used in state parks.**

sanitation buildings stocked between regular cleanings. Park managers may also recruit volunteers through local park “friends” groups, local community or civic groups, scout and school groups, and hiking, horse riding, and other outdoor clubs. About two-thirds of the state parks have an advisory group or park association that may help the park with volunteers, project funding, or advice. Some “friends” groups control how the money they raise is spent, while others may donate it to the division through the gift account. The DNR Park Partners Program provides matching state dollars for locally-supported building or facility improvements, resource management tasks, and interpretive projects.<sup>21</sup>

Crews of young people and adults paid by agencies or programs other than the division also work in state parks. The largest of these programs are the Minnesota Conservation Corps (MCC), a conservation-based program that provides services to various DNR divisions, and Sentencing-to-Service (STS), a court-ordered community service program. Park managers must apply to these programs to request assistance for specific projects. Other “paid labor” programs include Greenthumb, a federally funded program that hires the elderly, and several work experience programs for young people.

## Constraints on Volunteer Use

While the division uses thousands of volunteer hours, we found that

- **Department guidelines, state law, and bargaining unit contracts limit the Parks and Recreation Division’s use of volunteers.**

While the division does not have a written policy on the use of volunteers, guidelines include the following:

1. State law prohibits volunteers in the Park Partners Program from displacing public employees in state parks.<sup>22</sup>
2. DNR guidelines specify that volunteers may do work that supplements, but does not supplant, paid staff. Supplementary work includes work that creates new projects or services or fills gaps in existing projects or services, would not get done because of funding and/or personnel limitations, and does not cause a layoff or shorten an employee’s work hours.<sup>23</sup>

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**Some “volunteers” are in fact paid.**

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<sup>21</sup> *Minn. Stat.* §85.045 created the Park Partner Program to “encourage business and civic groups or individuals to assist, on a volunteer basis, in improving and maintaining” state parks. State law also contains language governing the program. Park Partner projects involve a 50/50 match (50 percent from the community or organization and 50 percent from division appropriations). The community or organization’s match can be in dollars, time, or materials.

<sup>22</sup> *Minn. Stat.* §85.045, subd. 4. The law states: “The commissioner may not enter into any agreement that has the purpose or results in the displacement of public employees by volunteers participating in the [park partners] program.”

<sup>23</sup> Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, *Minnesota DNR Volunteer Guidelines* (St. Paul, April 1999).



3. DNR's supplemental agreement to the AFSCME contract restricts the use of STS crews and Institution Community Work Crews (ICWC). DNR volunteer guidelines also apply to STS and ICWC.<sup>24</sup>
4. The division has adopted additional restrictions that limit the use of ICWC in state parks to remote park areas during the summer season.<sup>25</sup>

The division does not use volunteers to run state parks, instead it uses volunteers where it can as long as they do not replace state employees. Division staff emphasized that the use of volunteers requires administrative time to plan, coordinate, and supervise. Volunteers are not seen as a solution to a personnel shortage.

## Analysis of Volunteer Hours

We asked park managers to verify the number of volunteer hours reported to the central office in 1998. We discovered many discrepancies in the number of volunteer and paid labor hours reported, leading us to question the accuracy of the reported hours and to conclude that these hours were probably underreported.<sup>26</sup> Underreporting of volunteer hours may be caused by limited knowledge about the number of hours a crew worked, failure of some park managers to track volunteer hours or report them to the central office, or a reluctance of some park managers to report these hours. Using the 1998 volunteer hours verified by park managers, the only data available, we found that:

- **Most state parks reported using volunteers in 1998, although availability, problems with supervising, and union opposition may limit their use.**

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**Volunteers work in most state parks but their use varies by park.**

Of the over 155,000 volunteer hours worked in state parks in 1998, unpaid volunteers provided over one-third of the hours (56,762), while paid labor crews provided about two-thirds of the hours (98,734). Figure 2.1 shows the type of volunteer and paid labor hours for 1998. Campground hosts accounted for nearly half of the volunteer hours, followed by community groups. STS and MCC crews provided 80 percent of the paid labor hours in 1998.

Eighty-five percent of the state parks used volunteers in 1998. Volunteer use varied significantly by park. Table 2.6 shows that ten parks accounted for over 50 percent of the volunteer hours and about 60 percent of the paid labor hours in 1998. Many parks with high numbers of volunteer hours were large and busy (Itasca); however, several smaller parks also used a large number of volunteer

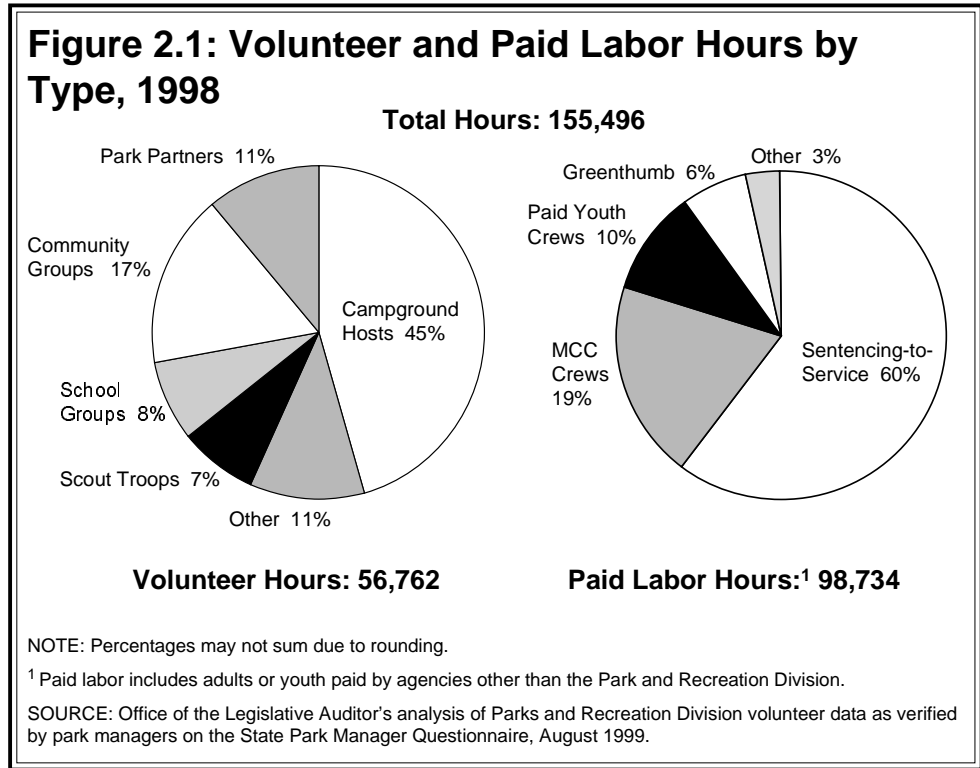
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<sup>24</sup> The contract requires notifying the union about non-emergency STS projects prior to beginning any work and submitting any ICWC projects to the union for approval. It is also expected that there will be no reduction in hours of AFSCME employees as a result of STS projects. Agreement between Minnesota State Employees Union AFSCME, Council No. 6, AFL-CIO and the State of Minnesota, July 1, 1997 through June 30, 1999, DNR Supplement Article B, 345; and Brad Moore, Field Operations Manager, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, to DNR Senior, Operations, and Regional Managers, *Reaffirmation of DNR's Procedures for Sentencing to Service and Institutional Community Work Crew Programs*, April 30, 1998, memorandum.

<sup>25</sup> Ron Hains, Parks Operation Manager, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, to regional park managers and others, *Use of the Institutional Community Work Crew (ICWC) Program in State Parks*, August 14, 1998, memorandum.

<sup>26</sup> We limited our analysis to 1998 volunteer data because of concerns with data quality.

**Paid labor crews provided two-thirds of all volunteer hours in 1998.**



hours (Crow Wing, Rice Lake, and Nerstrand-Big Woods). About one-third of all parks reported fewer than 200 volunteer or paid labor hours.

According to our park manager survey, common volunteer tasks included campground host, resource management projects, trail maintenance, and cleaning and litter pick-up. Some parks use volunteers to operate the park's visitor center.<sup>27</sup>

**Table 2.6: Volunteer and Paid Labor Hours for the Top Ten Parks, 1998**

Park	Volunteer		Paid Labor		
	Hours	Percentage of Total	Hours	Percentage of Total	
Fort Snelling	5,740	10.1%	Fort Ridgely	10,865	11.0%
William O'Brien	5,072	8.9	Glendalough	9,320	9.4
Myre-Big Island	3,798	6.7	Fort Snelling	7,656	7.8
Nerstrand-Big Woods	2,962	5.2	Itasca	6,141	6.2
Wild River	2,907	5.1	Myre-Big Island	4,989	5.1
Rice Lake	2,775	4.9	Blue Mounds	4,652	4.7
Itasca	2,392	4.2	William O'Brien	4,352	4.4
Crow Wing	1,779	3.1	Lake Maria	4,260	4.3
Frontenac	1,611	2.8	St. Croix	4,248	4.3
St. Croix	1,435	2.5	Tettegouche	4,096	4.1
Total for all parks	56,762			98,734	

SOURCE: Office of the Legislative Auditor's analysis of Parks and Recreation Division volunteer data as verified by park managers on the State Park Manager Questionnaire, August 1999.

<sup>27</sup> Blue Mounds, Fort Snelling, and Interstate recently solicited visitor center hosts. Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, *DNR Volunteer Opportunities*, (St. Paul, Summer 1999), 3, 4, 9.

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**Availability and other factors limit the usefulness of volunteers.**

MCC and STS crews assisted with labor-intensive resource management projects, such as prairie restoration, exotic species control, prescribed burns, and trail development.

We asked park managers if they had any problems using volunteers and paid labor crews. Most managers (88 percent) reported that volunteers were helpful in accomplishing tasks. Park managers with fewer paid staff were more likely to find volunteers “very helpful.” Several factors, however, limit volunteer usefulness. Sixty-three percent of park managers reported that supervising volunteers takes too much time, 50 percent said that volunteers lack needed skills, and 44 percent reported that not enough people volunteered. Park managers also cited union opposition as a limitation in using both paid labor (41 percent) and volunteers (31 percent).

The Sentencing-to-Service program contributed nearly 60,000 hours to state parks in 1998. The Department of Corrections and DNR jointly sponsored the STS program in the late 1980s with a goal to devote about half of all hours to state natural resources projects. In 1998, however, DNR received only about one-fifth of the available STS hours (137,184 of 961,493); state parks received 43 percent of the STS hours provided to DNR.<sup>28</sup> Some park managers told us that they could use more STS help, but hours were limited because the STS program did not select park projects, some counties do not have STS programs, and STS crews can not be used when seasonal state employees are on layoff.

## CAMPING

Sixty-two state parks and one recreation area offer camping opportunities, including tent and recreational vehicle (RV) campgrounds, walk-in and cart-in campsites, camper cabins, and horse camps.<sup>29</sup> We looked at the demand for campsites and reservations during the busy summer season and also reviewed the camping reservation system.

Campsite occupancy varied widely by park and day of the week. Campsites in some parks were in high demand and near full occupancy many summer weekends, while others had vacancies on both summer weekends and weekdays. We found that:

- **Occupancy for camping in all state parks averaged 72 percent on weekends and 26 percent on weekdays during the summer of 1998.**

Overall, the most heavily used parks (Group A) had the highest average summer weekend and weekday occupancy, while the least used parks (Group E) had the lowest, as shown in Table 2.7. Occupancy rates for individual parks, however, varied widely. Four North Shore parks—Split Rock Lighthouse, Tettegouche, Temperance River, and Gooseberry Falls—had the highest average total summer

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28 John McLagan, Sentencing-to-Service Program Director, Minnesota Department of Corrections, “Annual STS Data Summary F. Y. 1998,” August 17, 1998.

29 Seven parks offer housekeeping cabins or other lodging—Bear Head Lake, Itasca, Savanna Portage, Scenic, St. Croix, Tettegouche, and Wild River.

occupancy in 1998, as shown in Table 2.8. Some of these parks also had high occupancy on summer weekdays, while other parks such as William O'Brien, Whitewater, Frontenac, and Father Hennepin had high weekend occupancy (over 90 percent) but much lower weekday occupancy (about 30 percent). Finally, some parks had low campsite occupancy during summer weekends and weekdays in 1998. For instance, Old Mill, Kilen Woods, Monson Lake, and Upper Sioux

**Table 2.7: Average Summer Campsite Occupancy Rates by Group, 1998**

Park Group	Summer Occupancy Rates		Total
	Weekday	Weekend	
Group A	37%	86%	52%
Group B	19	64	33
Group C	33	78	47
Group D	15	57	28
Group E	6	35	15
All Parks	26%	72%	41%

NOTE: Occupancy rates are a ratio of all campsites occupied to all campsites available within each park group.

SOURCE: Office of the Legislative Auditor's analysis of Parks and Recreation Division data.

**Table 2.8: Summer Campsite Occupancy Rates for Top Ten and Bottom Ten State Parks, 1998**

State Park	Summer Occupancy Rates		Total
	Weekday	Weekend	
Split Rock Lighthouse	84%	97%	88%
Tettegouche	80	98	86
Temperance River	79	96	84
Gooseberry Falls	75	91	80
Cascade River	65	89	72
Interstate	61	96	72
Jay Cooke	59	95	70
Bear Head Lake	56	80	64
Judge Magney	56	79	63
Itasca	52	85	62
Fort Ridgely	8	47	20
Glendalough	6	45	19
Big Stone Lake	8	37	17
Lake Bronson	8	34	16
Old Mill	8	33	16
Carley	3	39	15
Kilen Woods	8	25	13
Schoolcraft	5	26	12
Monson Lake	3	29	11
Upper Sioux Agency	2	23	9

NOTE: Data were not available for John Latsch and Franz Jevne state parks.

SOURCE: Office of the Legislative Auditor's analysis of Parks and Recreation Division data.

**The most heavily used parks had the highest weekend and weekday campsite use in 1998.**

**Use of campsites at individual parks varied widely.**

Agency filled one-third or fewer of their campsites during summer weekends and fewer than one-tenth of those sites on summer weekdays in 1998.

Up to 70 percent of campsites available at any park may be reserved up to 90 days prior to the scheduled arrival date.<sup>30</sup> We examined summer campsite reservation rates and found that:

- **Generally, it can be difficult to get reservations for campsites with electricity at some popular parks on summer weekends.**

Table 2.9 shows that campsites with electricity were more popular and had higher reservation rates on average than sites without electricity in 1998. Park managers told us that generally campsites with electricity were the first reserved and occupied. Other popular, first-reserved campsites were non-electric, cart-in sites, such as those at Split Rock Lighthouse and Tettegouche.

**Table 2.9: Summer Reservation Rates for Campsites by Type, 1998**

	<u>Recreational Vehicle Sites</u>		<u>Sites Without Electricity</u>
	<u>With Electricity</u>	<u>Without Electricity</u>	
Weekday	23%	15%	20%
Weekend	83	66	70
Total Summer	42	31	36
Number of sites	800	1,815	201

NOTE: Reservation rates are a ratio of number of days reserved divided by the total number of available sites.

SOURCE: Office of the Legislative Auditor's analysis of Parks and Recreation Division data.

**For some parks, campsite reservations were filled most summer weekends in 1998.**

During the summer, the reservations in some parks were filled most summer weekends in 1998. Over the entire summer, campers reserved 90 percent or more of the weekend sites available for reservation in 18 parks such as Split Rock Lighthouse, Jay Cooke, and Interstate.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, campers reserved fewer than half of the available sites in 16 parks such as Camden, Carley, and Minneopa.<sup>32</sup> Campers reserved sites at popular parks far in advance. On average, campers made reservations at least eight weeks in advance at many parks that averaged more than 90 percent occupancy during summer weekends, including Split Rock Lighthouse, Gooseberry Falls, and Tettegouche.<sup>33</sup> Nearly two-thirds of all camping reservations were made for weekend days.

<sup>30</sup> Lodging reservations may be made up to a year prior to the scheduled arrival date.

<sup>31</sup> Other parks in this group included William O'Brien, Temperance River, Tettegouche, Father Hennepin, Whitewater, Banning, Sibley, Wild River, Frontenac, Itasca, Moose Lake, Lake Carlos, Sakatah Lake, Gooseberry Falls, and Cascade River.

<sup>32</sup> Other parks in this group include Lac Qui Parle, Buffalo River, Big Stone Lake, Myre-Big Island, Hayes Lake, Minnesota Valley, Upper Sioux Agency, Zippel Bay, Monson Lake, Kilen Woods, Lake Bronson, Old Mill, and Schoolcraft.

<sup>33</sup> Other parks included Lake Carlos, Jay Cooke, Itasca, Temperance River, Sibley, Whitewater, Interstate, and Father Hennepin.

## State Park Camping Reservation System

Park users made about 57,000 campsite and lodging reservations for state parks in 1998. The division has contracted with Data Listing Services (“The Connection”) for reservation services since 1997.<sup>34</sup> After problems with a previous contractor the division hired a consultant to analyze reservation system options, including using an in-house reservation system. Based on the consultant’s recommendation, the division has continued using an outside vendor.<sup>35</sup> The current contract includes several customer service measures such as maximum average telephone hold time and park-specific training for staff. In 1999, campers were charged a \$6.75 reservation fee.

The current system offers several improvements over the previous system. The division built an extensive information system using consistent definitions for terms such as cart-in or backpack-in campsites and tried to anticipate points of confusion such as Split Rock Creek and Split Rock Lighthouse. Callers can reserve specific types of sites, such as electric hook-ups, RV length, and handicapped accessible. However, we found that:

- **During summer 1999, the Parks and Recreation Division received an increased number of complaints about the state park camping reservation system.**

Complaints resulted from two issues. First, telephone operators taking reservations use extensive menus to access information about individual park features. This can slow the reservation process, especially when someone is making multiple reservations. Second, overflow telephone calls to The Connection rolled over to operators located in South Dakota who were not familiar with Minnesota geography or individual state parks. Division staff are working with The Connection to address these problems through software redesign and additional training.

Campers often call the parks directly for more specific information and some park managers told us that parks should be able to make their own reservations, possibly by using the Internet. Campers can make Internet reservations for state park campsites in California, Massachusetts, New York, Texas, Oregon, and Wisconsin.<sup>36</sup> At the present time, The Connection does not have the technical ability to provide Internet reservations. When the reservation contract is rebid for 2001, however, the division would like to add Internet reservations to the specifications for the reservation call center. In the meantime, the division is working with DNR technical support to post information about campsite availability on its Internet web site.

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**DNR would like to add Internet reservations in the future.**

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<sup>34</sup> Parks and Recreation Division, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, *Centralized Reservation System Contract Amendment*, 1997. The existing contract is valid through December 31, 2001.

<sup>35</sup> Deloitte & Touche, *Final Report: Minnesota State Park Reservation System* (April 30, 1993).

<sup>36</sup> These states use the same private vendor, ReserveAmerica. Internet reservation fees range from \$3 to \$6 per reservation in addition to the standard reservation fee.

## INTERPRETIVE SERVICES AND EDUCATION

**One goal of state parks is to provide a variety of natural and cultural interpretive services.**

Interpretive services in state parks are designed to promote increased understanding and enjoyment of natural and cultural resources, protect resources by focusing on resource management, and increase public awareness of critical environment problems. Three types of interpretive services are provided: 1) staff-led presentations and activities such as hikes, tours, and demonstrations; 2) self-guided services such as interpretive trails, exhibits, visitor centers, and publications; and 3) community and environmental education services. In recent years, the emphasis for naturalists in state parks has been shifting toward development of self-guided interpretive services and materials.<sup>37</sup>



Self-guided trails are one type of interpretive service provided in state parks.

We were asked to examine how many state parks provide interpretive or naturalist programs and whether these programs meet public demand. We found that:

- **Eighteen state parks had permanent, full-time year-round naturalists and eight parks had seasonal naturalists in 1999.**

Table 2.10 summarizes the naturalist programming and staff in state parks. Interpretive services has a total of 37 full-time equivalent staff consisting of a program coordinator in the St. Paul office, 5.5 regional naturalists working in regional offices, and 30.3 naturalists working in 26 state parks. The park

<sup>37</sup> Parks and Recreation Division, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, *Minnesota State Park System Interpretive Services Plan* (St. Paul, 1995), 3-5.

operating standards included about 52,000 hours for interpretive services in 1999, which funded the full-time and seasonal park naturalist positions.

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**Twenty-six parks have year-round or seasonal naturalists.**

The remaining 42 parks did not have naturalist staff. Of these, over two-thirds provided occasional programs using regional naturalists, naturalists from nearby parks, park managers, staff from other DNR divisions or other agencies or organizations, and volunteers. The remaining parks provided self-guided services only, although some parks, such as Monson Lake and Schoolcraft, have few self-guided trails or exhibits.

The above range of interpretive services programming is consistent with the division's 1995 interpretive services plan, which provides a framework for making decisions and setting priorities about what interpretive services will be available in individual parks. The plan analyzed each park's natural and cultural resources and current and potential attendance. Using these criteria, the plan

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**Table 2.10: Naturalist Programming and Staff in State Parks, 1999**

Year-Round Naturalist-Led Programs (Full-Time-Equivalent Staff)	Seasonal Naturalist-Led Programs (Full-Time-Equivalent Staff)	Occasional Naturalist Programs
Blue Mounds (1)	Buffalo River (.25)	Afton
Forestville/Mystery Cave (3.5)	Frontenac (.25)	Banning
Fort Snelling (2)	Hill Annex Mine (1.5)	Bear Head Lake
Gooseberry Falls (1.25)	Interstate (.50)	Beaver Creek Valley
Grand Portage (1)	Lake Bronson (.25)	Camden
Itasca (1.75)	Lake Carlos (.25)	Carley
Jay Cooke (1)	Lake Shetek (.25)	Cascade River
Lake Bemidji (1)	Scenic (.25)	Charles A. Lindbergh
Mille Lacs Kathio (1) <sup>1</sup>		Crow Wing
Nerstrand-Big Woods (1) <sup>2</sup>		Father Hennepin
Rice Lake <sup>2</sup>		Flandrau
Sakatah Lake <sup>2</sup>		Fort Ridgely
St. Croix (1)		Glendalough
Sibley (1.3)		Hayes Lake
Soudan Underground Mine (7)		Judge C.R. Magney
Whitewater (1)		Kilen Woods
Wild River (1)		Lac Qui Parle
William O'Brien (1)		Lake Louise
		Lake Maria
		Maplewood
		McCarthy Beach
		Minneopa
		Moose Lake
		Myre-Big Island
		Old Mill
		Savanna Portage
		Split Rock Creek
		Tettegouche
		Upper Sioux Agency

<sup>1</sup>Naturalist also works with Crow Wing and Father Hennepin.

<sup>2</sup>One area naturalist splits her time between these three parks.

SOURCES: Parks and Recreation Division, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, *Summer Traveler*, 1999, 14; Joel Stedman, Interpretive Services Coordinator, Telephone interview, October 14, 1999; and Office of the Legislative Auditor, State Park Manager Questionnaire, August 1999.

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established interpretive priorities by placing parks in one of five groups representing five levels of interpretive services, from year-round staff and programming with a full-service visitor center to self-guided interpretive services only.<sup>38</sup>

## Interpretive Services Program Activity

Based on activities reported by full-time and seasonal naturalists in 1998, nearly 132,000 park visitors attended over 6,000 scheduled naturalist presentations or tours. An additional 55,800 school children and education professionals participated in over 1,600 requested environmental education programs.<sup>39</sup> The parks with the most participation in scheduled programs were Soudan Underground Mine (23 percent of the total), Forestville/Mystery Cave (15 percent), and Itasca (11 percent). Soudan and Forestville run scheduled tours which may be the primary reason for visiting these parks. The parks providing the most school children with environmental education programs were William O'Brien (13 percent of the total), Fort Snelling (11 percent), and Whitewater (11 percent).

In our survey of park managers and interviews with regional and park naturalists we asked how well interpretive programs meet park visitor demand. We found that:

- **Park managers in about half of the state parks with naturalist-led interpretive services told us that programs do not meet demand.**

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**Park managers are split on whether existing interpretive programs adequately meet public demand.**

Responses from parks with interpretive staff were evenly split, with 14 saying some programs do not meet demand, 13 saying programs do meet demand, and 1 saying the programs were rarely full. Given these responses, we asked what programs were not able to meet demand and found that:

- **Some parks were not able to meet school groups' demand for environmental education programs or the public's demand for specific naturalist programs.**

Of the park managers responding to this question, 12 indicated that they were not able to meet the requests of schools and other organizations for environmental education programs. Most of these requests occur in the spring and fall. If park staff are unable to provide naturalist- or park manager-led programs, they work with teachers to encourage the use of self-guided interpretive trails and exhibits, park brochures, and other self-guided interpretive materials. Nine park managers identified specific naturalist programs that are not able to meet demand, such as:

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<sup>38</sup> The plan identified 20 parks that should have year-round naturalists and full-service visitor centers; 22 parks to have seasonal naturalists and visitor centers open on busy days during peak season; 13 parks to have seasonal or occasional programming provided by naturalists from nearby parks or others; and 11 parks to have self-guided interpretive trails and exhibits only.

<sup>39</sup> Joel Stedman, Interpretive Services Coordinator, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, "Minnesota State Parks Interpretive Services 1998 Annual Summary," March 17, 1999. These numbers reflect actual counts of people attending programs. Information is not collected on the use of self-guided interpretive trails or exhibits.

live animal programs, evening stargazing, bluebird box building, boat tours on Lake Bemidji, and fall and spring cave tours at Forestville/Mystery Cave.

## Visitor Centers

Visitor centers are a significant component of providing interpretive services in Minnesota's state parks.

- **Twenty-five state parks had visitor centers in 1999. Of these, 19 visitor centers were open year-round.**

In addition, three parks have visitor centers that are operated by the Minnesota Historical Society—Charles A. Lindbergh, Fort Ridgely, and Split Rock Lighthouse. Visitor centers either have been funded or are under construction at Forestville/Mystery Cave and Itasca; design work has been completed for a Moose Lake visitor center. The division defines a visitor center as a building that has visitor support services, rest rooms, educational exhibits and orientation materials, an area for gathering and presentations, and staff.<sup>40</sup> Some visitor centers do not meet all elements of this definition. For instance, the centers at Afton and Lake Maria are not staffed and centers at six parks do not include space for naturalist-led activities.

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**Visitor centers in 19 parks are open year-round.**

Nineteen of the visitor centers are open year-round, primarily those with full-time naturalists. Most visitor centers (22) are open some hours every day of the week. Visitor centers are open more hours on weekends than on weekdays. Most visitor centers (21) are open between 7 and 14 hours on weekends. Attendance at state park visitor centers totaled 710,523 in 1998. Whitewater had the highest attendance with about 115,000. Attendance data were not reported for some visitor centers.<sup>41</sup>

In response to our survey, 15 park managers indicated that they used seasonal employees to staff visitor centers, 10 used volunteers, and 8 used park staff who work in the park contact station. Multiple use facilities, such as a combined visitor center and contact station, provide opportunities to minimize costs and maximize services. For instance, the combined visitor center and contact station at Whitewater State Park allows the visitor center to be open extended hours (from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m.), provides more services to the public, provides a core location for park services, and consolidates park staff at one location. Of the 25 existing visitor centers, 8 are part of park contact stations and 4 include other functions such as administrative space.

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<sup>40</sup> There appears to be some misunderstanding about what constitutes a visitor center. Some park managers responding to our survey said their park had a visitor center, although the state park interpretive services coordinator does not consider these parks to have visitor centers for various reasons. Examples include Big Stone Lake, Buffalo River, Minneopa, Myre-Big Island, Split Rock Creek, and Zippel Bay.

<sup>41</sup> Visitor center attendance data are determined using electronic counters, visual counts, or various estimates.

## RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND PRESERVATION

State law charges DNR with protecting and preserving natural and cultural resources in state parks, while providing recreational and education opportunities. We examined how the division balances the preservation of natural resources with the provision of outdoor recreation activities and found that:

- **To balance preservation of natural resources with recreational use, the Parks and Recreation Division uses specialized staff, conducts research and resource assessments, funds special projects, and develops park management plans.**

According to division staff, resource preservation includes protecting existing park resources and restoring what has been lost or damaged, while allowing recreational use and facility development.<sup>42</sup> DNR uses an “ecosystem-based management” approach to resource management. This involves sustaining broad ecosystems for the long term using scientifically valid methods, partnerships with other agencies, and citizen participation.

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**DNR uses a variety of techniques to protect and preserve natural and cultural resources.**

The resource management program has 13 full-time, professional staff, including a program coordinator in the central office who provides program leadership. In addition, six regional resource coordinators work with managers of parks in their regions to plan and implement resource management strategies. There are three area resource specialists—one each for the prairie parks (Blue Mounds, Camden, Split Rock Creek, and Lake Shetek), North Shore parks, and south-central parks (Nerstrand-Big Woods, Rice Lake, and Sakatah Lake). Finally, there are three resource specialists located at Fort Snelling, Itasca, and St. Croix. Resource specialists frequently work with other park staff, Minnesota Conservation Corps and Sentencing-to-Service crews, interns, contractors, and volunteers.

Both permanent and seasonal staff in individual parks work on resource management projects. The operating standards provided about 30,000 staff hours for resource management activities in 1999, ranging from about 3,500 hours at Itasca to fewer than 40 hours at Monson Lake. According to division staff, this reflects about 30 percent of funding necessary to sustain natural and cultural resources systemwide.<sup>43</sup> Since the division does not track employee hours, it is not possible to objectively determine the extent of resource management work undertaken by staff in state parks.

In the early 1990s, DNR provided a series of six two-week training courses to staff from the central and regional offices and state parks. The training covered natural resource topics and was designed to increase the resource management

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<sup>42</sup> Ed Quinn, Resource Management Coordinator, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Interview, July 1, 1999.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*



Prescribed or controlled burns are used to manage forest resources.

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**Controlling exotic species and restoring prairies and forests were the most common resource management projects in 1998.**

knowledge of division staff and help them integrate resource management into on-going park operations.<sup>44</sup>

We asked park managers to list resource management projects in their parks during the past year. Most park managers reported at least a few resource management projects for 1998, often controlling exotic and nuisance species or restoring prairies and forests.<sup>45</sup> Of the 322 projects listed by park managers for 1999, about 15 percent involved research or monitoring, sometimes through the County Biological Survey, another DNR program.<sup>46</sup> In many cases, the division's budget or the Working Capital Account funded the labor and supply costs for these projects, whose expenditures totaled \$297,500 in 1998 and \$1.7 million between 1992 and 1999.

The division also uses park management plans to balance preservation of natural resources with providing recreational opportunities. The plans identify areas within a park that will be designated for recreational use or preservation based on assessments of geological conditions and biological inventories. The early park management plans (late 1970s and early 1980s) limited development to 5 percent of a park's total land area. Some recent plans use "management zoning" to identify areas best suited for intense recreational use or minimal disturbance (such

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<sup>44</sup> Dorothy H. Anderson, David W. Lime, and Bill Morrissey, "A Continuing Education Program to Upgrade Knowledge and Skill Levels of Professional Natural Resources Staff," *Journal of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Education*, 24, no. 2 (Fall 1995).

<sup>45</sup> Managers in four parks did not report any projects: Father Hennepin, Franz Jevne, John Latsch, and Monson Lake. About half of the park managers reported at least five projects.

<sup>46</sup> Examples of research and monitoring projects include: campsite impact monitoring at George Crosby Manitou; pine bark beetle trapping, monitoring, and research at Itasca; bluebird and Blanding's turtle monitoring at Lake Maria; and dwarf trout lily monitoring at Nerstrand-Big Woods.

as areas containing habitat of rare species). The Itasca State Park Management Plan is a good example of management zoning. The plan identifies restricted management zones, intensive management zones subject to controlled burns, plantings, or restoration, and development zones containing recreational facilities. The division plans to include these concepts in other park management plans as they are revised, but revision of all existing park plans is likely to take many years.

Division staff evaluate proposed construction projects to determine the likely impact on resources. For instance, resources are assessed when trails are added or moved, electrical lines are installed, and buildings are constructed or expanded. Projects are moved or redesigned to minimize potential damage to natural or cultural resources.

Despite these efforts, we found that:

- **The Parks and Recreation Division has not emphasized its goal of resource management and preservation as much as its goals of providing recreation and interpretive services.**

The division's three goals—resource management, recreation, and education—are derived from state law. Although state law appears to emphasize protection, preservation, and restoration of natural resources, it does not give one function priority over another. Staff hours funded through the operating standards are an indicator of division priorities. In 1999, nearly twice as many hours were allocated to interpretive services (51,000) and six times more hours were funded for public contact, building cleaning, and security (about 198,000) than resource management (30,000). In addition, park managers told us that demands of day users and campers frequently take precedence and divert attention from resource management activities.

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**Demands of day users and campers may take precedence over resource management activities.**

There is no division-wide resource management plan, similar to the interpretive services plan, that analyzes the known or likely resources in each park, establishes priorities, and identifies strategies for preserving resources in Minnesota's state parks. Literature indicates that developing an approach to balance resource protection and visitor needs involves several stages starting with awareness of the problem, identifying specific issues, and selecting strategies and tactics to solve the problems.<sup>47</sup> The approach, however, assumes the availability of up-to-date park plans, definition of desired visitor experiences, knowledge of what is acceptable compared to what exists, and measuring resource and visitor impacts.

The division's progress in this area has been mixed. On the positive side, the division has demonstrated an awareness of the importance of resource

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<sup>47</sup> U.S. Government Accounting Office, *National Park Service: Activities within Park Borders Have Caused Damage to Resources* (Washington D. C., August 1996); U.S. Government Accounting Office, *National Park Service: Activities Outside Park Borders Have Caused Damage to Resources and Will Likely Cause More* (Washington D.C., January 1994); and Dorothy Anderson, David Lime, and Theresa Wang, *Maintaining the Quality of Park Resources and Visitor Experiences* (St. Paul: University of Minnesota Extension Service, 1998). The last source identifies five primary strategies: modify the character of visitor use; modify resource base by increasing its durability or rehabilitation; increase the supply of recreational opportunities; reduce area use; and, modify visitor expectations. It also identifies 25 tactics in 5 categories: site management, rationing and allocation, regulation, deterrence and enforcement, and visitor education.

management in its strategic plan. In the mid-1990s, the division cooperated with the National Forest Service to study visitor experiences in six state parks and community benefits related to two parks. These studies gathered considerable information about what visitors want from their experience in particular parks and how this relates to existing or future outdoor recreation opportunities. DNR's 1996 performance report contained a performance measure to identify and manage areas in state parks that are heavily impacted by high visitor use. North Shore parks were identified as pilots to develop definitions and survey techniques to measure visitor impacts.<sup>48</sup> Since 1996, the division has done little work systemwide to quantify the impact of recreational overuse in Minnesota's state parks or identify how to mitigate such damage. The park management plans for Tettegouche and Itasca contain some of these concepts and park staff at several North Shore parks are working on projects to evaluate trail erosion and campsite soil compaction. But much remains to be done in this area.

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**The lack of baseline data makes it difficult to establish resource management priorities.**

Effective resource management and preservation depends on baseline data. Not enough survey and inventory research is being conducted to identify existing resources, establish baselines, determine how the resources should be managed and preserved, and monitor the long-term impacts of new development and recreational use. Some parks, such as those in Region 5 (Southeast), have fairly complete, up-to-date biological inventories while others have little information. The lack of baseline survey data makes it difficult to establish resource management priorities. Surveys are complicated, costly, and must be updated regularly to be accurate. According to the division, it plans to prioritize survey work based on existing natural communities, park development plans, and plans for revising park management plans.

Up-to-date individual park management plans are an important tool in balancing resource protection with recreational use in Minnesota's state parks. Ideally, these plans would identify a park's natural and cultural resources, as well as recreational facilities, along with strategies for managing these resources. Most of the park management plans were originally adopted in the late 1970s and early 1980s and may not accurately reflect current park conditions or resources. Without knowing the condition of existing resources, it is difficult to assess the impact of recreational use on those resources. Division staff have identified the need to develop natural resource inventories, park specific resource management plans, and indicators of environmental condition before they can adequately monitor the impact of recreational use on natural resources in state parks.

## ENFORCEMENT

About 50 percent of park users who responded to a 1998 DNR survey said that security provided in state parks was very important to their enjoyment of the parks. The DNR Commissioner has promulgated rules that govern the use and enjoyment of state parks and park managers are responsible for enforcing these rules. We examined how security and enforcement services are provided in state parks and found that:

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<sup>48</sup> Parks and Recreation Division, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, *1996 Performance Report* (St. Paul, 1997), 97.

- **The Parks and Recreation Division used over 100 certified park officers (Level II) and between 130 and 150 night security staff (Level I) in 1999 to provide proactive and preventive law enforcement services.**

The division has a philosophy of “low key,” personal, proactive, and preventive law enforcement services. This approach relies on the presence of uniformed personnel who assist, inform, and educate park users as a means of pre-empting future problems. Park officers attempt to use the lowest level of enforcement or corrective action necessary to resolve a situation. Officers frequently use verbal warnings to educate people about park rules. When verbal warnings do not produce compliance, park officers issue written warnings or citations.<sup>49</sup>



State park officers provide proactive and preventive law enforcement services.

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**Some level of night security service is provided at every park.**

The division uses two levels of law enforcement personnel: 1) Level I night security, usually seasonal, part-time staff, who are authorized to give verbal warnings; and 2) Certified Level II park officers who are authorized to issue written warnings and citations, and carry and use mace for defensive purposes only. Level II park officers are not licensed peace officers and are not authorized to carry or use fire arms, stun guns, or handcuffs.<sup>50</sup> All park managers, assistant managers, and operation specialists are park officers, as are some staff in central and regional offices.<sup>51</sup> Park officers' enforcement authority ends at the park boundary. Generally, county sheriff offices are the primary backup for park officers. Depending on a park's location, city police departments and DNR conservation officers may also play key roles in backup for park managers.<sup>52</sup>

Night security services are provided in every park, although the nature of those services varies depending on the size and use of each park. For instance, in more heavily used parks with high weekday and weekend campground occupancy, night security is provided every evening during peak season. In parks with low

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<sup>49</sup> Parks and Recreation Division, *State Park Law Enforcement Manual*, 1992, 3-4, 19-21.

<sup>50</sup> Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, “Operational Order No. 94,” January 1991, contains guidelines for Level II Law Enforcement Officers.

<sup>51</sup> Managers in two parks and assistant managers in seven parks, who were hired in 1999, will receive their initial Level II training in late 1999 or early 2000.

<sup>52</sup> The City of Taylors Falls provides law enforcement services at Interstate. During the 1999 session the Legislature approved a special appropriation to the city for these services. During the summer, the city and county consolidated law enforcement functions.

weekday campground use, security is provided on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday evenings. Similarly, night security is available until 11:00 p.m. in parks with smaller campgrounds but until 2:00 a.m. or later in parks with larger campgrounds.

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**DNR has specific procedures to deal with weather and other emergencies.**

DNR and the division has operational orders and policies related to law enforcement and security, including training requirements, emergency procedures, use of emergency vehicles, and weather emergencies. In cases of severe weather, park staff make reasonable efforts to advise park users of the situation. This can include posting information on park bulletin boards, notifying park visitors using a public address system on a truck, and advising people to move to a secure shelter (usually the park office, visitor center, or sanitation building), if necessary. Weather information is usually posted on park bulletin boards and includes the location of the designated shelter, listing of local radio stations, emergency assistance telephone numbers, directions to the nearest hospital and local law enforcement office, and actions to take in the event of severe weather.

We found that:

- **While park officers deal with many different kinds of enforcement and emergency situations, the most frequent problems involved vehicle permit violations in 1998.**

Table 2.11 lists the frequency of enforcement problems in state parks. Park managers told us that vehicles without permits were the most common daily enforcement problem, excessive noise and pet-related problems were the most common weekly problems, and most vandalism problems occurred once or twice a season.

The level of law enforcement authority needed to protect the parks and park users varies from park to park depending on geographic location, demographics of park users, level of park activity, and other factors. Park enforcement reports for 1998 show that the most common activity was issuing vehicle permit warnings. Enforcement staff in 54 parks issued over 5,500 vehicle permit warnings; the 15 most heavily used parks (those in Group A) accounted for 63 percent of the warnings issued. In contrast, park officers in 20 parks issued 87 written warnings usually for vehicle permit (24) or parking (21) violations. Similarly, park officers in 17 parks issued 87 citations primarily for vehicle permit violations (34) or

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**Table 2.11: Frequency of Problems in Minnesota State Parks**

Problem	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Once or Twice a Season	Almost Never
Vehicles without permits	65%	25%	3%	1%	1%
Drunkness	0	28	25	34	9
Vandalism	0	16	34	41	9
Excessive noise	12	49	22	10	7
Pet-related problems	15	57	9	13	3

NOTE: Numbers are percentage of park managers. (N=68)

SOURCE: Office of the Legislative Auditor, State Park Manager Questionnaire, August 1999.

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alcohol or drug use (14). The 15 most heavily used parks accounted for half of the written warnings and nearly three-fourths of the citations issued in 1998.

Park managers reported that other enforcement agencies, usually the county sheriff's office, responded to situations in state parks 94 times in 1998. These situations most frequently involved disturbances, vandalism, and burglaries. Park staff responded to 329 emergency situations in 1998, 120 of which involved a response from an outside agency such as emergency medical technicians or fire departments. Medical situations, injuries, and deaths accounted for 58 percent of these emergencies and environmental situations (weather or flooding) accounted for 21 percent. Finally, park managers reported using emergency lights and sirens 28 times and firearms to dispatch nuisance or injured animals 100 times in 1998; no one reported using mace.

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**One half of the park managers said they need more law enforcement resources.**

We asked park managers if they had the resources (training, staff, and equipment) necessary to provide law enforcement services. Thirty-six park managers (over 50 percent) said they needed more enforcement resources; most of this group (22) said they needed either more staff or more funding. Some managers (10) said they needed additional self-defense and control equipment, specifically expandable batons and handcuffs, and some (5) wanted Level I night security staff to be certified as Level II park officers. A few managers (2) said they wanted weapons. DNR has determined that handcuffs and expandable batons will not be used in parks because of concerns about escalating enforcement situations, and increased costs and training requirements.

## MARKETING

Legislators asked us to examine how DNR advertises and markets state parks. The public affairs and marketing supervisor, in the St. Paul office, is responsible for promoting state parks and works with a division committee to develop a biennial marketing work plan.<sup>53</sup> The 1998-99 marketing plan identified goals, strategies, timelines, and budgets.<sup>54</sup> Marketing efforts have focused on knowing who state park users are, identifying what park users consider a quality state park experience, and building customer loyalty. We found that:

- **DNR uses a variety of techniques to promote state parks, including publications, the Internet, news releases and media relations, trade shows, and cooperative relationships with other agencies and organizations.**

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<sup>53</sup> The committee is composed of the parks marketing supervisor, one person from each region—either park or regional office staff—and a representative from DNR's Information and Education Bureau. The committee receives input from parks administrative staff at the beginning of the planning process as priorities are being developed and at the end when the plan is reviewed and approved.

<sup>54</sup> The 1996-97 marketing plan laid the foundation for the current state park marketing efforts and involved an assessment of recreation and park user trends, sources of parks information, and target marketing groups.

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**DNR uses a variety of techniques to promote state parks.**

In 2000, marketing and publications has a budget of \$73,600, excluding salaries and benefits for two staff people.<sup>55</sup> Specific marketing efforts include:

- Printing and distributing publications—350,000 Minnesota state park guides, annual permits, and the *Traveler* newsletter (which is published three times a year and distributed to 55,000 households, 12 travel information centers, and hotels and motels);<sup>56</sup>
- Providing state park information on the DNR Internet web site;
- Working with DNR's Information and Education Bureau on the department's telephone information line, events such as the state fair, fund raising efforts, media relations, and services such as the design and layout of publications;
- Issuing news releases and working with approximately 700 media outlets (television, radio, and newspapers);
- Working with media outlets to enhance state park media exposure, such as placing a state parks supplement in an issue of *Minnesota Monthly*, a public radio magazine, and working with newspaper journalists on state park articles in travel and outdoor sections;
- Developing relationships with corporations to leverage financial resources. The division is negotiating with a company to sponsor the state park guide in exchange for \$50,000 a year for three years. Last year a poultry producer provided \$20,000 for picnic grills;
- Coordinating with Minnesota's Office of Tourism and the editor of *Minnesota Explorer*, which is mailed to 1.2 million households; and
- Attending outdoor, camping, lodging, recreation trade shows (four in the Twin Cities and one each in Chicago, North Dakota, and South Dakota), in cooperation with the Minnesota Department of Trade and Economic Development and the Office of Tourism.

The marketing budget also provides funding to state parks whose managers want to be members of local tourism boards or chambers of commerce, and want the park listed in local guides and guest service. Seventy-five percent of park managers told us that they worked with local chambers of commerce, business associations, or tourism groups to promote the state parks they managed.

In 1995, state law required the division to implement an electronic system to identify park users by scanning drivers' licenses.<sup>57</sup> The personal information collected from park users was supposed to be used to send out annual vehicle permit renewal notices, communicate with park users, and conduct research. We found that:

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<sup>55</sup> Major items in the marketing budget include: \$45,000 to print 350,000 park guides; \$15,000 to print annual park permits; \$8,000 for reservation brochures; and \$500 for a parks fact sheet.

<sup>56</sup> Printing costs for the *Traveler* are included in the electronic drivers' license scanning program.

<sup>57</sup> *Minn. Laws* (1995), ch. 220, sec. 5, subd. 5.

- **In 1999, the state park electronic database contained information on only about 55,000 of the 113,000 people purchasing annual permits.**

During our visits to state parks, some park managers expressed resistance to scanning drivers' licenses. Many park managers do not see how this program benefits them and complain that it takes too much time to ask for someone's license and explain why it is being scanned. This is particularly burdensome during times when the contact station is busy. Park managers also complained about the financial resources used to support this program, instead of providing park services in the field.

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### RECOMMENDATION

*Parks and Recreation Division administrative staff should work with park managers and park staff to improve implementation of the drivers' license scanning program.*

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The legislature initiated this program to identify park users and to promote the state parks. Following an initial appropriation in 1996 to purchase equipment and implement the drivers' license scanning system, the program has received regular appropriations of \$86,000 annually to pay for equipment, printing, and mailing costs. The division uses personal information collected from some park visitors to distribute the *Traveler* and to conduct focus groups related to park issues. The *Traveler* includes a mail-in order form for annual permits and other merchandise. The winter 1998/spring 1999 *Traveler* generated about \$22,000 in sales of over 950 state park permits and merchandise. Although the number of permits sold through the *Traveler* has not been extensive these numbers could be increased if more people were on the mailing list. The program is in place and regularly funded and should be fully implemented.

## PLANNING

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**DNR uses a strategic plan and individual park plans to help manage the state park system.**

State law requires the division to develop management plans for state parks and recreations areas before land acquisition and development can proceed.<sup>58</sup> Most of the initial state park management plans were adopted in the late 1970s and early 1980s, following passage of the Outdoor Recreation Act. Since the mid-1990s, the division revised individual park management plans for 11 parks and developed management plans for three new units (Cuyuna Country Recreation Area and Grand Portage and Glendalough state parks). The planning process takes about 2 years and involves the participation of park staff, resource and recreation management professionals, and citizens. At an average of about three plans a year, it could take nearly 20 years to revise all existing park management plans.

In 1995 the division completed a strategic plan that was designed to identify potential areas of improvement for maintaining the state park system. The plan established goals, articulated major policy issues, and identified ways park staff

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<sup>58</sup> *Minn. Stat.* §86A.09.

and stakeholders could address the issues. One of the items identified in the strategic planning process was the division's study of the state park system.

## 1999 Study of the State Park System

The most recent report related to the composition of the state park system is the Park and Recreation Division's *Minnesota State Park System Land Study*, a draft of which was released for public review in August 1999. Proposed legislation directed the division to prepare a study containing "a long range plan to provide for a state park system which will preserve appropriate representations of Minnesota's landscape regions and meet future demands for state park resources, environmental education, and recreational opportunities . . . The plan shall contain recommendations for additions, deletions, modifications, and classifications for the system."<sup>59</sup> Although proposed language was eliminated along with funding for the study, the division completed the study to fulfill a commitment to some legislators.

The 1999 report examined future recreational demand and compared biological, geological and cultural resources existing in the state parks with resources that should be protected in the state park system to identify where the system should be expanded to the year 2025.<sup>60</sup> The draft study focused on adding state parks to the system and contained a decision-making framework for evaluating proposals for new parks and recreation areas using criteria contained in the Outdoor Recreation Act. It also proposed a process for rating and prioritizing proposals from the public for new parks using criteria related to size, ecological features, cultural and educational opportunities, and recreational factors.

We question some of the assumptions and conclusions contained in the draft study, including:

1. Use of a thirty-mile radius. The report recommended establishing additional state parks or recreation areas so that there is one within 30 miles of every Minnesota resident.<sup>61</sup> While the study says the 30-mile radius comes from a 1939 park study, the basis for this recommendation is not explained in the report. It also appears to be inconsistent with the 50-mile radius used in state park management plans. The 1998 park user survey data show that 57 percent of day users and 82 percent of campers traveled more than 50 miles to visit a state park, while 71 percent of day users and 89 percent of campers traveled 30 miles or more to visit a state park.
2. Assessment of other outdoor recreation providers. Based on an assessment of complementary providers of outdoor recreation in Minnesota, the report concludes that state parks have a unique role in providing opportunities for outdoor recreation, resource preservation, and environmental education. While the three-part mission of state parks is unique, it appears that the study underestimates the role played by other units in Minnesota's outdoor

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<sup>59</sup> Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, *Minnesota State Parks Update*, May 19, 1997.

<sup>60</sup> Parks and Recreation Division, Minnesota Department of Natural Resource, *Minnesota State Park System Land Study: Public Review Draft* (St. Paul, August 1999).

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

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**The 1999 state park study could help DNR evaluate the existing state park system.**

recreation system (such as state forests, state trails, and scientific and natural areas) and other entities (such as the Minnesota Historical Society and environmental learning centers). While these entities may not have the same three part mission, they are critical components of preserving resources and providing recreational and educational opportunities in Minnesota.

3. Emphasis on cultural resources. While existing state parks contain numerous cultural resources and DNR is charged with protecting and conserving these resources, the criteria in the Minnesota Outdoor Recreation Act of 1975 (*Minn. Stat.* §86A) for creating new parks focuses on protecting and preserving natural resources. While creation of a new state park based on cultural resources is not precluded, the report appears to over emphasize cultural resources as a criterion for creating a new state park.

The study, nevertheless, sets forth a decision-making framework that the division can use to evaluate proposals for new state parks and recreation areas based on criteria contained in state law. The report acknowledges that it would be useful to evaluate existing state parks and develop a baseline with which to compare proposals for new parks.

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#### RECOMMENDATION

*The Parks and Recreation Division should continue its analysis of the current state park system, develop baseline data using criteria proposed in its Land Study, and based on that analysis examine possible modifications to Minnesota's state park system.*

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## OTHER

Other examples of management practices that we would expect to see in a reasonably well-managed agency and that we observed while evaluating the division include cooperative working relationships with other DNR divisions and other state agencies, solicitation of public input, and use of a variety of techniques to facilitate communication between field and administrative offices. Each of these is discussed briefly.

## Working Relationships

State park managers often work with other DNR divisions and other government agencies to coordinate specific projects and manage natural and cultural resources. Staff in some state parks work with other DNR divisions, sharing staff and equipment, to conduct controlled burns and complete large, labor-intense projects. Occasionally there may be friction due to differences in mission, but generally we were told that the cooperation is good.

Many park managers told us about the positive relationships they had with the Minnesota Department of Transportation. Sometimes a park is able to take advantage of surplus MnDOT materials, such as path work at Shovel Point in Tettegouche. In other cases there are cooperative arrangements to provide

services, such as the shared visitor centers/rest stops at Gooseberry Falls and Tettegouche.

Relationships with the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) are also positive. Six parks collaborate with MHS—Charles A. Lindberg, Forestville/Mystery Cave, Fort Ridgely, Fort Snelling, Split Rock Lighthouse, and Upper Sioux Agency. Park staff may provide some ground maintenance services at historic sites for a fee and staff may cooperate on interpretive services. Representatives from MHS told us that they have very good day-to-day working relationships with park staff.

## Public Input

The division uses surveys of park users and the general public to gather information about user satisfaction and park activities, benefits, and problems. The division conducts public hearings and meetings, works with citizen advisory committees, and uses other techniques to solicit input from the public, park users, park stakeholders, and local government. The division uses this information when developing state park management plans, proposing park boundary changes, considering changes in state park fees, and analyzing the composition of the state park system. These groups and individuals represent a wide range of opinions about how parks should look and what activities they should include. Competing interests from a diversity of stakeholders may make it impossible for the division to incorporate everyone's perspective in the development of a specific policy or park management plan.

## Communications Within the Division

The division uses several techniques to foster communication among staff in its geographically dispersed organization. Two- to three-day bimonthly administrative staff meetings of central office and regional managers are held at various locations around the state. Agendas and minutes of these meetings are sent to staff in the parks via mail or electronic mail. These meetings are generally followed by regional staff meetings where decisions are communicated to staff in individual parks and where ideas on park operations from park staff are discussed. The division uses standing committees to obtain program direction and input on issues such as enforcement, marketing, budgeting, and management information services. Generally, committees include staff from central and regional offices and individual parks. In addition, all levels of the division use electronic mail to share information.

We asked park managers how satisfied they were with their working relationships with staff in the central and regional offices. The vast majority of park managers (92 percent) were either “completely” or “somewhat” satisfied with their working relationships with regional office staff. Park managers were somewhat less satisfied with central office staff—78 percent of park managers responded that they were either “completely” or “somewhat” satisfied with their working relationships with central office staff. During our evaluation, a number of park managers expressed frustration with the lack of communication within the division.

## SUMMARY

Overall, DNR does a good job of managing Minnesota's state parks. Park users are generally satisfied and the state parks present a pleasing appearance. The department uses a reasonable management practices for allocating resources to individual state parks, a planning process for individual parks and interpretive services, various methods to involve citizens, and cooperative working relationships with other DNR divisions and state agencies. Camping is a key recreational activity for some park visitors and generates substantial income although some parks and geographic areas are more popular, and more crowded, than others.

There are some problems with state park management. Parks depend on a large number of seasonal staff but there are restrictions on the division's ability to reduce staffing costs. While many parks have naturalists, occasionally programs cannot meet demand and some visitor centers are unstaffed. The division uses a variety of techniques, including park management plans, to balance recreational use with resource management and preservation, but it has not done enough to develop baseline information on existing resources or identify critical indicators of recreational impact. There may also be some room for improvement in communications within the division.

DNR has tried to impact the fewest users when reducing public services in state parks. This chapter presents seven options for the Legislature and DNR to consider when addressing issues of state park financing. The options include maintaining the status quo; reducing the size of the park system by transferring or mothballing some parks; cutting the division's administrative costs; and increasing funding. The department's recent study of the state park system, which includes criteria and a decision-making framework, may be useful in reviewing existing state parks as well as evaluating potential, new parks.