

Minnesota's State Park System

SUMMARY

Minnesota has an extensive state park system that provides citizens with recreational and educational opportunities and strives to protect and preserve natural and cultural resources. Park visitors have been consistently satisfied with their experiences in state parks. While park attendance increased in the 1990s, it did not increase as fast as park operating expenditures or revenues from park operations. Revenues from park users represent about one-third of the Parks and Recreation Division's budget.

The Parks and Recreation Division of DNR manages the state parks.

Itasca State Park was established in 1891, making it one of the first state parks in the nation. Over the past 108 years, Minnesota's state park system has grown to encompass 79 state parks, recreation areas, waysides, and trails. State parks contain some of Minnesota's most valued natural and cultural resources, including the headwaters of the Mississippi River, native prairies, stands of old growth pine, and habitat for rare plant and animal species. The Parks and Recreation Division of the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is responsible for planning, developing, operating, and maintaining Minnesota's state park system.

In this chapter we review the history of Minnesota's state park system and state laws governing its operation. This chapter also addresses the following questions:

- **Who are park users? Are they satisfied with state parks? What facilities and experiences are important to park visitors?**
- **How is the Parks and Recreation Division organized?**
- **How have the division's expenditures and staffing changed over time?**
- **How does Minnesota's state park system compare with those in neighboring states?**

To answer these questions, we reviewed state statutes and laws, previous reports and studies, and DNR surveys of park users. We also analyzed financial data and budget documents, interviewed division staff, and conducted telephone interviews with representatives of state park management agencies in neighboring states.

HISTORY

The history of state parks in Minnesota began in 1885 when the Legislature authorized creation of a state park at Minnehaha Falls.¹ The Legislature did not provide any financing, however, and eventually the City of Minneapolis acquired the land and established a local park. In 1891, as noted, the Legislature established Itasca State Park as the first Minnesota state park. (Table 1.1 lists state parks and recreation areas by the year they were established.) It was not

Table 1.1: History of Minnesota's State Park System

Year Established	Park Name	Year Established	Park Name
1891	Itasca	1957	Cascade River, ² Frontenac, Judge C. R. Magney, Mille Lacs Kathio, Temperance River ²
1895	Interstate	1959	Crow Wing, Lac Qui Parle, ² Schoolcraft, Zippel Bay
1905	Minneopa	1961	Bear Head Lake, Big Stone Lake, Fort Snelling, Savanna Portage
1911	Fort Ridgely	1963	Banning, Forestville, ³ Glacial Lakes, Lake Louise, Lake Maria, ³ Maplewood, Great River Bluffs, Rice Lake, Sakatah Lake, Soudan
1915	Jay Cooke		Underground Mine, Upper Sioux Agency
1919	Sibley, Whitewater	1967	Franz Jevne, Hayes Lake, Split Rock Lighthouse
1921	Scenic	1969	Afton, Minnesota Valley Trail
1923	Lake Bemidji	1969	<i>Department of Natural Resources established</i>
1925	<i>Department of Conservation established</i>	1971	Moose Lake
1931	Charles A. Lindbergh	1973	Wild River
1935	Camden	1979	Tettegouche
1935	<i>Division of State Parks established</i>	1989	Hill Annex Mine, Grand Portage
1937 ¹	Beaver Creek Valley, Blue Mounds, Buffalo River, Flandrau, Goosesberry Falls, Lake Bronson, Lake Carlos, Lake Shetek, Monson Lake, Old Mill, Split Rock Creek	1991	Glendalough
1941	Father Hennepin	1993	Cuyuna Country Recreation Area
1943	St. Croix, St. Croix Island Recreation Area	1994	Minnesota Valley Recreation Area
1945	Kilen Woods, McCarthy Beach, Nerstrand-Big Woods	1995	John Latsch
1947	Myre-Big Island, William O'Brien	1998	Garden Island Recreation Area
1949	Carley		
1955	George Crosby Manitou		

¹Although established formally in 1937, these parks were developed as early as 1933.

²Although established formally in later years, Cascade River, Temperance River, and Lac Qui Parle were all developed in the 1930s.

³Forestville and Lake Maria were first established in 1949 and 1947, respectively. No land was acquired, however, and they were reestablished in 1963. Mystery Cave was added to Forestville in 1987.

SOURCES: Roy W. Meyer, *Everyone's Country Estate: A History of Minnesota's State Parks* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1991), xvii-xviii, 297-298; and Parks and Recreation Division of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

¹ For a complete history of Minnesota state parks see: Roy W. Meyer, *Everyone's Country Estate: A History of Minnesota's State Parks* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1991).

until 1925 that legislation established the Department of Conservation, the predecessor of the Department of Natural Resources, placing management of state parks under its jurisdiction. In 1935, legislation established the Division of State Parks and defined the duties of the director of parks to include acquiring and managing park lands and operating park facilities.

Eleven new state parks were added to the state park system in 1937, many developed with assistance from federal work relief agencies such as the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Works Progress Administration. A period of slower growth followed in the 1940s and early 1950s, during and after World War II. The 1960s was a decade of major change with new state parks established in 1961, 1963, 1967, and 1969. The Federal Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965 provided a source of financing for park land purchases.² During this period, many existing state parks were expanded, eight state parks were transferred to cities or counties to be managed as local parks, and one wayside was transferred to the Minnesota Historical Society. Since the 1960s, expansion of Minnesota's state park system has slowed; legislation authorized three parks in the 1970s, two in the 1980s, and one park and three recreations areas in the 1990s. In addition, John Latsch Wayside was reclassified as a state park in 1995.

STATE LAWS GOVERNING STATE PARK MANAGEMENT

**Only the
Legislature
can create or
expand state
parks.**

For the most part, two chapters of *Minnesota Statutes* govern the creation and management of the state park system: Chapter 85 and Chapter 86A, also called the Outdoor Recreation Act of 1975. Only the Legislature can create, expand, or change the boundaries of state parks, recreation areas, and waysides.³ Chapter 85 lists state parks and other areas established in state law. It also governs state park permits and fees, special uses of state parks, food and beverage service in certain state parks, special leases, special revolving fund accounts, and other aspects of state park management. In addition, the Commissioner of DNR has promulgated rules that regulate recreational use, personal behavior, and unlawful activities in state parks.⁴ It is the responsibility of park managers and other authorized employees to enforce park rules.

The Outdoor Recreation Act of 1975 identifies state parks and recreation areas as units of Minnesota's outdoor recreation system and designates DNR as the managing agency for these units.⁵ The act describes the purposes of state parks,

² This act requires that land purchased with these funds remain available for recreational use, but it does not specify whether the recreational use needs to be state, regionally, or locally operated.

³ *Minn. Stat.* §§85.01-85.013, and 86A.07. To create a new state park or recreation area or change the boundaries of an existing area, the Legislature must enact a law describing the area and authorizing land acquisition.

⁴ See *Minn. Stat.* §84.03 for rule-making authority; and *Minn. Rules* (1999), ch. 6100.0100 to 6100.2400.

⁵ *Minn. Stat.* §86A. Other units in Minnesota's outdoor recreation system are state trails; scientific and natural areas; wilderness areas; forests; wildlife management areas; water access sites; wild, scenic, and recreational rivers; historic sites; rest areas; and aquatic management areas.

The Outdoor Recreation Act describes the purposes of state parks.

criteria for new parks, and how parks should be managed. According to the act, the purposes of state parks are:

. . . to protect and perpetuate extensive areas of the state possessing those resources which illustrate and exemplify Minnesota's natural phenomena and to provide for the use, enjoyment, and understanding of such resources without impairment for the enjoyment and recreation of future generations.⁶

The act also says that a new state park should not be established "unless its proposed location substantially satisfied the following criteria:"

1. Exemplifies the natural characteristics of the major landscape regions of the state, as shown by accepted classifications, in an essentially unspoiled or restored condition or in a condition that will permit restoration in the foreseeable future; or contains essentially unspoiled natural resources of sufficient extent and importance to meaningfully contribute to the broad illustration of the state's natural phenomena; and
2. Contains natural resources, sufficiently diverse and interesting to attract people from throughout the state; and
3. Is sufficiently large to permit protection of the plant and animal life and other natural resources which give the park its qualities and provide for a broad range of opportunities for human enjoyment of these qualities.⁷

The act directs DNR to manage state parks:

. . . to preserve and perpetuate, and interpret natural features that existed in the area of the park prior to settlement and other significant natural, scenic, scientific, or historical features that are present. . . . to maintain a balance among the plant and animal life of the park and to reestablish desirable plants and animals that were formerly indigenous to the park area but are now missing. Programs to interpret the natural features of the park shall be provided. . . . Park use shall be primarily for aesthetic, cultural, and educational purposes, and shall not be designed to accommodate all forms or unlimited volumes of recreational use. . . .⁸

According to the act, state recreation areas should contain natural or artificial resources that provide a broad selection of outdoor recreation opportunities in a natural setting that may be used by large numbers of people.⁹

The Outdoor Recreation Act requires DNR to prepare a master plan for the administration of state parks, recreation areas, and waysides before construction of new facilities or other development of an authorized unit begins.¹⁰ The law also provides for the general public's review and participation in the process of preparing park management plans.

⁶ *Minn. Stat.* §86A.05, subd. 2 (a).

⁷ *Minn. Stat.* §86A.05, subd. 2 (b).

⁸ *Minn. Stat.* §86A.05, subd. 2 (c).

⁹ *Minn. Stat.* §86A.05, subd. 3.

¹⁰ *Minn. Stat.* §86A.09, subd. 1.

Minnesota state parks vary in size, facilities, and quality of natural resources. Historical documents indicate that as early as 1939 there were discussions about the quality of land suitable for designation as a state park.¹¹ In 1984, the Legislature amended the Outdoor Recreation Act and “grandfathered” into Minnesota’s outdoor recreation system state parks that were in existence on January 1, 1984, but did not meet the resource or site criteria in the act.¹²

MINNESOTA’S CURRENT STATE PARK SYSTEM

**In 1999,
Minnesota
state parks
covered
247,000
acres of
land.**

Minnesota’s state park system, consisting of 66 state parks, 4 recreation areas, 8 waysides, and 1 trail, encompassed over 247,000 acres of land or less than 1 percent of the state’s total land area in 1999. Ninety-five percent of the land was in state parks, which ranged in size from 118 acres at Franz Jevne to nearly 34,000 acres at St. Croix, with an average size of 3,572 acres. Half of the state parks were less than 1,900 acres in size and nine parks were smaller than 500 acres in size. Figure 1.1 shows the location of each unit in Minnesota’s state park system, along with six DNR geographic regions and regional offices.

Of the four state recreation areas, Islands of the St. Croix Recreation Area is located in the St. Croix River and is not actively managed, and Garden Island and Cuyuna Country are under development. The Minnesota Valley Recreation Area includes the Minnesota Valley Trail, which extends from Fort Snelling along the Minnesota River. The eight waysides were set aside for their unique natural or historical values. These waysides are smaller than most state parks, ranging in size from 1 to 240 acres, with an average size of 77 acres.

Minnesota’s state parks contain 4,378 campsites, 68 group camps, 1,255 miles of trail, 332 miles of road, 135 water access sites, over 90 picnic areas with over 6,300 picnic sites, 33 fishing piers, over 1,400 buildings including 25 visitor centers and 595 buildings on the National Register of Historic Places, and 62 historic districts or landmarks.¹³ State parks are open year-round, seven days a week, 365 days a year, although many parks with modern sanitation facilities turn off the water and close those buildings in the late fall through early spring. Appendix A summarizes the overnight facilities, trails, and recreation and visitor services provided in the state parks.

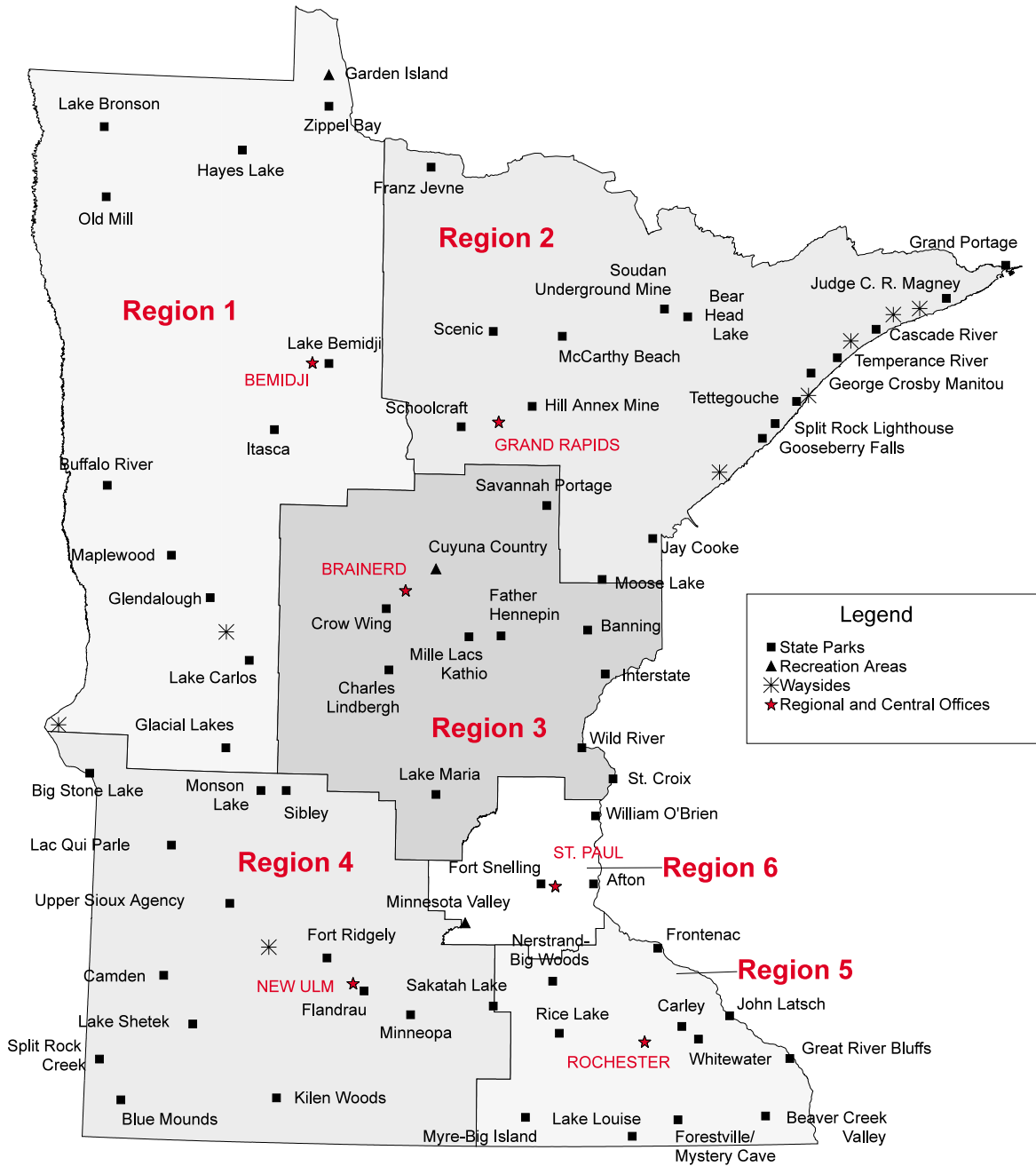
Many of Minnesota’s state parks contain significant natural resources including prairies, rivers, waterfalls, stands of old growth pine, blufflands, habitat for rare and endangered flora and fauna, and countless lakes. There are also historic and prehistoric sites and structures, and sacred American Indian sites within the state park system.

¹¹ Meyer, *Everyone’s County Estate*, 144-145; and Department of Natural Resources and State Planning Agency, *Minnesota Resource Potentials in State Outdoor Recreation: Project 80* (St. Paul, 1971).

¹² *Minn. Stat.* §86A.05, subd. 13.

¹³ Minnesota state park web site, http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/parks_and_recreation/state_parks/; and Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, *A Guide to Minnesota State Parks*, 1999-2000.

Figure 1.1: Minnesota State Park System, 1999



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

State Park Attendance

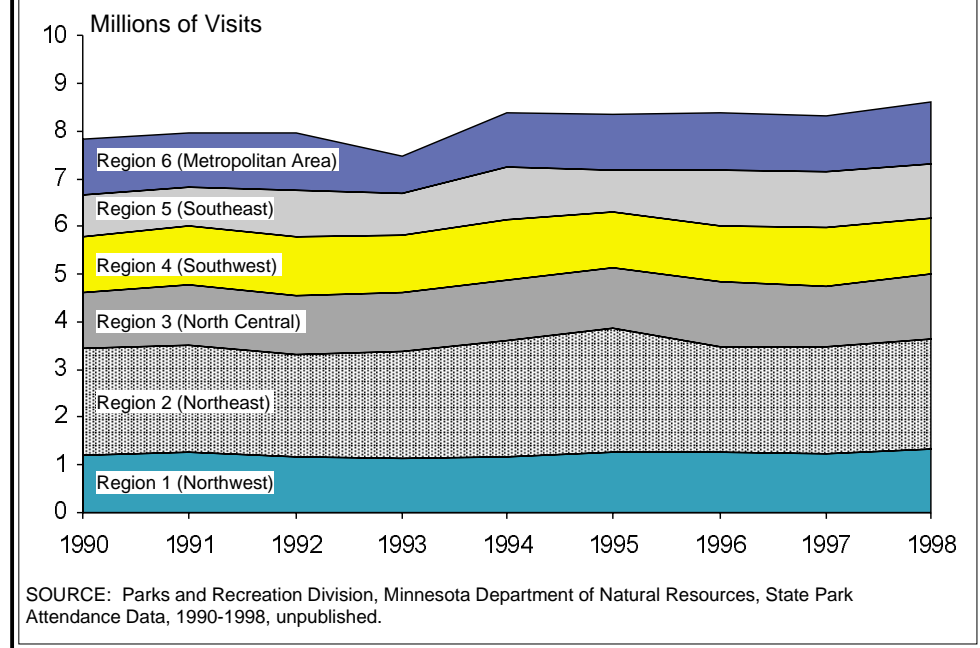
All state parks attract day users and most offer overnight camping.¹⁴ State park attendance data show that:

- **Total visits to Minnesota state parks rose 10 percent between 1990 and 1998.**

According to DNR estimates, there were about 8.6 million total visits to state parks in 1998, of which about 914,000 (11 percent) were overnight visits.¹⁵ This compares with an estimated 7.8 million total visits and 855,000 overnight visits in 1990, reflecting a 10 percent increase in total visits and a 7 percent increase in overnight visits between 1990 and 1998. Figure 1.2 shows total visits to state parks by DNR region from 1990 to 1998. The 1993 decrease in visits was likely caused by flooding at several state parks. During the past nine years, over 25 percent of all visits were to Region 2 (Northeast) parks, while the other regions each accounted for between 10 and 16 percent of the remaining visits.

Parks in Northeast Minnesota accounted for one-quarter of all visits to state parks in the 1990s.

Figure 1.2: State Park Attendance by Region, 1990-98



The division estimates the number of total visits to state parks using a combination of car counters, visual checks, and other procedures. Electronic devices count each car entering a park each day and park staff multiply the count

¹⁴ Fort Snelling, Grand Portage, Hill Annex Mine, and Soudan Underground Mine do not offer overnight camping or lodging, and Cuyuna Country Recreation Area is being developed.

¹⁵ The number of visits to state parks reflects the number of people entering the park system each day. When people leave the park and return another day, they are counted again.

by 3.2, the average number of occupants per car. For instance, a family of five picnicking in a park for one day would be counted as 3.2 visits and a single hiker driving into a park would also be counted as 3.2 visits. Because many parks have multiple entrances or major roads going through them, staff make adjustments to daily car counts to factor out local traffic and park vehicles. Estimates of park visits can be further complicated by people entering a park on bike or snowmobile trails; in some parks, these visitors must be visually counted. In contrast, park staff use camping or lodging registration cards to obtain the actual number of overnight visits. For instance, a party of three camping for two nights is counted as six overnight visits. We determined that:

- **Data on overnight visits to state parks are more reliable than data on total visits.**

Park staff told us that the number of total visits is an estimate and is useful for identifying trends, but it is not as accurate or reliable as the audited number of overnight visits. Park staff use overnight visit and revenue data as the basis for most park management decisions. However, DNR frequently uses data on total visits to state parks when making legislative presentations.

We examined state park daily visit counts for 1998 and found that:

- **The numbers of total and overnight visits varied widely by season, day of the week, and park in 1998.**

In 1998, 62 percent of total visits occurred during the summer season (Memorial Day through Labor Day) and 60 percent of total visits occurred on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Fall is the second most popular season, capturing 15 percent of total visits. Overnight visits were even more concentrated than total visits: 81 percent of overnight visits occurred during the summer season and 59 percent of overnight visits occurred on weekends (Friday and Saturday).



Most overnight visits to Minnesota state parks occurred during the summer.

During 1998, total visits per park ranged from a high of about 700,000 at Fort Snelling to fewer than 8,000 at Schoolcraft. Overnight visits ranged from a high of about 101,000 at Itasca to fewer than 1,000 at Monson Lake. Table 1.2 shows that when ranked by number of visits, the top six parks accounted for one-third of all visits in 1998. In contrast, the lowest ranking six parks accounted for approximately 1 percent of all visits.

State Park Visitors

The demographic profile of campers and day users in Minnesota's state parks has been fairly stable since 1987. DNR surveys show that:

- **In 1998, the majority of park users were white, well-educated, with at least moderate incomes, and lived in Minnesota.**

In 1998, 97 percent of park users were white, two-thirds had household incomes of \$40,000 or more, and more than half were college graduates.¹⁶ Generally, park

Table 1.2: Total and Overnight Visits at the Top Six and Bottom Six State Parks, 1998

Total Visits ¹				Overnight Visits ²			
Rank	Park	Number	Percentage of Total	Rank	Park	Number	Percentage of Total
1	Fort Snelling	700,076	8.1%	1	Itasca	101,129	11.1%
2	Gooseberry Falls	580,361	6.7	2	St. Croix	56,833	6.2
3	Itasca	506,340	5.9	3	Whitewater	40,401	4.4
4	Interstate	377,562	4.4	4	Lake Carlos	37,323	4.1
5	Whitewater	366,688	4.3	5	Sibley	36,952	4.0
6	Sibley	325,898	3.8	6	William O'Brien	35,123	3.8
61	Kilen Woods	14,895	0.2	56	Kilen Woods	2,178	0.2
62	John Latsch	14,526	0.2	57	George Crosby Manitou	1,959	0.2
63	George Crosby Manitou	14,376	0.2	58	Old Mill	1,825	0.2
64	Hill Annex Mine	9,537	0.1	59	Schoolcraft	1,680	0.2
65	Monson Lake	9,370	0.1	60	Carley	1,636	0.2
66	Schoolcraft	7,551	0.1	61	Monson Lake	949	0.1

¹Data on total visits were not reported for Franz Jevne State Park or Cuyuna County Recreation Area.

²Fort Snelling, Grand Portage, Hill Annex Mine, and Soudan Underground Mine state parks do not have camping or lodging. Cuyuna County Recreation Area is being developed. Overnight visit data were not reported for John Latsch or Franz Jevne state parks.

SOURCE: Parks and Recreation Division, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, State Park Attendance Data, 1998, unpublished.

¹⁶ We examined DNR's surveys of park users conducted in 1987, 1994, 1996, and 1998 to gather information on park user characteristics, expectations, and satisfaction with state parks. The surveys were designed to allow comparisons between campers and day users but included too few respondents to make comparisons among individual parks. Although each survey had a slightly different focus, they shared some common questions. DNR's survey methodology was reasonable, with the exception of the 1994 survey which had methodological flaws (such as a low response rate and overrepresentation of campers) that limit its usefulness as a measure of park user attitudes and satisfaction. If data from the 1994 survey are presented carefully they may have some value in reflecting camper opinions.

users were more highly educated, somewhat more affluent, and more white than Minnesota's general population.¹⁷ Approximately 80 percent of park visitors were from Minnesota. Campers as a percentage of total park visitors decreased from about 18 percent in 1987 to about 13 percent in 1997.¹⁸ A 1998 Minnesota Office of Tourism survey of travelers showed that "scenic touring," "visiting state/national parks," and "camping" were the top three spring and summer travel activities for Minnesota residents, while "visiting state/national parks" ranked fifth for non-Minnesotans.¹⁹

DNR surveys also show that:

- **For park users, the most important park features were clean facilities and grounds, a natural setting, and well-protected natural resources.**

Table 1.3 summarizes park user rankings of the most important park features. Over 70 percent of the day users and campers surveyed in 1998 identified cleanliness of grounds and facilities, a natural setting for the park, well-protected natural resources, and beauty of the park as "very important" features.²⁰ Campers also ranked the quality of the campground as important. In contrast, relatively few day users and campers ranked visitor centers, interpretive services, and exhibits as "very important" to their enjoyment of a state park. When asked what features, facilities, and services *should* be in a state park, over 90 percent of park users selected hiking trails, clean waterways, and native plants and animals. Smaller percentages of survey respondents selected visitor/trail centers (79 to 86 percent), naturalist programs (65 to 73 percent), and interpretive displays (63 to 72 percent).

When asked about activities and benefits attained from state park visits, campers reported participating in more activities than day users. Table 1.4 shows that hiking, sightseeing, and observing nature were the most popular activities for both groups in 1998. The most important experiences and benefits attained from visiting state parks included enjoying natural scenery and the smells and sounds of nature, getting away from life's usual demands, and spending leisure time with family.²¹

Responses to survey questions about park users' satisfaction with their visits to state parks shows that:

- **Consistently since 1987, park visitors have expressed high satisfaction with Minnesota's state parks and had few complaints about park facilities or staff.**

Most park users want to experience nature as part of their visit to a state park.

¹⁷ U.S. Census Bureau web site, <http://www.census.gov/population/estimates/state/>

¹⁸ The 13 percent reflect DNR data from August 1997.

¹⁹ Minnesota Office of Tourism, Department of Trade and Economic Development, "1998 Spring-Summer Seasonal Survey," *Travel Partners* (St. Paul, July 1999), 4.

²⁰ Park users surveyed in 1987 identified "beauty of the park," "cleanliness of restrooms," and "trails to walk and hike" as the most important items contributing to their enjoyment of the park. Different wording of the question and different options, however, limit direct comparisons with the responses to the 1998 survey.

²¹ Responses to the 1987 survey were similar, although the question and options were worded differently.

Table 1.3: Park Features Valued by Park Users, 1998

Survey Question	Percentage Rating Each Option As "Very Important"	
	Day Users	Campers
"How important were each of the following to your enjoyment of this state park on this visit?"		
Cleanliness of grounds and facilities	82%	86%
A natural setting for the park	81	78
Well-protected natural resources	79	74
Beauty of the park	79	72
Lakes and rivers in the park	67	58
Trails	66	56
Lack of disturbances by other users	54	66
Informational brochure/maps provided	54	44
Security provided by park staff	47	52
Helpfulness of park staff	47	43
Good facilities in the picnic grounds	38	30
Quality of the campground	34	73
Water recreation opportunities (fishing, boating, swimming, etc.)	32	44
Availability of park staff	31	22
Safe places to swim	30	42
High-quality facilities in campground	26	48
Visitor center	26	12
Campground near lake or river	23	52
Proper appearance of park staff	23	23
Secluded campsites	22	66
Historical/archeological sites to see	21	13
Interpretive program	18	9
Exhibits to see	16	6
Variety of daytime activities	10	12

NOTE: Data are ranked by day-user responses.

SOURCE: Office of Planning, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, 1998 Minnesota State Park Summer Visitor Survey (St. Paul, 1998).

Park users have been consistently satisfied with their visits to state parks.

Table 1.5 shows that park users' satisfaction with state parks has been consistently high. Since 1987, more than two-thirds of both day users and campers responded that their visits to state parks "exceeded expectations" or that they were "completely satisfied" with their visits. Satisfaction levels increase to over 90 percent when "mostly satisfied" responses are included. Relatively small percentages of respondents indicated that their experience "could have been better" or that they were "dissatisfied."

When asked to identify factors that detracted from their enjoyment of state parks in 1998, campers and day users differed in their responses. Two-thirds of day users said nothing detracted from their enjoyment, compared with 48 percent of campers. Campers were more likely than day users to identify problems with pets, bathroom odors, noise, and crowding (see Table 1.6). Few park users identified "conflicts with staff" as a distraction from their enjoyment of the park.

The division does not have a centralized system for logging complaints from park users; therefore, we were unable to comprehensively assess the number or nature of complaints. Instead, we examined park-related letters sent to the state parks

Table 1.4: Participation in Park Activities, 1998

Survey Question	Percentage Selecting Specific Activity	
	Day Users	Campers
"Which of the following activities did you participate in while visiting this park on this trip?"		
Hiking	57%	77%
Sightseeing	44	50
Nature observation	40	58
Picnicking	36	32
Looking at visitor center exhibits	35	34
A self-guided nature walk	22	30
Swimming	18	44
Visiting historic sites	14	24
Did nothing/relaxed	14	32
Bird watching	13	32
Boating/canoeing	10	23
Bicycling	5	27
Fishing	5	27
A naturalist-led program	3	12

NOTE: The questionnaire included a list of 17 options. Data are ranked by day-user responses.

SOURCE: Office of Planning, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, *1998 Minnesota State Park Summer Visitor Survey* (St. Paul, 1998).

director between July 1998 and June 1999 and to the DNR Commissioner between January 1998 and June 1999. Eight of the 49 letters examined involved complaints about the campground reservation system, park rules, overcrowded camping areas and too few bathrooms, lack of deer feeding plots, and poor quality trail maps; 6 letters praised park staff or the appearance of a state park; and the remainder requested information or expressed support for park proposals or projects. The division may want to consider whether a more systematic way of logging and tracking complaints from park users would help the staff identify and resolve problems in the state parks.

Table 1.5: Park User Satisfaction, 1987, 1996, and 1998

Survey Question	1987		1996		1998	
	Day Users	Campers	Day Users	Campers	Day Users	Campers
"Which statement most closely reflects your feelings about this visit?" ¹						
Exceeded expectations; it was a great experience	14%	21%	21%	23%	15%	19%
Completely satisfied	58	48	52	51	54	51
Mostly satisfied	22	24	23	21	26	25
OK—could have been better	5	6	2	4	4	5
Dissatisfied ²	1	1	2	1	1	<1

¹There were minor wording differences on the three questionnaires.

²"Dissatisfied" represents a combination of "somewhat," "very" and "most dissatisfied."

SOURCES: Office of Planning, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, *1987 Summer User Survey of Minnesota State Park Visitors* (St. Paul, 1987), *Fee Strategy Survey of State Park Visitors* (St. Paul, 1996), and *1998 Minnesota State Park Summer Visitor Survey* (St. Paul, 1998).

Table 1.6: Selected Factors Detracting from Park User Enjoyment of State Parks, 1998

Survey Question	Percentage Selecting Specific Activity	
	Day Users	Campers
"Which of the following detracted from your enjoyment of this park during this visit?"		
Too crowded	6%	9%
Problems with other people's pets	5	12
Unpleasant odors from dumpsters	4	4
Too noisy	3	9
Unpleasant odors from restrooms	3	11
Unfriendly, discourteous behavior by others	2	7
Conflicts with staff	0	1

NOTE: The questionnaire included a list of 20 options. Data are ranked by day-user responses.

SOURCE: Office of Planning, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, *1998 Minnesota State Park Summer Visitor Survey* (St. Paul, 1998).

In addition to DNR's park user satisfaction data, staff in nearly all parks solicit comments from park visitors using customer comment cards, camper registration cards, and oral communications. Written comments from park users are not routinely summarized or sent to the central office. Park managers told us that visitor comments about problems like broken faucets, trees down over trails, or similar issues are addressed as soon as possible.

ORGANIZATION, STAFFING, AND EXPENDITURES

About three-fourths of the parks division staff work in the parks.

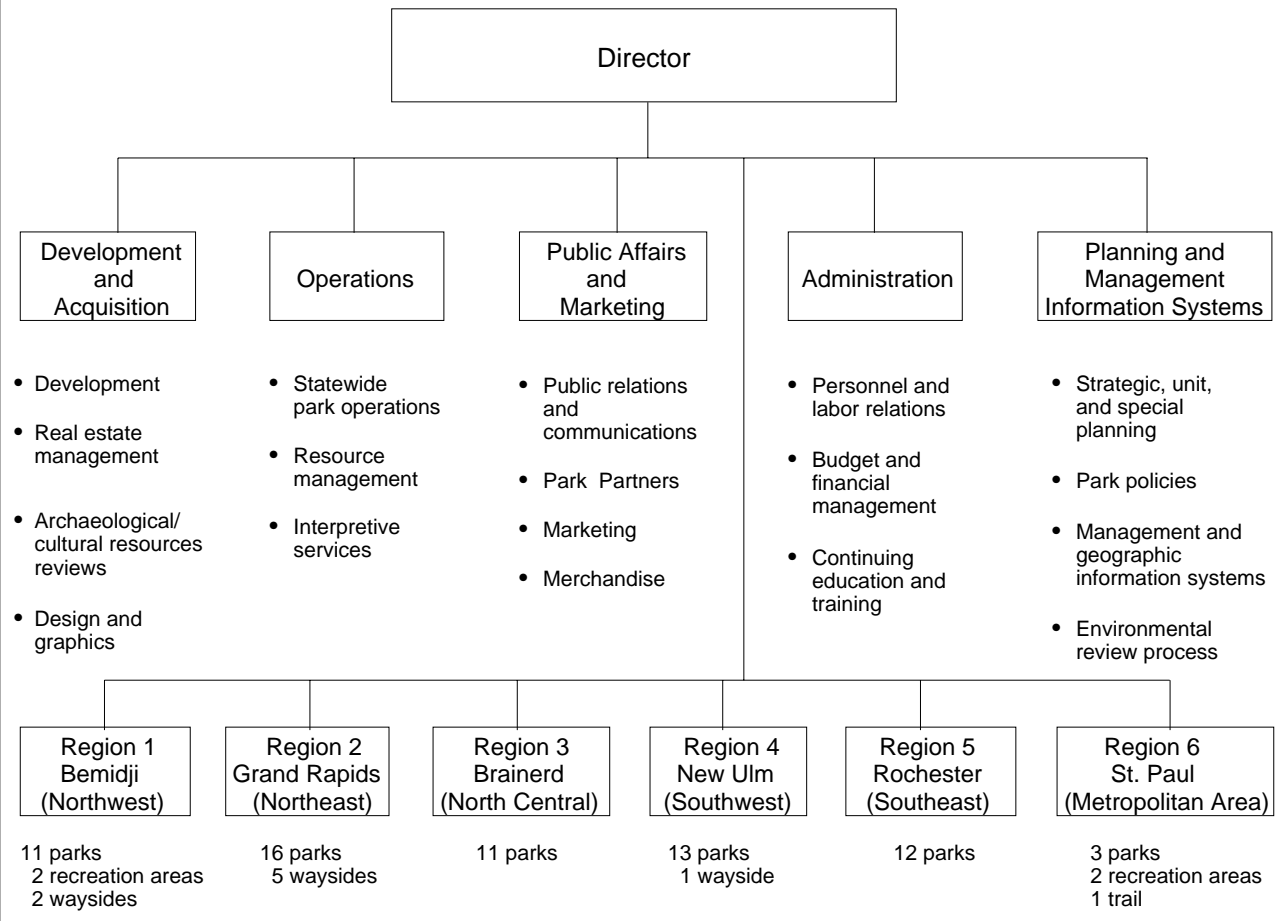
The Parks and Recreation Division relied on about 235 permanent full-time staff and 550 seasonal employees to operate state parks in 1999. About three-fourths of permanent staff and nearly all seasonal staff worked in state parks or recreation areas. Other staff worked out of the central office in St. Paul or one of six regional offices. Figure 1.3 shows the division's organizational structure.

Staff in the St. Paul central office provide leadership, program direction, coordination, budget administration, and general management for the state park system.²² The responsibilities of the five administrative management areas are summarized in Figure 1.3. In 1999, 32 full-time staff worked in the central office.

Each of the six regional offices employ between four and eight full-time staff, generally consisting of a regional parks manager, a regional park operations specialist, a regional resource specialist, a regional naturalist, and a clerk.

²² Parks and Recreation Division, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, *1992-93 Job Classification Study* (St. Paul, 1993), Director's Overview, 7.

Figure 1.3: Organization of the Parks and Recreation Division



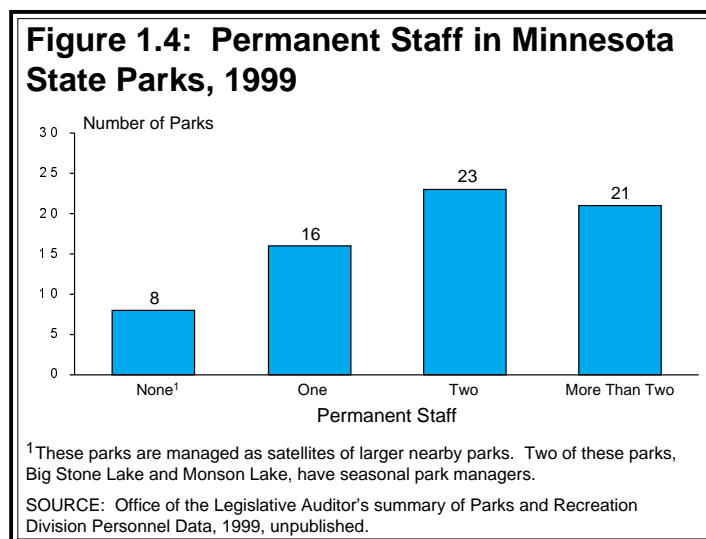
SOURCE: Parks and Recreation Division, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

Regional park managers oversee park operations and are responsible for overall policy direction. They also serve as a link between the field and central office, providing a field perspective to the division’s decision-making processes. Regional park operations specialists directly supervise the park managers and oversee administrative and operational activities in a region’s parks. Regional resource specialists direct and coordinate resource management activities in the parks. Regional naturalists provide program direction and assist with interpretive services in parks.

Over the past several years, the division has been evaluating the structure of its regional offices. As a result, the division is currently consolidating the park offices in Regions 5 (Southeast) and 6 (Metropolitan Area) through attrition. Consequently, Region 6 does not have a full-time regional park operations specialist. Instead, the regional manager supervises parks in Region 6, with some help (about 20 percent time) from the regional park operations specialist in Region 5. Similarly, in the past year, one regional naturalist has been working with parks in both Regions 5 and 6.

Nearly two-thirds of all parks have two or more permanent staff.

Of the 79 units in Minnesota's state park system, 66 state parks and 2 recreation areas are managed by professional staff.²³ Park managers are responsible for managing individual parks and are accountable for all day-to-day park operations and programs. Park managers and assistant managers share responsibility for supervising full-time and seasonal staff. The number of permanent staff assigned to a state park or recreation area varies depending on the size, complexity, and use of the unit (see Figure 1.4). Nearly two-thirds of the parks and recreation areas



are assigned two or more permanent staff. Eight parks (12 percent) have no permanent staff and are managed as satellites of larger nearby parks.

In addition to its complement of full-time staff, the division relies on about 180 full-time-equivalent seasonal positions to operate parks.

These positions are

either part-time union represented staff or participants in work training programs. Common positions filled by seasonal employees are buildings and grounds worker, parks worker, and clerk. Issues related to seasonal staffing are discussed further in Chapter 2.

Changes in Staffing

The division experienced modest growth in permanent personnel between 1992 and 1999. We found that:

- **Permanent personnel in the Parks and Recreation Division increased 11 percent, from 211 to 235 positions, between 1992 and 1999.**

Table 1.7 shows that staff in regional parks offices increased the most between 1992 and 1999 (9.5 positions were added for an increase of 38 percent). Several factors explain this increase. First, clerical staff previously funded through DNR regional administration were shifted to the division's budget in 1993. Second, the division added several regional resource management staff who work in multiple parks. Permanent positions in state parks, which accounted for 72 to 74 percent of all positions, increased about 8 percent (or nearly 13 positions) between 1992 and 1999.

²³ Waysides and Islands of the St. Croix Recreation Area are not staffed and Garden Island Recreation Area is under development.

Table 1.7: Full-Time-Equivalent Staff Complement by Unit, 1992-99

	<u>1992</u>	<u>1993</u>	<u>1994</u>	<u>1995</u>	<u>1996</u>	<u>1997</u>	<u>1998</u>	<u>1999</u>	Percentage Change <u>1992-99</u>
General Fund Positions:									
Parks	156	158	159	162	164	164	163	167.75	7.5%
Regional offices	25	32	31	31	31	31.5	33	34.5	38.0
Central office	<u>29</u>	<u>29</u>	<u>26</u>	<u>27</u>	<u>27</u>	<u>26</u>	<u>27.5</u>	<u>27.5</u>	-5.2
Subtotal	210	219	216	220	222	221.5	223.5	229.75	9.4
Special Fund Positions:									
Parks				1	1	1	1	1	-
Central office	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4.5</u>	<u>4.5</u>	-
Subtotal	1	1	1	5	5	5	5.5	5.5	-
Combined Positions:									
Parks	156	158	159	163	165	165	164	168.75	8.2%
Regional offices	25	32	31	31	31	31.5	33	34.5	38.0
Central office	<u>30</u>	<u>30</u>	<u>27</u>	<u>31</u>	<u>31</u>	<u>30</u>	<u>32</u>	<u>32.0</u>	6.7
Total	211	220	217	225	227	226.5	229	235.25	11.5%

SOURCE: Parks and Recreation Division, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Personnel Data, 1992-1999, unpublished.

Permanent staff in the central office accounted for 12 to 14 percent of division personnel in the period examined and were funded with General Fund and special fund appropriations. While General Fund positions in the central office declined since 1992, the division has used special funds (such as the Water Recreation Account and the Working Capital Account) to increase staffing in the central office.²⁴

Expenditures and Revenues

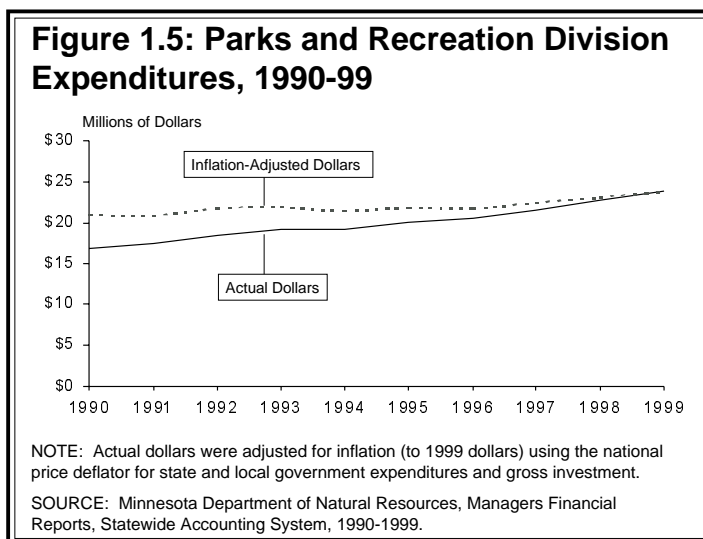
Expenditures for the division totaled about \$23.8 million in 1999. Figure 1.5 shows the division's expenditures in actual and inflation-adjusted dollars. We found that:

- **Even after adjusting for inflation, expenditures for state park operations and maintenance increased faster than park visits during the 1990s.**

Expenditures for state parks increased 41 percent in actual dollars and 13 percent in inflation-adjusted dollars between 1990 and 1999. This compares with a 10 percent increase in total visits and a 7 percent increase in overnight visits to parks between 1990 and 1998. During the same period, the Legislature added new units to the state park system: Glendalough State Park in 1991, Cuyuna Country Recreation Area in 1993, and Garden Island Recreation Area in 1998. In addition, new facilities (such as visitor centers and bathhouses) were constructed in state parks.

²⁴ The Water Recreation Account also funds the contracts of two archaeologists.

Figure 1.6 shows that the cost of operating individual parks represented nearly 80 percent of the division's total expenditures in 1999—73 percent in direct costs and 6 percent for the costs of unemployment, workers compensation, and other park expenses paid out of the central office. Salaries and benefits for full- and part-time staff represented over 73 percent of total expenditures, the division's largest expenditure category in 1999.²⁵



Comparing these expenditures with revenues shows that:

- **Revenues generated from park operations represented between 30 and 33 percent of Parks and Recreation Division expenditures in the 1990s.**

General Fund revenues from state park operations totaled \$7.4 million in 1999, or 31 percent of expenditures; appropriations from the state General Fund financed the remainder of the division's expenditures. Between 1990 and 1999, park revenues increased 41 percent in actual dollars and 13 percent in inflation-adjusted dollars.

State park operations generate revenues from the sale of park permits, camping, and other sources. In 1998, annual and daily permits combined generated 41 percent (or nearly \$3 million) of park General Fund revenues, with annual permits accounting for two-thirds of all permit revenues. Camping fees generated 38 percent (\$2.8 million) of all revenues. Concession fees, sales taxes collected, and other fees accounted for the remaining 21 percent of park revenues. We also found that:

- **Between 1990 and 1998, the sales of annual park permits increased slightly, while sales of daily park permits declined.**

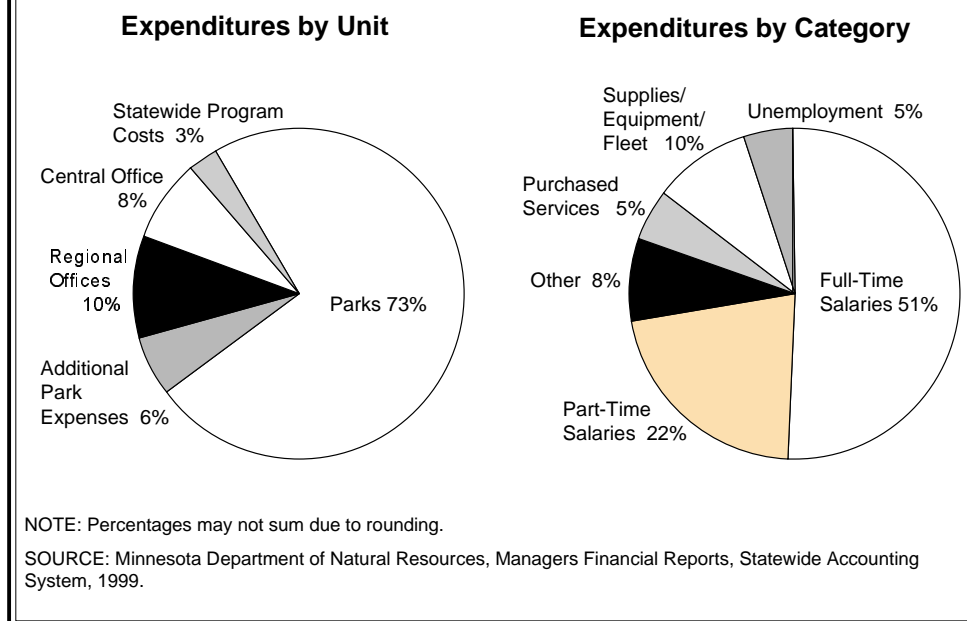
In 1998, the division sold 107,785 annual permits and 271,118 daily permits. Sales of both annual and daily permits fluctuated during the 1990s. For example, sales declined in 1992 and 1993, likely due to increased fees in 1992 and flooding in 1993. The sale of annual permits increased 3 percent and the sale of daily permits declined 4.5 percent between 1990 and 1998.

The sale of annual and daily permits generate most state park revenues.

²⁵ The costs of seasonal staff in work training programs were included in purchased services.

Salaries and benefits represented nearly three-fourths of state park expenditures in 1999.

Figure 1.6: Parks and Recreation Division Operating Expenditures, 1999



Because user fees and other directly earned revenues represent only about 30 percent of state park operating costs, parks are not self-supporting.²⁶ According to the division, the average net cost per state park visit was \$1.02 in 1998. The net cost of operating state parks ranged from a positive \$0.10 per visit at Interstate to a negative \$16.52 per visit at Soudan Underground Mine. Only Interstate had a net gain per visit. These data, however, reflect only direct park costs (full-time and seasonal personnel and supplies and expenses), and do not include park expenses paid out of the central office, such as unemployment or marketing costs. We suggest that future division estimates of net costs per visit be based on total park costs.

In addition to its General Fund account, the division uses many special accounts. We examined the Working Capital and the Douglas Lodge accounts, two special revolving fund accounts that are supposed to be self-supporting.²⁷ The Legislature created the Working Capital Account (WCA) to support resource management and interpretive programs in state parks. Revenues from the sale of merchandise (such as clothing), consumables (such as soda, ice, and firewood), equipment rental, and donations to a friends of the park program are deposited into the WCA. The Legislature created the Douglas Lodge Account in 1994 to support the

²⁶ This analysis is based on General Fund revenues, park operating costs, and total visits per park. The division uses a 1988 economic impact analysis study to argue that state parks could be considered self-supporting if indirect and induced economic impacts of visitor spending in state parks are considered. Examples of indirect economic impacts include spending for lodging, food, and gasoline in communities near state parks. While it is reasonable to think about economic impacts, such research is theoretical and speculative, and usually does not consider that people would spend those dollars on other entertainment if not spent on visits to state parks.

²⁷ *Minn. Stat.* §85.22.



The sale of merchandise accounts for two-thirds of Working Capital Account revenues.

operations of Itasca State Park's historic lodge. Revenues from the operation of Douglas Lodge and two gift shops are deposited into this account. We found that:

- **While the Working Capital Account has generated net revenues to support resource management and interpretive programs, performance of the Douglas Lodge Account has fluctuated.**

In 1999, the WCA made a profit of \$373,000 on revenues of \$1.8 million. Since 1994, when retail activity at Itasca State Park was directed to the Douglas Lodge Account, WCA profits averaged over \$288,000 annually and increased 12 percent a year in inflation-adjusted dollars. In recent years, the sale of merchandise accounted for about two-thirds of WCA revenues, while the sale of consumables generated about one-quarter of revenues. Between 1994 and 1999, approximately \$1.3 million in WCA revenues (an average of about \$214,000 annually) were appropriated for resource management and interpretive service projects. The account had a fund balance of \$843,600 at the end of fiscal year 1999.

In 1998 and 1999, Gooseberry Falls generated the largest share (between 36 and 40 percent) of all WCA revenues, followed by Forestville/Mystery Cave (with about 7 percent). The 15 most heavily used parks accounted for over 70 percent of all WCA revenues, and parks in Region 2 (Northeast) accounted for over 55 percent of WCA revenues.

In contrast, the Douglas Lodge operations experienced net losses of about \$10,000 in 1996 and \$75,000 in 1997. In 1999, this account had \$16,000 in profits on \$1.5 million in revenues. The division's 1999 analysis of lodge operations showed that lodging and souvenir sales were profitable between 1994 and 1997, while food

Fifteen parks accounted for over 70 percent of all revenues to the Working Capital Account in 1999.

services were not.²⁸ The account had a fund balance of \$147,500 at the end of fiscal year 1999.

COMPARISON WITH OTHER STATES

Comparisons with other states can be difficult because park systems differ in their nature and organization. For instance, in addition to managing state parks, Wisconsin's park division manages some state forest land. In a comparison of 10 Midwestern states, Minnesota's park system ranked third in total acres behind Illinois and Michigan, second in acres per 1,000 state residents behind South Dakota, and fifth in proportion of state land dedicated to park use in 1998 (see Table 1.8).

Table 1.8: Size of Midwestern State Park Systems, 1998

State ¹	Number of Parks	Number of Parks and Other Units	Total Acres in		Proportion of State Land in		Acres Per 1,000 Residents	
			All Units	Rank	All Units	Rank	Residents	Rank
Illinois	62	384	411,156	1	1.15%	1	34	3
Indiana	22	33	178,507	5	0.77	3	30	5
Iowa	52	173	63,071	9	0.18	9	22	9
Michigan	64	92	266,251	2	0.73	4	27	6
Minnesota	66	79	241,137	3	0.47	5	51	2
Missouri	45	85	135,738	6	0.31	7	25	7
North Dakota	11	31	20,046	10	0.05	10	31	4
Ohio	73	73	204,852	4	0.78	2	18	10
South Dakota	11	86	96,099	8	0.20	8	130	1
Wisconsin	44	65	127,811	7	0.37	6	24	8

¹The parks systems in most states include other units in addition to state parks. Specifically, the Illinois park system includes recreation, natural, historic, and fish/wildlife areas, and forests; Indiana includes one forest and other areas; Iowa includes recreation, historic, environmental education, and scientific areas; Michigan includes recreation, natural, and historic areas; Minnesota includes recreation areas and waysides; Missouri includes historic and miscellaneous areas; North Dakota includes recreation, natural, historic, and miscellaneous areas; South Dakota includes recreation, natural, historic, and other areas; and Wisconsin includes recreation areas and forests.

SOURCES: National Association of State Park Directors, *The 1999 Annual Information Exchange: A Statistical Report of State Park Operations for the Period July 1, 1997 through June 30, 1998* (Tucson, AZ: NASPD, 1999), 11-14; U.S. Bureau of the Census, "State Population Estimates," WWW Document, <http://www.census.gov/population/estimates/state/st-98-3.txt>; and U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1998* (Washington, D.C.: 1998), 236.

Minnesota ranked eighth in spending per acre for state parks with \$94.66 and fourth in spending per capita with \$4.83 in 1998. Minnesota, along with Iowa and North Dakota, received over two-thirds of the state parks operating budget from the state General Fund. In contrast, Wisconsin and three other states receive less than one-third of their state park budgets from the General Fund (see Table 1.9). These differences are examined in Chapter 4.

In terms of full-time and total employees per unit, Minnesota ranked in the middle compared with neighboring states in 1998 (see Table 1.10).

²⁸ The Itasca State Park Douglas Lodge Resort Study Committee, *Future Management Options for Itasca State Park's Douglas Lodge Resort*, March 1999, 4-5.

Table 1.9: Midwestern State Park Systems Operating Costs, 1998

State	Operating Budget (in thousands)	Proportion of Operating Budget from		Operating Costs		Operating Costs	
		General Funds	Rank	Per Acre	Rank	Per Capita	Rank
Illinois	\$41,230	56%	5	\$100.28	7	\$ 3.42	6
Indiana	23,524	44	6	131.78	5	3.99	5
Iowa	9,600	69	2	152.21	3	3.35	8
Michigan	33,600	24	8	126.20	6	3.42	7
Minnesota	22,827	68	3	94.66	8	4.83	4
Missouri	28,463	1	10	209.69	2	5.23	3
North Dakota	1,815	69	1	90.56	10	2.84	10
Ohio	58,748	57	4	286.78	1	5.24	2
South Dakota	8,942	21	9	93.05	9	12.11	1
Wisconsin	16,899	31	7	132.21	4	3.24	9

SOURCE: National Association of State Park Directors, *The 1999 Annual Information Exchange: A Statistical Report of State Park Operations for the Period July 1, 1997 through June 30, 1998* (Tucson, AZ: NASPD, 1999), 14, 29-30; and U.S. Bureau of the Census, "State Population Estimates," WWW Document, <http://www.census.gov/population/estimates/state/st-98-3.txt>.

Table 1.10: Personnel in Midwestern State Park Systems, 1998

Park systems among the states differ, making comparisons difficult.

State	Full-Time Employees		Total Employees	
	Per Unit	Rank	Per Unit ¹	Rank
Illinois	1.6	7	3.0	9
Indiana	11.7	1	52.6	1
Iowa	0.6	10	1.9	10
Michigan	3.5	4	7.0	6
Minnesota	2.9	6	7.8	5
Missouri	7.1	3	9.7	4
North Dakota	1.3	9	4.6	8
Ohio	9.1	2	23.4	2
South Dakota	1.5	8	5.9	7
Wisconsin	2.9	5	14.7	3

¹These numbers include full-time, part-time, and seasonal employees.

SOURCE: National Association of State Park Directors, *The 1999 Annual Information Exchange: A Statistical Report of State Park Operations for the Period July 1, 1997 through June 30, 1998* (Tucson, AZ: NASPD, 1999), 49.