

**Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation
Strategic Plan
Questionnaire Comments Summary**

Recreation

Respondents indicated that they want clean, well maintained, safe facilities with year-round access. They also want the facilities to be adequately staffed by informative, knowledgeable rangers. Respondents expressed concerns about protecting present and future access points along the park units' boundaries. They see the need to continue to develop trails, build more public use cabins and campgrounds. Respondents are generally against privatization of parks and want the legislature to provide more funding for the management of the parks. While in the long term they want more parks and expanded facilities and trails, respondents first want existing facilities and parks taken care of. Many commented on the need for interpretive programs, signs, and information materials.

Trails

A significant number of comments addressed trails. Respondents want more winter and summer access, new trails and better maintenance of existing trails. Many want more groomed winter trails for both snow machines and skiers, greater access to winter resources and expanded winter opportunities and facilities such as maintained winter parking and snowmachine safety programs. Many also expressed a desire for better trailheads with trash removal services, toilets and information kiosks, hut-to-hut trail systems, better gradients on existing trails and loop trails. Respondents often cited the need to develop trails that provide for the varying needs of the users groups and expressed frustration over the limited number of trails in general.

Facilities

Respondents expressed a need for well-serviced toilet facilities, especially along the road system. They also asked for more parking and picnic areas, especially for those areas that become crowded on weekends. Maintenance and regular trash removal are top priorities for users of State Parks. Respondents felt there should be more campgrounds with separated areas for tents and RVs. RV'ers requested larger campsites and more hookups. There was wide support for more large campsites, pavilions and day-use areas that can accommodate large groups. Backcountry users want additional hardened campsites, tent platforms and outhouses along popular trail systems. Several commented that they very much appreciated the system of public use cabins, suggested more be built and that hut-to-hut trail systems be considered along remote trails.

Interpretation

Interpretation was addressed by more than a third of the respondents. Responses ranged from requesting more informational signs to the development of a State Parks interpretation program complete with regular interpretation staff. Respondents want better signs, kiosks with park and area information, regulations, maps and interpretative information.

Natural & Cultural Resources

While many respondents did not directly address a cultural or natural resource issue, there was consistent concern over the protection of the natural integrity of the landscape in the form of maintaining trails, campsites and minimizing development to avoid degradation and erosion. Additionally, the promotion and protection of the cultural and natural resources of parks was commented on by many.

Financial Management

A majority of the respondents commented that they want the legislature to appropriate more funds to Alaska State Parks. In general, respondents do not want additional privatization of parks. If a service can be privatized or done through a partnership without compromising the integrity of the park, then respondents indicated it would be acceptable. They still wanted to see State Parks take responsibility for overall management, field presence and enforcement. In general, they said that user fees at present levels are acceptable as long as they are appropriated back to the park where they're collected. With only a few exceptions, people did not support raising user fees. The primary concern with user fees is the public perception that the fees go into the general fund, not to State Parks. Many commented that they missed the annual camper passes and urged that State Parks reinstitute the program.

Human Resources

The majority of respondents were concerned that State Parks are severely understaffed. The most common concern is the lack of enforcement of park rules. Respondents were sympathetic to the fact that rangers are overextended. They recognized that their responsibilities pulled them in too many directions and there's too few staff to accomplish all the things that the public would like to see done. There is an expressed desire for a division of labor amongst rangers. There should be rangers designated specifically for law enforcement, interpretive services, maintenance and trails. They also recommended more year-round positions.

Services

Along with the necessity for more staff in general, there is a need for Alaska State Parks to actively outreach to their local communities including supporting local education and interpretation. Respondents expressed dismay with the lack of community involvement and suggested many programs for park staff to be involved in. Many requested rangers go to schools during the winter months and give programs and talks on public lands, fitness, ecology, recreation, biology, and related themes. These efforts would both help with local school district education programs and boost State Parks' image. Other suggestions included more ranger-led hikes, safety and education programs, and campfire talks. People often mentioned the Boating Safety program and wondered why State Parks doesn't sponsor similar education/media safety programs for other types of outdoor activities and hazards (ORV's, snowmachining, avalanches, wilderness survival, skiing and backcountry travel).

Education, Interpretation and Image

State Parks needs to have a positive, standardized, recognizable image with the public. This would help connect visitors to their local parks and generate publicity and support -- a message that state parks are valuable assets to their communities both culturally and economically; they serve the public; enhance recreational opportunities, and protect the natural and cultural resources of Alaska. Offering printed materials on parks is a high priority. Questionnaire responses showed that there is a shortage of information in print on the parks. In particular, park users want more park/trail maps and information brochures.

Partnerships

Respondents recommended State Parks seek more business sponsorships for trails and facilities, more volunteer opportunities and the expansion of the Alaska Conservation Corps program. Several respondents suggested forming local “Friends of State Parks” groups or “adopt-a-trail/facility” programs.

Another idea suggested fostering better relationships with universities. There are many programs that study parks, public lands, planning and park management in the US and abroad. Some respondents see this as a great opportunity for State Parks to collect information on its resources and uses. State Parks should be actively inviting researchers and giving education grants to students both locally and internationally. There is also the need to utilize interns and emphasize the educational aspect of parks.

The division’s grant programs are well received and trail groups, in particular, urged that the programs to be better funded. Most respondents feel that continued funding of these programs is essential to maintaining trails in the state and are an efficient use of public funds.