

Introduction

The Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation provides outdoor recreation opportunities, protects and interprets areas of natural and cultural significance, and supports the state's tourism industry. The 121 park units range in size and character from the half-acre Potter Section House State Historic Site to the 1.6 million acre Wood-Tikchik State Park. In addition, there are several programs administered by the division including the Office of History and Archaeology, State Historical Preservation Office, Office of Boating Safety, Office of Design and Construction, and the Alaska Trails Program.

The division employs 129 full-time, part-time and Alaska Conservation Corps employees. Of these, only 43 full-time employees work in the park units. The division also sponsors a very large and active volunteer program including over 800 dedicated volunteers who donate over 80,000 hours of labor annually.

The state park system in Alaska enables everyone, regardless of age, background, economic or social circumstances to enjoy the state's natural beauty and experience a wide range of recreational activities. Containing 3.2 million acres, the Alaska State Park System is the newest and largest in the United States. Units in the system are diverse and include parks, historic parks and sites, marine parks, wilderness

parks, recreation areas and sites, trails, preserves, and special management areas. The system provides over 2,500 campsites, 128 trailheads, 37 boat launches, 43 scenic overlooks, and over 340 toilets. Alaska State Parks receive over 4 million visits per year, almost twice the visitation seen in Alaska's National Parks. Of the approximately 4.4 million visits, 80 percent of the visitors are Alaska residents.

Park visitors help fuel the state's economy. More than 630 commercial use permits are issued annually to small businesses operating inside state parks. Many community economies depend on and thrive from state park users. With continued growth projections in the tourism industry, state parks are a key component of Alaska's economic future.

After 40 years of providing outdoor recreation to the public, the division faces unprecedented challenges. Despite the increase in funding from both the legislature and user fees over the last 15 years, the division's budget has not kept up with inflation. To compound this, park visitation has risen 29 percent in the last decade. As a result, the division has found it evermore difficult to satisfy the outdoor recreation needs of residents and visitors. Increased use threatens to damage park resources and challenges the agency's ability to sustain facilities and programs at acceptable levels.



Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation's Spring Conference 2005



Matanuska Glacier; Tom Bol/Mat-Su Convention and Visitors Bureau

This backdrop of social, economic, and environmental influences requires continual, innovative approaches and dedication by division personnel to provide the outdoor settings and programs people desire while effectively meeting resource management goals. The division has long been familiar with these challenges; they are embodied in the agency's multi-faceted legislative mission mandated in Alaska state law. Those holding the fate of this division have an awesome responsibility. Division leaders, together with Alaska residents, must decide what kind of parks we want to leave our children, and pursue that vision with unswerving determination. In Alaska, these responsibilities also include the management of statewide outdoor recreation, education and cultural resource programs.

Mindful of these responsibilities and realizing that the division could not meet the public's future expectations without a significant change in direction, the department's leadership initiated this strategic planning process. The Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation's Ten-Year Strategic Plan, 2007-2017, is the product of this comprehensive planning process.

The Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation Strategic Plan

Why the Plan?

This strategic plan is a tool to improve policy analysis and priority setting for the Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation over the coming years. The plan is designed to be flexible, allowing the agency to adjust to unexpected challenges that will inevitably appear during the ten-year planning timeframe. The strategic plan provides overall direction to the division, as well as guidance and stated purpose for its leaders, employees and stakeholders.

How was the plan developed?

The planning process began in late May 2006. Planners first reviewed themes identified in the 2004 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan and strategic plans from many other states. A process timeline and draft plan format were then developed. In June, planners distributed a news releases and developed a website and questionnaire. Through the course of the summer, a series of 42 focus group meetings were held across the state.



Focus groups included park staff, park advisory boards, municipalities, non-profits, contractors, concessionaires, visitor bureaus, volunteers and many others. By early August, over 300 questionnaires had been returned. The responses on the questionnaires and information generated by focus groups included hundreds of valuable suggestions and insights. These were compiled and formatted into draft goals, objectives and over 250 strategies. In late August, 35 members of the division's staff met for a two-day facilitated workshop to review and consolidate all the public's suggested strategies and to refine the draft goals and objectives. These were included in the draft plan which was distributed for public review in September. In October, a series of 11 public meetings were held throughout the state. One hundred and twenty four people attended and almost 100 written comments were received. These comments were used to further refine the plan and prioritize strategies. The final plan was adopted by the Department of Natural Resources Commissioner and Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation Director in early December 2006.

What is the Plan?

Three essential elements comprise this new strategic planning model for the division:

1. **Strategic Plan** - To succeed, an organization must have a clear view of its purpose and reason for existence. With this in mind, Mission and Vision statements were created for the agency. The mission and vision reflect the core values which evolved from public input during the process and were further articulated by division employees in August 2006. Core values include:

- Providing quality outdoor recreation opportunities;
- Committing to natural resource stewardship and interpretation;
- Protecting and fostering understanding of our cultural heritage;
- Lending support to outdoor recreation and safety programs statewide;
- Providing customer service;
- Basing management and decision-making on sound data;
- Developing an informed and involved public based upon an open and motivated staff that exude professionalism;
- Creating a staff that are valued, diverse and dedicated, and
- Developing a means of sustainable funding.

The ***Mission Statement*** was developed to clarify the agency's reason for existence. The new ***Vision Statement*** explains the agency's future. Seven planning ***Goals*** frame the steps over the next ten years that will move the division closer to this vision. ***Objectives*** and specific ***Action Strategies*** during that timeframe will help the agency reach desired goals.

2. **Annual Implementation Plan** – An Annual Implementation Plan will be developed. This planning effort will closely link prioritized planning action strategies with division budget initiatives and other resource allocations. The plan specifically identifies actions to pursue

in the upcoming fiscal year, as well as budget initiatives that will be reflected in the budget process. Envisioned to be dynamic and to assist in developing benchmarks and performance planning, the plan will be developed each year by the Leadership Team. The team is made up of area superintendents, division program managers and members of the Director's Office. Prioritized action strategies from the Ten-Year Strategic Plan will be identified, quantified and considered in the annual budget process. As part of this process, the division must realistically balance its ability to fund new initiatives in the plan with the need to continue providing adequate resources for core duties and responsibilities.

- 3. Annual Report** – An Annual Report will be published near the end of each calendar year. The Annual Report will cover the prior fiscal year's (July through June) accomplishments and agency priorities for the coming fiscal year.

With these three integrated planning pieces, the division will be prepared to respond to legislative and executive branch initiatives, social and economic

trends or themes, and immediate threats to important natural and cultural resources.

How will the plan affect division's priorities?

The action strategies listed under each objective are in priority order. Most strategies in this plan are initiatives new to the division or recommendations for improving operations. This approach was intended to focus attention on ways to improve the ways the division conducts its business. Although many on-going activities and programs are not identified in the plan as specific strategies, they are still essential for fulfilling the division's mission.

The Strategic Plan's priorities along with the existing demands of operating the park units and other programs will help direct budget requests and allocations. High priority strategies were determined to be those that are absolutely essential and cannot be postponed without serious detrimental consequences to the division's mission. Those strategies with higher priorities are given specific initiation and/or completion dates in the plan. Those strategies with lower priorities were not assigned dates because of the unpredictability of future funds. Shortly after the



Anthracite Ridge, photo taken from Long Lake SRS

plan was adopted, cost estimates for funding some of the high priority strategies were prepared. Funding requests for these will be pursued first as opportunities arise.

Current fiscal resources are insufficient to implement all the strategies in the plan. However, many of the strategies do not require additional budget or staff. The division will strive to achieve these strategies regardless of the availability of additional funds. In other cases existing resources can be shifted to strategies that better meet the division's mission.

What the Plan is Not

The Ten-Year Strategic Plan is not intended to list all activities undertaken by the division over the next ten years; it focuses primarily on new initiatives and ways to improve park operations and programs. If

an activity or product is not identified in the plan, particularly day-to-day activities required to operate state parks and programs; it should not be assumed that these too aren't important.

In addition, plan strategies are not intended to apply equally to each of the 121 park units. The park system includes a wide variety of units ranging from large, relatively undeveloped parks to small historic sites. While it is the intent of the division to provide for a diversity of uses, this does not imply that every park unit is capable of, or suitable for, all uses.

This document, as well as integrated agency plans, is not intended to replace other critical planning processes conducted regularly by the division. Each of these plans and processes will consistently include division priorities, mission and vision. Other



Lost Lake at Quartz Lake Recreation Area



important division planning processes include the:

- Annual division budget and plan, submitted to the Commissioner's Office;
- Ten-year Development Plan, updated annually by the Leadership Team, which reflects intended capital budget investments from all funding sources over a rolling ten-year planning horizon, and the
- Division grant programs developed each year to reflect the intended use of these funds over the coming year.

Trends, Influences and Public Preferences

Over the past several months, department planners gathered and analyzed trends, influences and public preferences related to the agency's mission. We have listened to Alaskans and as a result, the goals, objectives and action strategies contained within this Ten-Year Strategic Plan reflect this input and public interests.

For more information about the Ten-Year Strategic Plan and the Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation, see www.alaskastateparks.org