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# One State's Response to Outdoor Recreation Pressures

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**ONE STATE'S RESPONSE  
TO OUTDOOR RECREATION PRESSURES**

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Outdoor Recreation:  
Promise And Peril in The New West

June 8-10, 1998

Natural Resources Law Center  
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## I. SUMMARY

Growth in Colorado is dramatically changing how we manage Colorado's State Parks. This pressure is manifested in many ways. It increases both the demands for additional land acquisition to preserve important areas and the demands for more intensive day to day management of a rapidly growing park visitation.

In the last ten years land acquisition efforts by State Parks have gone from virtually dormant to becoming a top priority for available funds. The recent high demand for development has meant that previously open spaces along park borders are now for sale at escalating prices. Buffer acquisitions are being pursued as a top priority, particularly in parks lacking sufficient land mass to sustain their important natural values.

Growth also escalates demand by local communities to set aside and preserve important natural lands. Many new park proposals are in discussion as important lands are threatened and local communities seek partners to purchase and manage these areas for the future.

At the same time, parks are experiencing heavy increases in both the numbers of visitors and in types of recreation uses. Many parks regularly hit capacity on weekends throughout the summer season, and use on weekdays and off-season is at levels traditionally experienced only during peak periods. To respond, parks rely more heavily on defining park carrying capacities and restricting or rationing use to these limits. This requires park managers to employ a higher level of science in day to day management, and agencies to continuing investing in emerging technologies for inventories and monitoring of the resource.

More users are recreating with a growing array of recreation toys from jetskis to snowshoes. More toys mean new, unanticipated impacts to the resource and the potential for increasing user conflicts. More visitors with more toys require stronger people management at parks by increasing seasonal staffing levels, attention to crowd control and stepped-up visitor education efforts.

## II. FACTS ABOUT COLORADO STATE PARKS

- A. Colorado has 40 State Parks including major water based areas such as Cherry Creek, Chatfield and Lake Pueblo and nature based parks such as Golden Gate Canyon and Mueller State Parks.
- B. It is a young system started in the 1950's with earlier parks focused on water-based areas and more recent emphasis on river corridor and land based resource parks.
- C. The park system contains approximately 200,000 acres of land and water and hosts over 12 million visitors annually.
- D. Park visitation has grown by 25 percent in the last five years.
- E. Parks charge entrance fees that go directly into supporting park operations. Colorado State Parks is the 9th most self-sufficient state park system nationally.
- F. Colorado State Parks has a statewide recreation mission that extends beyond park boundaries and includes programs such as:
  - the State Trails Program which makes trails grants to local communities and non-profits;
  - the Natural Areas Program which identifies and designates important natural areas;
  - the River Outfitter licensing program;
  - and a registration program for boats and snowmobiles.

Information about State Park systems nationally and links to each state's home page may be found on the home page of the National Association of State Park Directors at:  
<http://www.indiana.edu/~naspd>.

### III. OUTDOOR RECREATION PRESSURES AND RESPONSES

- A. Pressure from increased development, particularly along the front range has made the need to buffer park boundaries a top priority. Buffer plans are in place for target parks raising tough decisions about how much is enough and how to stretch limited acquisition dollars in high priced markets.
- B. Local communities face very real threats to important open space and recreation lands, creating an increasing demand for new park acquisitions statewide. Numerous proposals for new parks have generated important new partnerships between local communities, the Colorado General Assembly and non-profit organizations. Five new park areas are in proposal stage at this time.
- C. Visitor use is growing rapidly at existing parks. Carrying capacities are in place to limit or ration use at most heavily used areas. Enforcing visitor entry restrictions and rationing stretches already thin agency budgets to increase seasonal staffing to manage people at the park.
- D. Heavy use demands that park personnel employ higher levels of scientific expertise to define sustainable capacities and prescribe uses within parks. Important investments must be made to provide managers with GIS and other capabilities to assist in ongoing resource monitoring and management decisions.

- E. Park's visitors bring with them a growing array of recreation toys. More toys increase resource impacts and generate challenges in managing between conflicting uses. Use of jetskis has transformed flat-water management, and needs to be proactively addressed on rivers in Colorado. Dog off-leash areas conflict with mountain bikes, rollerbladers and bird watchers. Recreational vehicle satellites and generators disrupt neighboring tents. As park uses multiply, park managers step in to zone, separate or educate users about their impacts, often through unwelcome regulation and restrictions on their outdoor experience.
- F. Heavy visitor use statewide is redefining management arrangements by public land agencies. On the Arkansas River, State Parks manages the corridor in partnership with the BLM to increase staff presence and to charge fees that can be returned to the area. River outfitters contribute a percent of gross in exchange for increased regulation of boaters and rationing of available launch times. As pressures increase, more agency partnerships will be needed to share scarce resources and test new techniques for response.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Recreation has never been more popular as more and more people pursue healthy outdoor experiences. At the same time, growth demands that more important natural areas be set aside for future generations. Successful management of these two dual missions -- preservation and recreation -- can only be joined if we take great care to ensure we have an in-depth understanding and respect of the resources we manage, a willingness to set limits even when they are unpopular, and an educated and motivated park visitor who interacts with the resource with respect and care.