



NORTH CAROLINA CENTER FOR
PUBLIC POLICY RESEARCH INC.

NEWS RELEASE

For Release on Thursday, Dec. 8: May be broadcast Thursday a.m. and may
1988 appear in Thursday and Friday morning and
afternoon newspapers

TIME TO END THE STATE PARKS DISGRACE, CENTER SAYS

If North Carolina is to bring its state parks system up to a level comparable to other states and suitable for its own citizens, the state must devote more resources to land acquisition, development, and repairs, says the North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research of Raleigh

For more than a year, the State Parks Study Commission has been evaluating the needs of the state parks. The panel, which meets Friday, December 9, will make recommendations to the 1989 session of the General Assembly aimed at overcoming decades of neglect by both the executive and legislative branches of state government. That neglect has resulted in an almost overwhelming list of park needs, as outlined in the latest issue of North Carolina Insight, the Center's quarterly magazine.

"We rank next to last in the nation in spending on state parks, and it shows," says Mike McLaughlin, Insight associate editor, "Considering North Carolina's natural beauty, it's a shame we don't do more to preserve our parks and make them more accessible so that every citizen can enjoy them."

North Carolina -- at \$1.12 a person -- stands 49th in the nation in its per capita spending on state parks, according to the National Association of State Parks Annual Information Exchange. The national average is \$4.08 per person. North Carolina also ranks last among 13 southeastern states in the percentage of its operating budget raised through user fees. Yet the state park system draws more than 7 million visitors a year and its 124,532 acres represent the nation's 27th largest park system. The system includes 29 parks, four recreation areas, and nine natural areas.

The Center's research disclosed numerous examples of problems. For example, Umstead State Park near Raleigh has 166 buildings, most of them built between 1933 and 1943. "I've got buildings with five generations of patches," says park Superintendent Edwin Littrell. Mitchell's Mill State Park in eastern Wake County and Rolling View Recreation Area in Durham County are closed or in only partial use because of inadequate facilities. Sewage has seeped down the mountain-side at Mt. Mitchell State Park, boat docks have collapsed at Carolina Beach State Park, and methane has been detected in bathrooms at Waynesboro State Park in Wayne County. Buildings have been condemned at Kerr Lake State Recreation Area.

The Department of Natural Resources and Community Development, in a report released November 28, estimated it would cost \$250 million to bring the state park system up to respectable standards. That cost estimate includes \$135 million in new construction, renovation, and repair needs, and \$114 million for about 23,000 acres of land acquisition needed to complete existing parks. NRCDC Secretary Thomas Rhodes said in a statement released with the report that the state parks are "in a crisis. We're millions and millions of dollars behind," Rhodes said.

The NRCDC report is far from the first to point to pressing needs in the state parks system. A 1973 report by the Legislature's Fiscal Research Division found the parks in woeful condition. The State Goals and Policy Board, in its May 1986 report to Gov. Jim Martin, called the condition of the state parks "deplorable." And there have been other studies with similar conclusions by the Research Triangle Institute (1968), 1979 and 1985 legislative study commissions, and the State Auditor (1988).

Sen. Henson Barnes (D-Wayne), co-chairman of the State Parks Study Commission, says the commission's major recommendation to the 1989 legislature will be the creation of a long-range Parks Improvement Plan. The plan would be patterned after the nine-year Transportation Improvement Plan used to fund state highway projects and would channel about \$15 million a year into park improvements over an eight-year period.

"In a few short years, North Carolina is going to be offering an excellent park system to the people of the state," says Barnes. "The bottom line is money. Once you assess the needs, you've got to determine how to access the money supply." Barnes says the study commission has wrestled with the issue of how to pay for needed park improvements, but is yet to reach a consensus.

Rep. Narvel J. Crawford (D-Buncombe) says a figure of \$10 million has been cited for state parks capital improvements in the 1989-1990 fiscal year during early deliberations on the state's biennial budget. "We're extremely hopeful," says Crawford, also a co-chairman of the State Parks Study Commission. "We're going to work very hard to get a generous appropriation for parks."

But state lawmakers must overcome a long history of underfunding that has exacted a harsh toll. North Carolina has spent less than \$65 million on state parks development and land acquisition in the system's 73-year history. Several parks are threatened by development, facilities at some parks are crumbling, and some park land lies unused because the state has not been able to find the money to erect basic structures such as restrooms and picnic tables.

"This stinginess has tended to create an us-versus-them mentality pitting those who want to acquire more land to protect the integrity of the parks against those who want to use resources to develop land that is already in the system," says McLaughlin. "The reality is that we must do both."

The state parks also suffer from staff shortages. With only 103 field rangers for the entire system, most parks are staffed by three or fewer rangers. Six parks have only two rangers, yet the gates are open seven days a week, and in the summer months, 13 hours a day. The long days demand that some parks be kept open with only part-time or seasonal workers on duty. The state also needs naturalists to interpret the parks' resources through nature walks, historical programs, and the like. North Carolina employs only four district naturalists throughout the state park system, and seasonal employees must conduct most of the interpretive programs.

Rangers complain of low pay and overwork. The starting salary for a Park Ranger I is \$14,436 and tops out at \$22,136. That's comparable to the pay of rest area attendants and low enough, according to one parks advocate, to qualify some park rangers for food stamps.

"They get basically the same salaries as people who are attendants at rest areas, and I resent that," says Bob Conner, immediate past president of Friends of the State Parks. "Many of them are college graduates. I think they deserve better. Some of them qualify for food stamps, and I don't think that's anything to be proud of."

There are almost as many people running the state zoo in Asheboro as there are operating the entire state park system, yet a request for 22 additional maintenance workers was rejected by the 1988 General Assembly. The state zoo has 141 full-time employees, while the entire state park system has only 178 full-time employees.

To bring the parks up to speed, North Carolina must spend more money. State elected officials face the difficult choice of determining the source of that money. The task is complicated by recent grim forecasts of a decline in growth in state General Fund revenue that will heighten the already fierce competition for funds during 1989-1990 budget deliberations.

Park advocates are clamoring for a dedicated source of revenue that will guarantee a healthy flow of revenue to the parks, separate from the General Fund. One oft-mentioned source is an increase in the land-transfer tax. A number of states have earmarked sources of revenue for parks, and Florida has used income from its land transfer tax to create a park system that is among the nation's finest. According to William W. Davis, North Carolina state parks director, 29 states have revenue sources specifically earmarked for parks. These sources include bonds, earmarked taxes, and lottery proceeds.

North Carolina also ranks last among 13 southeastern states in the percentage of its operating budget raised through user fees, partly because the state has consistently trailed the region in development and maintenance of parks. Georgia, South Carolina, and Tennessee offer far more attractions for paying customers, and Virginia is making rapid strides to improve its park system. The N.C. State Goals and Policy Board, in its 1986 Report to the Governor, recommended increased user fees for such things as cabins, campsites, and boat rentals as one means of boosting park revenue. But if fees are to be increased, facilities must be improved.

A third option would be a continuation of the present practice in which the parks compete with other state programs for a share of the General Fund, but with a stronger lobbying effort from the governor, state parks officials, environmentalists, and the general public. This pits the parks against schools, social services, and other state programs in the budget-making process, but neighboring states such as South Carolina have built exemplary park systems without special earmarked taxes.

"What is needed is for the governor and the General Assembly to give a high priority to the state park system -- a large appropriation for many years," says Bill Holman, a lobbyist for the Conservation Council of North Carolina and the N.C. Chapter of the Sierra Club.

There are signs that the state parks may be moving up on the agenda of North Carolina elected officials. Legislative appropriations for capital improvements have been on an upward march in recent years. The State Parks Act, passed by

the 1987 General Assembly, requires for the first time that the legislature approve additions to the state park system and at the same time appropriate money for their development and operation.

But the problems of the long-neglected park system are far from being solved. Davis says the parks currently are a disappointment to the traveling public and fall far short of their potential for promoting travel and tourism in North Carolina.

"Parks need more than just a quick infusion of cash -- from whatever source," says McLaughlin. "The 1989 legislature should take a hard look at the recommendations of both the State Parks Study Commission and the governor and take steps to put the parks on a stronger footing for the future."

The N.C. Center for Public Policy Research is an independent, nonpartisan, non-profit organization created to examine state government programs and important issues of public policy in North Carolina. The Center is supported in part by grants from the Z. Smith Reynolds and Mary Reynolds Babcock foundations, both in Winston-Salem. Other funding comes from 110 corporate contributors and 730 individual members. In addition to its quarterly magazine, North Carolina Insight, the Center also publishes peer rankings of the effectiveness of all state legislators and book-length research reports. Recent studies have been issued comparing the performance of for-profit and not-for profit hospitals, ranking the most influential lobbyists in the legislature, and analyzing the rise of a two-party system in North Carolina.

* * * * *

Copies of the issue of North Carolina Insight containing the research on state parks are available for \$6.30 (plus \$1.00 postage and handling) from the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research, P.O. Box 430, Raleigh, N.C., or call (919) 832-2839.

For more information, call Mike McLaughlin at the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research at (919) 832-2839.

Table 2. Comparison of State Parks Systems, By State

	Total Acreage	Rank	Annual Visitation	Rank	Operating Budget Per Capita	Rank	Revenues	Percentage of Operating Revenue From Fees	Rank
Alabama	48,377	38	6,099,318	31	\$ 3.7818	22	\$ 8,798,779	56.98 %	10
Alaska	3,110,268	2	5,289,607	36	9.2109	3	55,045	1.14	50
Arizona	37,040	43	2,088,101	45	1.5939	47	1,394,500	25.84	34
Arkansas	43,982	40	7,147,970	28	6.7284	5	8,799,355	54.77	11
California	1,268,955	3	72,856,593	1	4.8701	17	32,254,633	23.94	38
Colorado	287,309	6	7,924,132	24	2.3781	37	8,634,696	110.16	1
Connecticut	181,223	17	7,706,224	26	3.1143	31	2,282,174	22.82	41
Delaware	11,122	49	2,737,618	43	5.9912	9	2,916,220	72.43	5
Florida	278,442	7	14,290,383	14	1.7499	45	10,458,784	49.71	16
Georgia	61,001	33	13,310,355	15	2.8553	32	8,569,297	48.23	17
Hawaii	24,881	46	20,199,842	11	4.3259	19	1,192,871	25.46	35
Idaho	46,808	39	2,280,752	44	2.5327	36	815,075	32.25	29
Illinois	363,338	4	35,190,355	7	1.9619	41	2,123,292	9.34	48
Indiana	54,062	34	9,884,728	20	1.7979	42	7,434,438	74.76	4
Iowa	52,025	37	10,023,624	19	1.7741	43	2,161,831	43.00	20
Kansas	36,918	44	4,451,523	37	1.7723	44	1,928,985	43.96	19
Kentucky	41,501	41	24,210,000	9	13.7210	1	31,858,033	62.30	7
Louisiana	37,999	42	740,243	50	1.1500	48	990,463	19.31	43
Maine	71,761	32	2,071,752	46	3.2832	27	1,266,344	32.49	27
Maryland	215,945	14	6,890,264	29	3.3621	25	5,534,799	36.30	25
Massachusetts	265,903	9	12,239,770	17	3.1973	30	6,050,019	32.32	28
Michigan	252,626	11	22,845,271	10	2.1338	39	13,951,023	71.07	6
Minnesota	3,441,061	1	6,001,004	32	2.7119	34	4,596,000	39.91	23
Mississippi	22,490	47	4,433,670	38	3.5169	24	4,245,655	45.99	18
Missouri	106,682	27	12,442,359	16	3.2344	28	2,323,952	14.08	47
Montana	52,261	36	4,195,200	39	3.5420	23	466,733	16.29	46

Table 2. Comparison of State Parks Systems, By State, *continued*

	Total Acreage	Rank	Annual Visitation	Rank	Operating Budget Per Capita	Rank	Revenues	Percentage of Operating Revenue From Fees	Rank
Nebraska	147,948	19	8,412,954	23	\$ 4.6904	18	\$3,956,632	52.92%	13
Nevada	144,188	20	3,103,696	42	3.2005	29	756,918	23.49	40
New Hampshire	29,862	45	3,905,900	40	6.4813	7	6,818,757	99.53	2
New Jersey	299,599	5	9,599,129	21	2.6160	35	5,212,947	25.97	33
New Mexico	118,951	25	6,790,527	30	3.9061	21	2,231,100	38.08	24
New York	258,390	10	37,514,000	4	5.6118	12	22,632,000	22.63	42
North Carolina	124,532	21	7,151,518	27	1.1259	49	1,181,883	16.37	44
North Dakota	16,198	48	949,818	48	2.3608	38	639,811	40.33	22
Ohio	193,000	16	68,164,424	2	3.3462	26	9,999,926	27.71	31
Oklahoma	95,470	28	15,655,812	13	5.5695	13	5,605,568	30.76	30
Oregon	89,494	30	37,156,000	5	6.7247	6	6,223,000	33.97	26
Pennsylvania	276,250	8	36,303,046	6	2.8051	33	5,474,577	16.35	45
Rhode Island	9,223	50	5,807,250	33	5.5677	14	1,464,651	26.68	32
South Carolina	79,260	31	7,803,469	25	3.9639	20	8,359,667	61.58	8
South Dakota	113,370	26	5,578,819	34	6.8906	4	2,531,983	51.83	14
Tennessee	120,238	22	24,343,492	8	6.3584	8	15,661,589	50.73	15
Texas	224,667	13	19,925,396	12	1.6298	46	11,107,411	40.59	21
Utah	94,848	29	5,349,791	35	5.8699	10	2,322,155	23.55	39
Vermont	170,678	18	785,797	49	5.6152	11	2,801,402	91.04	3
Virginia	53,747	35	3,634,956	41	1.0651	50	1,557,965	24.78	36
Washington	233,596	12	46,685,652	3	4.8808	16	5,322,902	24.03	37
West Virginia	206,185	15	9,128,716	22	10.3222	2	10,462,431	53.43	12
Wisconsin	119,224	24	11,275,097	18	2.1223	40	6,096,550	59.76	9
Wyoming	119,364	23	1,855,819	47	4.9164	15	101,254	4.20	49

Source: National Association of State Park Directors, *Annual Information Exchange*, April 1988
 Chart prepared by Kim Kebschull, N.C. Center for Public Policy Research Intern