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California State Parks: Our Past, Our Present, Our Future

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You can't have a developed society and culture without memory and our state parks preserve the memory: the memory of who we were naturally before we even arrived; the memory of nature; and the memory of our social and cultural experience. We define ourselves as a people, an American people, now a global people, in part, in significant measure through our state parks. -- Kevin Starr, Professor of History & Author - University of Southern California and Librarian of California

(emeritus)

California's memories are captured in its storied state parks. This month, state parks and the people of California received a reprieve with an additional [\\$23 million](#) in funding and new operating partnerships that staved off the impending closure of 70 state parks. Just days ago, an internal review discovered an additional [\\$54 million](#) in unspent revenues that could have been used to stave off the closures. Both of these negative and positive events are significant, but they must be seen within the context of the 150-year history of California State Parks. The current issues will be resolved and fade over time, but the scenic lands and historic sites that state parks protect must never be forgotten. What is critical right now is for Californians to reconnect with their state parks; appreciate their value; embrace them as part of California's future and ensure that they are preserved for generations to come.

Many are aware of the natural beauty and cultural history protected by California State Parks, but few know its history. In 1864 Abraham Lincoln signed the Yosemite Grant setting aside Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias to protect the monumental scenery and unique flora and fauna. It was the first time in the nation's history that a wilderness tract was designated as a public park. Although it was created by an act of Congress, management of the new park would be left to the State; Yosemite became California's first state park and would

remain so until 1906. The "park idea" was born in California, inspiring the creation of Yellowstone National Park in 1872, the National Park Service in 1916, and the protection of wilderness around the globe. Today, 187 nations, in addition to the United States, have national parks and equivalent reserves totaling 12 1/2 percent of the earth. This lasting legacy can be traced back to Yosemite and California.

Yurok people still carve canoes from fallen redwoods at Patrick's Point State Park. The Custom House at Monterey is where colonial Spain staked their claim to "Alta California." At Sutter's Mill, a few grains of gold sparked an international stampede. The small agrarian town of Allensworth is where freed slaves asserted their rights to the American Dream and Angel Island is where similar dreams held by Chinese immigrants were officially denied. These are the historic sites that hold the cultural memories that define what it means to be a Californian.

Fog-shrouded redwood groves on the North Coast, sand-etched Badlands of the Anza-Borrego Desert, ocean-pounded perfection of Point Lobos and Big Sur, and the shimmering sapphire of Lake Tahoe are landscapes of astonishing beauty that at once inspire and anchor a mythic California.

The grandeur of the giant sequoias at Calaveras Big Trees State Park protects the largest trees in the world, while the open meadows of Los Angeles State Historic Park provide exercise and release from the enveloping city. Each one of these state parks, and more than 200 others, provides affordable and educational outdoor activities for families and people of all ages and backgrounds.

California State Parks protect and preserve more than 1.5 million acres of world-class natural beauty and 35 historic sites of national significance, making it by far the largest and most diverse state park system in the nation. They provide public access to the magnificent beaches, mountains, redwoods and deserts of California; a primary reason why there are now [more than 35 million](#) people living in the Golden State. California's state parks are more than just a birthright; they belong to the people. They were set aside by the tireless dedication, generous financial support, and resolute commitment of Californians who fought for their preservation over that last 150 years. They need to be protected, embraced and cherished by the people now and for future generations.

David Vassar has spent most of his professional career producing films and television about conservation issues and the natural world. His most recent program, "California Forever - The Story of California State Parks," will be presented on PBS this September.