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'California Forever' Celebrates History of State's Parks



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Courtesy "California Forever"

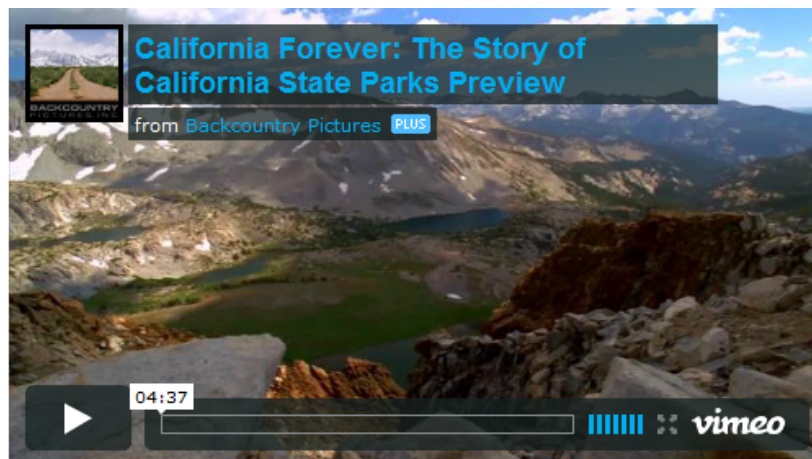
McWay Falls at Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park on the Big Sur Coast of California.

A new documentary airing on PBS stations next week takes up the California park system's history, and the challenges it faces today. The two-part series "California Forever" celebrates the dramatic stories, scenic beauty and sweeping history of California state parks -- the most diverse collection of state parks in the nation.

As summer rolls to a close, many of us are keen to go on one last adventure this Labor Day weekend.

While some folks are cancelling trips to Yosemite over the outbreak of hantavirus, state parks can expect to see a lot of traffic this weekend. The agency that runs state parks has taken a political hit over hidden pots of money. But you can't blame your favorite local park for that. A new documentary airing on PBS stations starting next week takes up the state park system's history and the challenges it faces today. It's called "California Forever." Here's California historian Kevin Starr from the documentary, making his pitch for the parks.

KEVIN STARR: 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. 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 significant measure through our state parks.



RACHAEL MYROW: The writer and director of California Forever, David Vassar, joins us to go into more detail about the documentary.

DAVID VASSAR: Pleasure to be here.

MYROW: So Kevin Starr, he really does speak to this critical point that who we really are are people, how we conceive ourselves, changes over time and its easy to forget the different stages that got us to where we are today.

VASSAR: He made a great contribution and he also says at the end of the film that we need these places not only to remind ourselves who were are but to remind ourselves where we're going and I think that's a pretty salient point. It's the old adage that in order to know how to move into the future and avoid the mistakes of the past we have to study history.

MYROW: The second part of the series digs into arenas of conflict starting with Anza-Borrego Desert. I don't want to put you on the spot here, but you seems to have a definite opinion on the difference between the the tranquil flower lovers and the off-road vehicle guys at Ocotillo Wells.

VASSAR: Regardless of my own personal opinion, I think the fact that what's interesting about these two places, Ocotillo Wells and Anza-Borrego is that they share a common border that's nearly 20 miles long. On the Ocotillo Wells side of the border you have sometimes up to 200,000 people who bring their off-road vehicles whether they are dirt bikes or sand rails or dune buggies and they run around the desert at very, very high speeds. Just across the border you have people who are either hiking or walking and seeking the solitude of the desert. And so inevitably those two user groups are going to come into conflict and it plays out in a fairly dramatic way in Anza-Borrego and Ocotillo Wells.

MYROW: Another challenge for the parks is their need to protect wildlife even when that means putting up fences to keep out people from the places they want to enjoy and their tax dollars pay for.

VASSAR: Here you have a conflict where you have two management objectives. One management objective is to preserve the species that require this beautiful open beach for their survival as opposed to human beings who want access tot hat beach for recreation. I think that's a great illustration of the kinds of problems that parks are facing in the future.

MYROW: One challenge that you don't touch on in this documentary is the political scandal in Sacramento over the hidden funds discovered at the California State Department of Parks and Recreation. Any thoughts you want to share on that scandal and how that could affect the way people think about state parks?

VASSAR: I think it's a tragedy number one, but I also think that particularly if you look at episode two and you think about the 150 year legacy of California State Parks, I'm not sure that with the benefit of hindsight in five or ten years that we're going to look back on this moment as a game changer. I do think that it's critical for people to visit parks, remind themselves why they're important and then become advocates and volunteers in the organizations that support state parks all up and down the state.

MYROW: I have to say that after watching the documentary, I came away with the feeling that state parks need to have their case made to the public anew, every generation how people forget how they got there in the first place, what kind of care they need, to stay relevant to stay beautiful for the next generation. It really seems like there's a constant call for activists to take up the cause.

VASSAR: I think your question goes to the heart of the park movement and the park idea. These places exist, this legacy that our generation has inherited, exists because individuals banded together and they raised money and they created political action that set all of these places aside and so in the present tense with the threats to state parks that exist it's our job to step up and to follow in the traditions of those who came before us to set these places aside.

MYROW: Thank you so much for talking with us.

VASSAR: My pleasure, thank you for taking the time.