

Top 10 ways to Save State Parks by Ruth Coleman

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As we seek to save 70 parks this year, I have formulated a list of ten ideas to follow that will help us reach this goal. This list acts as an organizing construct to allow me to convey some of the trends we need to think about as we move forward into these uncharted waters. So here is my list of the Top 10 Ways to Save State Parks.

10. Embrace Social Media

Consider two important facts: the fastest growing segment of Facebook are women age 55 and older...yet the youth of today continue to use it as well. The different demographics use it in different ways so we need to figure out how to reach them all. If Egypt and Tunisia can transform themselves from authoritarian regimes to free societies through Facebook, we surely can save our state parks.

9. Broaden your Base

Reach out to emerging populations in California. Make our parks and special events welcoming to people who have not traditionally used our parks. Get outside your comfort zone. On a different front, consider other professional connections, for example, those in the health community. We have something to offer the health profession. Our public lands are an integral part of health care delivery...we provide wellness. Whereas a generation ago we all ran around outside as feral, free range kids, today's kids are literally 'caged' 7 hours a day in front of a screen. This generation of kids is not healthy. Their parents are not healthy. Large employers and HMOs are spending a fortune on preventable illnesses. If those employees visited our parks regularly, that would lower health care costs and make vast improvements in their quality of life. A few doctors give out "park prescriptions to their patients". Studies in the UK indicate that 5 minutes in nature equates to a low dose of Prozac for patients with depression. Add doctors to your board, and reach out to the medical profession to remind them that the network of local, regional and state parks are vital to our health...and all of them are being threatened with closure.

8. Broaden your vision of what YOU can do

Cooperating Associations need to expand their capacity so they not only provide interpretive services, but also become consummate fundraisers and maybe even run a park, or a component of a park. The role of a cooperating association must evolve and broaden beyond what we have done in the past. We don't even know how broad it will get.... but we need to allow our imaginations to see the possibilities.

7. Say Yes...and.... or the corollary: "Why Not?"

When someone suggests a new idea, don't go negative. Ask yourself, why not?

6. Don't Borrow Trouble

This advice comes straight from my grandmother. It's the idea that you should not let fear of what might go wrong limit your options. Yes we must consider risk. But manage risk; don't let the fear of it freeze us into inaction. We can spend so much time worrying about what might go wrong that we stifle creative solutions.

5. Seek to understand first, then to be understood.

Saving State Parks will require more communication than ever before. We know that co-ops don't always speak the same language as DPR staff and it requires both sides to understand each other fully. The corollary to this: Avoid the paternalistic approach of "Decide... Announce... Defend". When one member of a partnership decides in advance what the outcome must be, and simply announces that decision, everyone runs to the corner and no one listens to anyone. Gaining consensus up front takes longer, but the outcome has much better staying power.

4. Respect each other, and be kind to each other.

We are all grieving about this situation. Parks staff are being asked to give up their traditional role, one they have a great deal of pride in. They will be asked to move their families. Don't expect them to be delighted to turn over the keys to a new group and walk away. Honor the quality of the work that each group brings. This struggle to save parks will test all of us and we will all falter at times. But keep talking, apologize, and remember, we are together in this.

3. Read Books to gain insight.

Here are my two recommendations:

Last Child in the Woods by Richard Louv so you understand the depth of our challenge of how to connect to the next generation of environmental stewards.

Good to Great by Jim Collins (he also has a short paperback called Good to Great and the Social Sectors: A Monograph to Accompany Good to Great – this makes more direct applications of his theories to the social sector, and it's less expensive!) This book provides great insight into how an organization can meet challenges of change and external pressures, and how as managers we need to respond.

2. Think like an entrepreneur.

This is not a bad word. The public of California has made it clear that they are not willing at this time to fund the 'public good' part of our mission to the level we know it needs to be funded. We have to find private sources of funds to take care of that, and not

all of it will come from the philanthropic side of the equation. Hence, we need to find creative, value added activities in parks that can help fund what we need to do to preserve these parks for the future. Certainly we need to remain true to our mission, but finding new ways to draw visitors to enjoy our parks is not a bad thing. Validate the entrepreneurial spirit in each other. Never squelch it. We will survive if we innovate.

1. Believe in your cause

After spending 10 years in the Legislature, I can tell you that they never like to throw good money after bad. They don't like to fund losers. They like to support winning causes. This is also true of donors and the public. NEVER act like you are downtrodden. You have reason to believe in this cause. You preserve the most significant cultural and natural resources in the state for people to enjoy and to recreate. You are not down. You are not out. Keep your head high, be proud of what you are doing and you will save these parks.