



## PRESERVING WASHINGTON'S STATE PARKS

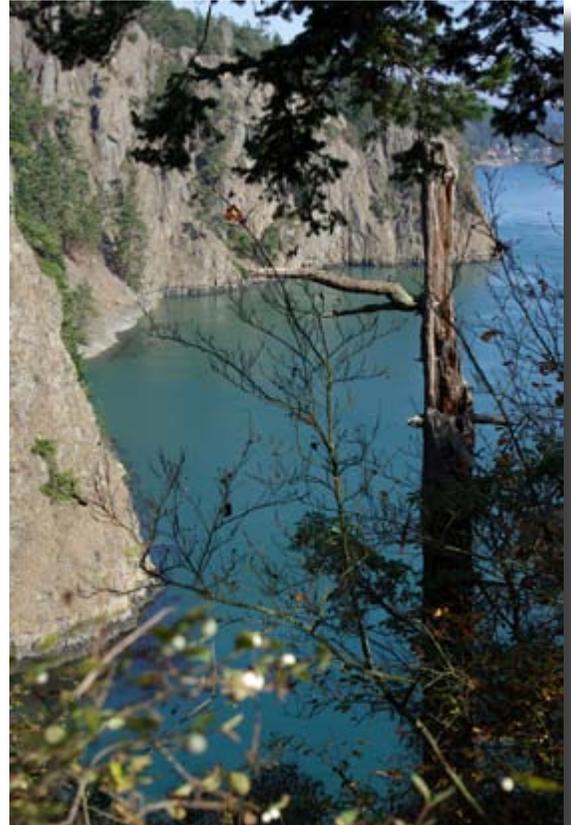
### BACKGROUND

Washington has one of the largest state park systems in the country which provides unparalleled opportunities for residents to experience nature and the outdoors. Next year, our state parks will celebrate their centennial.

Last year, our 103 state parks received more than 35 million individual visits. Parks help to protect and maintain a substantial part of our state's natural, environmental, cultural and historic legacy. They also provide extensive economic benefits to local jurisdictions and to the state in the form of jobs and public works projects.

However, as state government has had to reset budgets during the Great Recession, state policymakers have had to reconsider whether Washington can continue to fund the state parks system's annual \$55 million budget entirely by the General Fund.

In several steps over the past four years, state budgets have transitioned state parks funding to a largely "user pays" system. The 2009–11 enacted budget established a \$5 "opt-out" donation program whereby drivers renewing their car tabs could opt-out of a pre-filled donation box. However, revenue of \$27 million per biennium from this source fell significantly short of projections.



### CREATION OF THE DISCOVER PASS

In the 2011 legislative session, Senate Bill 5622 established the Discover Pass, a per-vehicle pass that cost \$30 annually or \$10 per visit. In that year's budget, the Legislature left \$17 million in General Fund appropriations for "transition" to the new fee-based approach that removed approximately \$70 million in total General Fund support from State Parks' budget. After the first six months of implementation, it was clear that revenue would not meet expectations.

In the 2012 legislative session, the Legislature made two changes to the Discover Pass revenue stream to correct the problem: First, it made the Pass transferable between two vehicles. Second, it directed Discover Pass infraction revenue to State Parks. The first change has not had a significant impact on sales while the second change has yielded less than \$100,000 to date.

## REVENUE NOT MEETING PROJECTIONS

After 15 months of implementation, it is clear that the Discover Pass is not generating the amount of revenue that had been projected. In fact, the revenue shortfall for the Discover Pass is almost \$26 million and grows monthly. Of a total \$64 million that was anticipated for the 2011–13 biennium, the state will likely receive only \$32 million to \$33 million in actual collections.

In anticipation of this shortfall in Discover Pass sales, State Parks laid off approximately 120 staff in February 2012. Prior to these layoffs, the system was projected to run out of funding in April 2013. Even with those reductions, State Parks likely faces a \$18.7 million shortfall for the next biennium unless the system is cut dramatically or other substantial and reliable fund sources can be identified.

## REVISITING PARKS FUNDING

According to an August 2012 report from the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission, no state parks system in the country is fully self-supported from fees and dedicated use taxes. While both the agency and the State Parks and Recreation Commission have taken seriously the challenge to become more self-supporting, two facets of the parks programming do not seem appropriate for self-support.

**First**, the Legislature has opted to exempt or charge lower camping fees to many groups of low-income individuals, including disabled veterans, limited-income seniors, foster families and persons with disabilities. Governor Gregoire agrees with the policy that these residents should have opportunities to enjoy parks. The question is, who pays? The Governor believes the costs of subsidizing these users' park experiences must be borne by the state.

The Governor therefore proposes that the costs of providing park experiences to special needs populations should be covered by the General Fund.

**Second**, the State Parks and Recreation Commission has extensive general stewardship responsibilities to manage the state parks system, including the maintenance and protection of its many natural and cultural legacy sites. For example, according to the report, the Commission cares for 33 heritage sites and interpretive centers and more than 700 historic buildings. Because these general stewardship activities benefit more than just current park users, the Governor believes these activities should also be paid for by the state.



## THE GOVERNOR'S 2013–15 BUDGET PROPOSAL

The Governor's budget adds \$19 million in ongoing General Fund support to cover the projected revenue shortfall while calling on park managers to increase efforts to raise additional revenue. This includes \$7 million to compensate State Parks for exemptions required under state law and \$12 million to fund those activities required to operate a state park system and responsibly manage state lands. These activities include planning and development of parks; stewardship of natural, historical and cultural resources; ensuring public safety on state park lands; and performing administrative activities necessary to support state park operations.