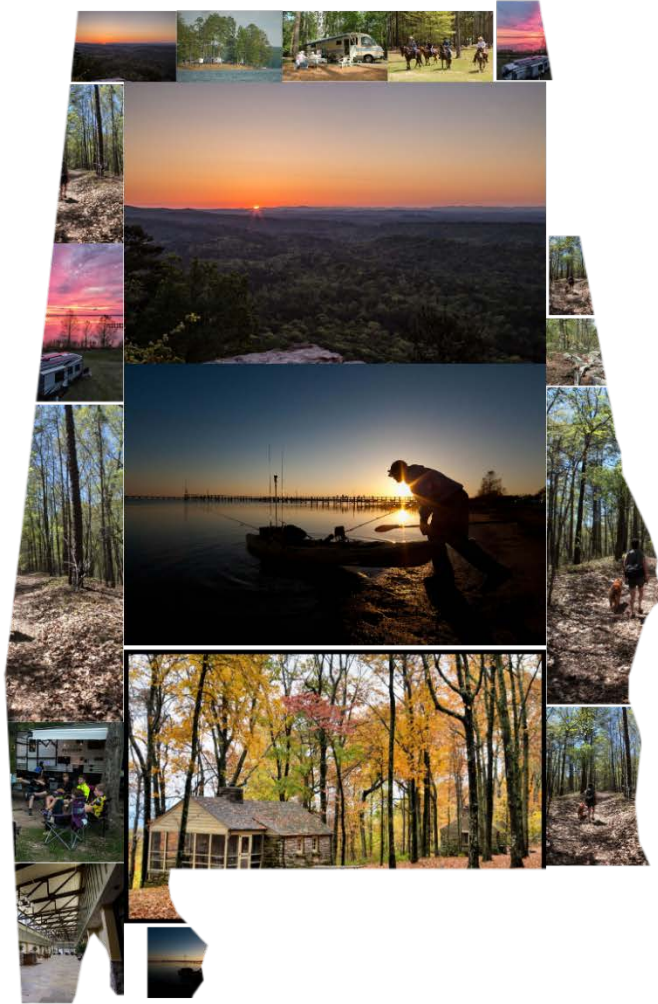


## FUNDING FOR ALABAMA STATE PARKS



## CELEBRATING ALABAMA'S PROGRESS

Certified Public Manager® Program  
CPM Solutions Alabama 2023



CERTIFIED PUBLIC MANAGER® PROGRAM – CPM SOLUTIONS ALABAMA 2023

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*The research, findings, and recommendations presented in this white paper do not represent the views of any agency or organization, but rather the collective educational research and analysis from a diverse group of participants in the Certified Public Manager® Training Program.*

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We would also like to give special acknowledgment to the following individuals for offering their valuable time, assistance, and expertise:

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## INTRODUCTION

We visit them to spend time with our families and friends, to attend church retreats, corporate team building, and staff retreats, and to seek individual solitude. State parks provide us with recreation, reflection, adventure, beauty, wildlife, wilderness, and relaxation. They contribute to the quality of life for all citizens. They provide a space that supports the health and well-being of people, contribute to the economic prosperity of communities and the State and improve the conservation of our natural resources. State Parks protect areas of natural beauty for recreational purposes and for the enjoyment of future generations.



Authors of “Attendance Trends Threaten Future Operations of America’s State Park Systems” conducted research analyzing the operations of all 50 state park systems in the United States and found that managing the lands for human enjoyment comes at a cost. Management requires capital to ensure visitors’ health and safety, to provide infrastructure and services that facilitate desired outdoor recreation activities, and to protect natural and cultural resources (Smith et al., 2019).

Alabama joined the national movement to develop a state system of parks to serve the public and enhance quality of life in the late 1930s and early 1940s (Alabama State Parks, 2014). All people must have access to the spaces and services that improve individual and community-level health outcomes and enhance quality of life (National Recreation and Parks Association, 2023).

People love state parks and for the past 20 years, the Alabama State Park system’s annual visitation rate has ranged from 4 to 5 million customers supporting this fact. Eighty to ninety percent of the park system’s annual funding comes from customer fees, resulting in the Alabama Park system being recognized as one of the most resourceful in the nation. The park system credits these accomplishments to its supporters and stakeholders; elected officials, park employees, local partners, and park customers (Alabama State Parks, 2023). Encouragement for community support of parks goes back to the 1920s. U.S. President Calvin Coolidge stated, “It is becoming generally recognized that the creation and maintenance of outdoor recreation facilities is a community duty in order that the whole public might participate in their enjoyment,” (Weir, 1928).

According to the Alabama State Parks website, the Alabama State Parks Division operates and maintains 21 state parks encompassing approximately 48,000 acres of land and water in Alabama. The parks are located across the state, from the Gulf Coast beaches in the south to the Appalachian Mountains to the north and provide a variety of opportunities and accommodations for day activities and resort convention/conference lodging, restaurants,



archery, camping and golfing areas. These parks rely on visitor fees and the support of other partners like local communities to fund most of their operations. Alabama’s 21 state parks are within an hour drive from most any community in the state and offer a variety of outdoor recreational opportunities.

The *Funding for Alabama State Parks Team* will identify and highlight the benefits provided by Alabama State

Parks, compare how Alabama State Parks are funded versus other selected states, and offer recommendations for additional programs and initiatives that would benefit Alabama citizens as well as funding sources for those initiatives.

## HISTORY OF THE ALABAMA STATE PARK SYSTEM

The state park system began in 1927 with passage of the State Land Act by the Alabama State Legislature and provided for development and operation of state parks and the administration of other state lands by the State Commission of Forestry (Ress, 2008 & rev. 2023). At that point, the Commission formed the Bureau of Parks and Recreation to manage all state park lands. In 1930, Governor Bibb Graves dedicated the first park which was a “tract of 421 acres on the banks of the Coosa River in southwest Talladega County” (Alabama State Parks, 2014). In 1933, the bureau established eleven state parks and the State Commission of Forestry brought in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), a federal work program for young men, to help with park improvement projects, construction of facilities and forest improvement efforts such as reseeding and fire control in the state



(Ress, 2008 & rev. 2023). Of the eleven parks, only Cheaha State Park survived as a state park, and the others are currently state forests managed by the Alabama Forestry Commission (Alabama State Parks, 2014). Cheaha State Park, which boasts the highest point in Alabama, opened to the public in 1933 and is Alabama's oldest continuously operating state park.

The State Commission of Forestry managed the state parks until 1939. At that time, the legislature passed the Department of Conservation Act and created the new Department of Conservation and abolished the State Commission of Forestry (later re-established as a separate agency in 1969). The new department created the Division of State Parks, Monuments, and Historic Sites to manage the park system, and a new Division of Forestry to manage all forest-management programs. In 1942, the Division of State Lands took over state lands management from the Division of Forestry.

In 1971, the Department of Conservation changed its name to the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR) and Alabama State Parks remained a division within the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and was tasked with operating and maintaining all state parks (Ress, 2008 & rev. 2023).

For 96 years, numerous significant events, including natural disasters and a pandemic, impacted state parks. Gulf State Park was heavily damaged by Hurricane Ivan in 2004; Hurricane Dennis and Hurricane Katrina caused damage to Gulf State Park in 2005; the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010 disrupted seasonal tourism along the gulf coast and negatively affected visitation to Gulf State Park; the 2011 tornado outbreak across north Alabama caused severe damage to Lake Guntersville and Bucks Pockets state parks; a tornado hit DeSoto State Park in 2013; and the 2014 winter storm in central Alabama caused ice damage to trees at Cheaha State Park (Alabama State Park, 2014). The Alabama State Parks 2022 Annual Report stated that in 2019, Joe Wheeler State Park was damaged by a tornado and in 2020 the COVID 19 pandemic, led to the state lockdown which caused all state parks to use an online reservation process and Hurricane Sally disrupted visitor attendance at Gulf State Park (Alabama State Parks, 2022). Oak Mountain State Park suffered severe tornado damage in 2021 (Bean, 2021).

In its annual report, the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources shared information about park facilities and personnel. Of the 21 state parks, seventeen are maintained by internal park staff and the number of park employees ranged from around 700 during the peak season to nearly 500 during the off-season. Four parks are staffed and managed through agreements with local governments or concessionaires (ADCNR, 2021).

The mission of the Alabama State Parks is to acquire and preserve natural areas; to develop, furnish, operate, and maintain recreational facilities; and to extend the public's knowledge of the state's natural environment.

The goals formed to reach this mission include:

- To maintain and operate the State Parks system in an economically sound and efficient manner on the most self-sustaining basis as possible.
- To provide and maintain high quality facilities and services to meet the needs of visitors.
- To provide an opportunity for personal growth and development of individuals through outdoor experiences.
- To promote use of State Park facilities.
- To preserve unique natural features and integrity of State Parks for future generations and to promote good will and enhance the public image of Alabama, and the Alabama State Parks through dedicated, courteous employees (Alabama State Parks, 2023).

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*"Nature itself is the best physician." - Hippocrates*

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## THE IMPORTANCE AND BENEFITS OF STATE PARKS

After studying North Carolina and other state parks, Thomas W. Morse, superintendent of North Carolina State Parks, wrote in the *Basic Purpose of State Parks* that the basic purpose of state parks is: TO SERVE PEOPLE. He defines four ways people are served: 1. Preserving and protecting natural areas of unique or exceptional scenic value not only for the inspiration and benefit of the present generation, but also for generations to come. 2. Establishing and operating state parks that provide recreational use of natural resources and outdoor recreation in natural surroundings. 3. Portraying and interpreting plant and animal life, geology, and all other natural features and processes included in the various state parks. 4. Preserving, protecting, and portraying historic and scientific sites of state-wide importance" (Morse, n.d.).

There are many benefits of state parks. Alabama State Parks offer a variety of programs and activities that provide essential health benefits, educational opportunities, support the local economy of communities and protect the state's natural environment. Alabama State Parks routinely offer a variety of specials and discounts, including deals for seniors, veterans, and children, to help make parks more accessible and cost effective for all visitors. The park system offers varied programs to teach about Alabama's natural history and cultural heritage and all 21 parks offer k-12 field trips and educational opportunities. Alabama State Parks offer recreational activities



including camping, hiking trails, dining at resorts, equipment rentals, fishing, geocaching, mountain biking, golfing, ziplines, birdwatching, cave tours, cable skiing, and rock climbing (Alabama State Parks, 2023).

Parks provide an opportunity to explore nature, while also contributing to physical, mental, and social wellness. Michelle Kondo, a research social scientist with the USDA Forest Service stated that "The physiological response to being outside in nature is real, and it's measurable. There are many physical and psychological benefits of nature that scientists have observed, which can better help us understand how nature supports wellness in the body, mind, and community." Being outside in nature supports physical wellness, mental wellness, and wellness in the community (Avitt, 2021). Studies show being outside in green spaces encourages an active and healthy lifestyle, lowers risk of depression, strengthens mental capacities, and reduces environmental stressors (air pollution, noise, and heat).

In *Parks and Recreation Is Essential*, the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA) shares insights into why parks are essential and how they promote health and wellness benefits. This report shares that time spent in greenspaces improves physical and mental health by lowering stress levels, blood pressure, heart rate, and the risk of chronic diseases; by lowering the prevalence of obesity in children; and by increasing cognitive performance and well-being and alleviating illnesses such as depression, attention deficit disorders, and Alzheimer's.

The report also shares that parks and recreation drive economic opportunity because employers and employees tend to gravitate to locations near high-quality parks and recreation facilities. Quality-of-life is a vital factor for eighty-seven percent of corporate executives when considering building a new facility, expanding, or relocating. In addition, investments in improving a community's quality of life can create a beneficial cycle because high-quality places tend to attract workers and employers who then attract additional investment and job opportunities (NRPA, n.d.).

Parks are essential to the health of people and communities. "The past few years have shown us just how important outdoor recreation is to our health and wellbeing," said Governor Ivey. "Spending time outdoors can reset our minds and refresh our spirits" (Newsroom, 2022).

Alabama State Parks and public lands are major drivers of Alabama's economy. The state generates almost \$15 billion annually (which translates into more than 135,000 jobs) because several million people participate in outdoor-related activities. "Having quality access to outdoor recreation is a vital aspect of improving the quality

of life for all Alabamians,” said Commissioner Chris Blankenship, of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR) (Newsroom, 2022).

Parks and recreation also unite people and strengthen communities by connecting people with nature and others through nature walks, historic site visits, social events and other natural and cultural history activities and 88% of U.S. adults believe parks and recreation provide good opportunities to interact with nature and the outdoors. The report further states that people with access to parks and green spaces live longer, healthier lives because parks provide opportunities for physical activity and connecting with outdoors which leads to better mental health, improved physical health, and increased physical activity (NRPA, 2023).

According to the Alabama State Parks website, Alabama is one of the most biologically diverse states in the nation and is a global hotspot of diversity for birds, amphibians, crayfish, mammals, reptiles, mollusks, fish and a variety of plants. Alabama's climate, geologic diversity, and rich evolutionary past contribute to this diversity. Two criteria must be met for a region to meet the requirements of a biodiversity hotspot: 1) have a high percentage, at least 1,500 plants, not found anywhere else on the planet and 2) have thirty percent or less of its original natural vegetation that is threatened (Conservation International, 2023). Alabama ranks fourth among states with more than 6,350 species, in relation to species diversity and is first among states east of the Mississippi River and has more than 132,000 miles of rivers and streams and several dozen marine ecosystems (Alabama State Parks, 2023).

## ALABAMA STATE PARKS FOUNDATION

Funding is necessary to maintain and protect Alabama State Parks. In January 2018, a group of people throughout Alabama formed the Alabama State Parks Foundation to serve as a philanthropic partner of the Alabama State



Parks Division. The Foundation is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that seeks gifts to support and enhance park programming, parks facilities and parks experiences. It is the first statewide nonprofit organization dedicated to

supporting the Alabama State Parks system and its board of directors include representatives from business, education, non-profits, state, and local government (Alabama State Parks Foundation, 2023).

Brianna Harris, a reporter with the Shelby County Reporter, interviewed Dan Hendricks of Florence, who serves as president of the Foundation (Harris, 2019). Hendricks shared that he's passionate about Alabama State Parks because they offer a chance for people to leave the stresses of modern life and gives them time to pause and appreciate nature. Greg Lein, Alabama State Parks Director, and Foundation Treasurer said, "This will help engage corporate Alabama and rally the community...it's the ally the park system needs...The Foundation will be the driver for attracting supporters who want to contribute for specific parks and projects that benefit the whole system".

In 2019, the Foundation announced its "First Friends" initiative to build a network of supporters who are excited about getting in on the ground floor of this endeavor," Hendricks shared, (News, 2019) and "First Friends" who give to the Foundation will forever be recognized as Founding Members of the Alabama State Parks Foundation" (News, 2019). Corporate partners of the Foundation include Alabama Power, Buffalo Rock, and the Yellowhammer Print Shop (Alabama State Parks Foundation, 2023).

## CURRENT ALABAMA STATE PARK INITIATIVES AND SUCCESSES

In 2014, the Alabama State Parks System celebrated 75 years of existence and reported on its history, accomplishments, challenges, and future plans in an anniversary report (Alabama State Parks, 2014). The report highlighted the significance of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) during the 1930s and credited the program with the development of 14 state parks, comprising approximately 22,500 acres of land. While instrumental in the initial success of these parks, that success was overshadowed by World War II. The program was discontinued and many of those young men went to fight in the war. Continued development of the parks was steady, and in the 1970's funding from a bond allowed construction of resort facilities at 6 parks and the expansion of campgrounds and day-use facilities at 5 others resulting in Alabama being publicized throughout the nation as having a modern and progressive park system.



In the 1990's, those same facilities needed repairs and renovations, which led to a decline in guest satisfaction and attendance, leading further to a decline in camp revenues. In 1998, Alabama voters approved a constitutional amendment for a \$110 million bond for camp renovations. Unfortunately, many park renovations did not begin because of construction cost increases due to the housing construction boom and post-hurricane redevelopment. The bond was not enough to keep up with cost increases (Alabama State Parks, 2023). The final renovations were delayed and concluded around 2011 because of staff layoffs, damages from natural disasters and the dissatisfaction and confusion of the public in understanding the true funding source of state parks, users.

Despite these challenges, the park system persevered and in 2014 had an annual visitation rate of 4 to 5 million visitors and was recognized as one of the most efficient state parks systems in the nation with 80 to 90 percent of the annual funding coming from customer fees and not taxes. Alabama State Parks commissioned a study to determine the economic impact of state parks which revealed that in 2011, visitors to state parks spent an estimated \$152.4 million and the expenditures by the park system amounted to a \$375 million economic impact and supported 5,340 jobs. The study confirmed the value of state parks and their important role in Alabama's economy. During the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the "Partners Pay the Way" campaign kicked off to highlight the important role of park visitors in the success of the state park system and the state's economy. Nine state parks were honored with TripAdvisor's 2014 Certificate of Excellence Award, which are determined solely by user ratings and reviews (Alabama State Parks, 2023).

In 2014 the state park system's social media and online reach included an individual Facebook page for each of the 22 parks, boasted 145,000 Facebook Friends collectively, saw a 50% increase in Twitter and Instagram followers, more than 1,000,000 users of alapark.com since 2010 (100,000 monthly users), and a monthly e-newsletter distributed to over 60,000 customers.

In moving forward and seeing ways to support park funding, the state park system decided to focus on partnering with local government, local recreational interests, and related industries to seek out win-win situations. Consideration was given to state parks joining in the fight to address the state's public health crisis related to obesity (Alabama State Parks, 2023).

## THE GOVERNOR’S PLAN FOR THE STATE PARKS



Alabamians love and cherish the State Parks, and we must make sure they are maintained and available for generations to come.

Governor Kay Ivey



On April 15, 2021, Governor Kay Ivey announced “The Governor’s Plan for the Parks” (Newsroom, 2021). She joined with members of the Alabama State Parks Foundation and local corporate leaders to announce a joint public-private partnership plan with Alabama businesses, corporations, foundations, and individuals to fund park upgrades and expansion of park amenities. The Foundation committed to raising \$14 million to the effort over 5 years. Governor Ivey shared her support for an \$80 million bond for park improvements to be presented to voters as a constitutional amendment. In May 2022, the people voted to approve an \$85 million bond to support state park improvements (Newsroom, 2022).

The Foundation shared its goal to increase park attendance by 1.5 million visitors a year with new park enhancements and announced pledges of \$250,000 by Buffalo Rock Company and \$100,000 from the Alabama Power Foundation (Alabama State Parks Foundation, 2023).

## KEY ALABAMA STATE PARKS & ACTIVITIES

Our team research included studying the Alabama State Parks system, identifying and highlighting benefits and highlighting programs and activities of individual parks in the state. We selected 4 parks to highlight: Gulf State Park, Oak Mountain State Park, Joe Wheeler State Park, and Lake Guntersville State Park. These parks were selected because they brought in the most revenue, had the most visitors annually, and exemplified a vast diversity of park activities, events, and landscapes. “The Alabama State Parks have it all from the mountains to the coast”, said Greg Lein, Alabama State Parks Director.



## Gulf State Park

Gulf State Park, Alabama's southernmost state park, was first opened in 1939 and encompasses 6,150 acres of dunes, a 900-acre freshwater lake, marshes, streams, and pine forests. Gulf State Parks has been inducted into the TripAdvisor Hall of Fame for winning its Certificate of Excellence five years in a row (Ress, 2010 & rev. 2023). TripAdvisor is the world's largest travel website and locations receive awards based on visitor opinions and rankings

(Jackson, 2018). In September 2020, the park received the Travelers Choice Award from Trip Advisor. In 2023, USA Today named the parks' Hugh S. Branyon Backcountry Trail as the best recreational trail in the country. This 28+ mile paved trail takes visitors throughout the 6,150 acres of the park and the trails are multi-use (suitable for hikers and cyclists and are ADA-accessible (Alabama State Parks, 2023).



The Lodge at Gulf State Park, a 350-room Hilton Hotel, is a full-service resort that overlooks the beach and offers a variety of activities (The Lodge at Gulf State Park, 2023). Popular park activities include a Nature Center, fishing, swimming, waterskiing, and boating. Other activities offered include geocaching, angler academy, hiking and biking trails, exploring, paddling, a fishing and education pier, and a butterfly garden (Alabama State Park, 2023). Geocaching is a global treasure hunt that consists of people looking for hidden items using navigation skills and following online clues from other seekers (National Geographic, 2023).

The park offers 3 glamping sites and 11 primitive camping sites that include stone campfire rings, grill tops, and picnic tables located along the creek (Alabama State Park, 2023). A new activity the park system introduced in 2023 is “glamping”. It is offered at 6 Alabama State Parks including Gulf State Park and Lake Guntersville State Park (Gattis, 2023). Glamping is a glamorous camping experience of luxurious and comfortable accommodations, including amenities such as a mattress, electricity and running water, in spacious lodging (Mulroy, 2023).

The Nature Center features educational hands-on exhibits that provide a closer look at Alabama's native wildlife and habitats, and the Interpretive Center, offers a variety of interactive displays and informational booths that focus on conservation and coastal ecology. The park is a stop on the Alabama Coastal Birding Trail and is a popular site during the annual John L. Borom Alabama Coastal Bird Fest held in October (Ress, 2010 & rev.



2023). In 2021-22, Gulf State Park ranked #1 out of state parks in park/lodges profits and grossed around \$3,394,654 (Alabama State Parks, 2022).

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## OAK MOUNTAIN STATE PARK

Oak Mountain State Park, located in Pelham (Shelby County), began as a 940-acre park and is now the state's largest state park at 11,632 acres. The Park is home to the Alabama Wildlife Center, Oak Mountain Interpretative Center, and the Oak Mountain BMX Track (Alabama State Parks, 2023). The park offers 70 miles of hiking trails, 42 miles of biking trails and 25 miles of horse trails. The bike trail was former training grounds of the U.S. Olympic Mountain Biking Team. The Interpretive Center educates visitors about Alabama's wildlife, plants, geology, and natural history and provides opportunities to learn about the



state's natural attractions. Oak Mountain is noted for its beautiful scenery and adventurous activities. A key attraction of Oak Mountain State Park is the Treetop Nature Trail, an elevated boardwalk that winds through the leafy tree canopy and offers close-up views of rehabilitated but un-releasable hawks and owls in natural habitat enclosures (Ress, 2010 & rev. 2023). Oak Mountain hosts a community archery park and is one of ADCNR's efforts to increase awareness and participation in the life skill of archery (Alabama State Parks, 2023).

The park was inducted into the TripAdvisor Hall of Fame for winning its Certificate of Excellence award numerous times. While mountain biking, horseback riding and hiking are the three most popular activities, other activities include: running, swimming, water sports, camping, fishing, geocaching, falconry, tennis, and golf (Alabama State Parks, 2023). In 2021-22, Oak Mountain, ranked #7 out of state parks in park/lodges profits and grossed around \$397,326 (Alabama State Parks, 2022).

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## JOE WHEELER STATE PARK

The Tennessee Valley Authority's Joe Wheeler State Park was incorporated into the park system in 1949 and came under complete state ownership in 1951 (Ress, 2010 & rev. 2023). The Alabama State Parks website notes that this park, located in Rogersville, is divided by the Tennessee River, which forms the 69,700-acre Wheeler Lake and is a 2,550-acre resort park. Each fall, the park hosts the Fall Rendezvous of boaters traveling the Great Loop, a continuous waterway that allows boaters to travel the eastern portion of North America, along the Atlantic Seaboard, across the Great Lakes, through inland rivers and around the Gulf of Mexico. Annually as many as 250 boats dock at the marina and attend the conference in the lodge (Alabama State Parks, 2023).

The resort features a waterfront lodge with restaurant and convention facilities, championship 18-hole golf course and clubhouse, full-service marina, modern and primitive camping, lakeside cottages, cabins, and a group lodge (Alabama State Parks, 2023). In addition to easy access to the Tennessee River, Joe Wheeler Resort State Park offers hiking and mountain biking trails.



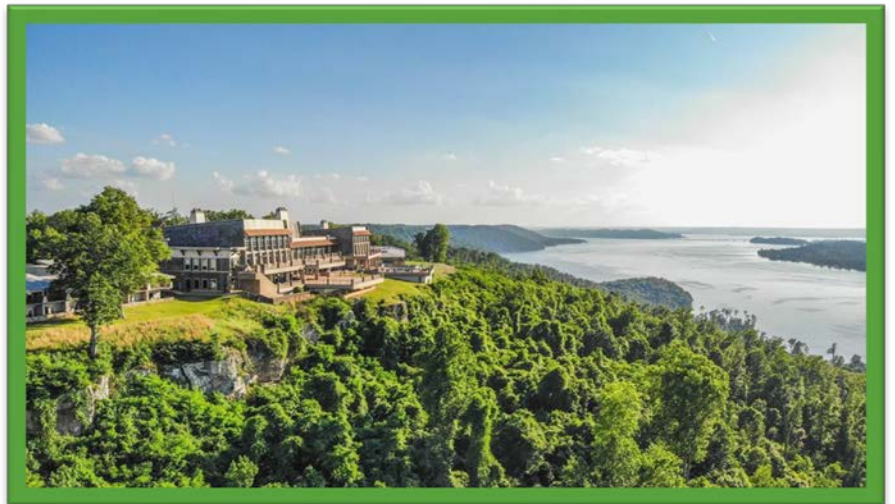
Joe Wheeler State Park received the TripAdvisor Certificate of Excellence award, which is reserved for the top tier of attractions, hotels, parks, and restaurants out of the thousands of attractions around the globe on TripAdvisor's site. Joe Wheeler received more than 60 reviews on TripAdvisor.com earning an overall rating of 4 out of 5 stars and has more than 200,000 visitors annually, generating more than \$1.5 million in annual revenues (Alabama State Parks, 2023). In 2021-22, Joe Wheeler, ranked #14 out of

state parks out of state parks in park/lodges profits and grossed around \$60,492 (Alabama State Parks, 2022). The low profits could possibly be attributed to the 2019 tornado that devastated the park and required the cancellation of camping reservations and closing of various areas in the park (Alabama State Parks, 2023).

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## LAKE GUNTERSVILLE STATE PARK

Lake Guntersville State Park, located in Guntersville, along the banks of the Tennessee River, features 6,000 acres of natural woodlands and includes Lake Guntersville, the largest lake in Alabama which covers more than 65,000 acres. The park offers many recreational activities, including an 18-hole championship golf course, the Screaming Eagle Zipline, a beach



complex, an outdoor nature center, fishing in Alabama's largest lake, 36 miles of hiking and biking trails, glamping, weekly guided hikes, geocaching, horseback riding, and a day-use area (Alabama State Parks, 2023).

One of the park's main attractions is the Eagle Awareness Program. Conservation efforts have helped Alabama's nesting bald eagle population increase, and Guntersville has become a focal point of Eagle Awareness in the state. On select weekends in January and February, the Park's Eagle Awareness programs entertain and educate the public about the bald eagle. The park includes a resort inn, restaurant and convention center that can host weddings, parties, family reunions, national, state or regional meetings.

Lake Guntersville and other state parks, regularly partner with various sports and healthy living businesses and organizations to host special events. The Bassmaster Tournament is one of the more popular fishing tournaments that has been held at this state park bringing in a wide array of visitors and vendors to enjoy all the state and park has to offer. (Brown, 2019). In September 2020, Lake Guntersville State Park received the Travelers Choice Award from Trip Advisor (Alabama State Parks, 2023). In 2021-22, Lake Guntersville, ranked #3 out of state in park/lodges profits and grossed around \$677,594 (Alabama State Parks, 2022).

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

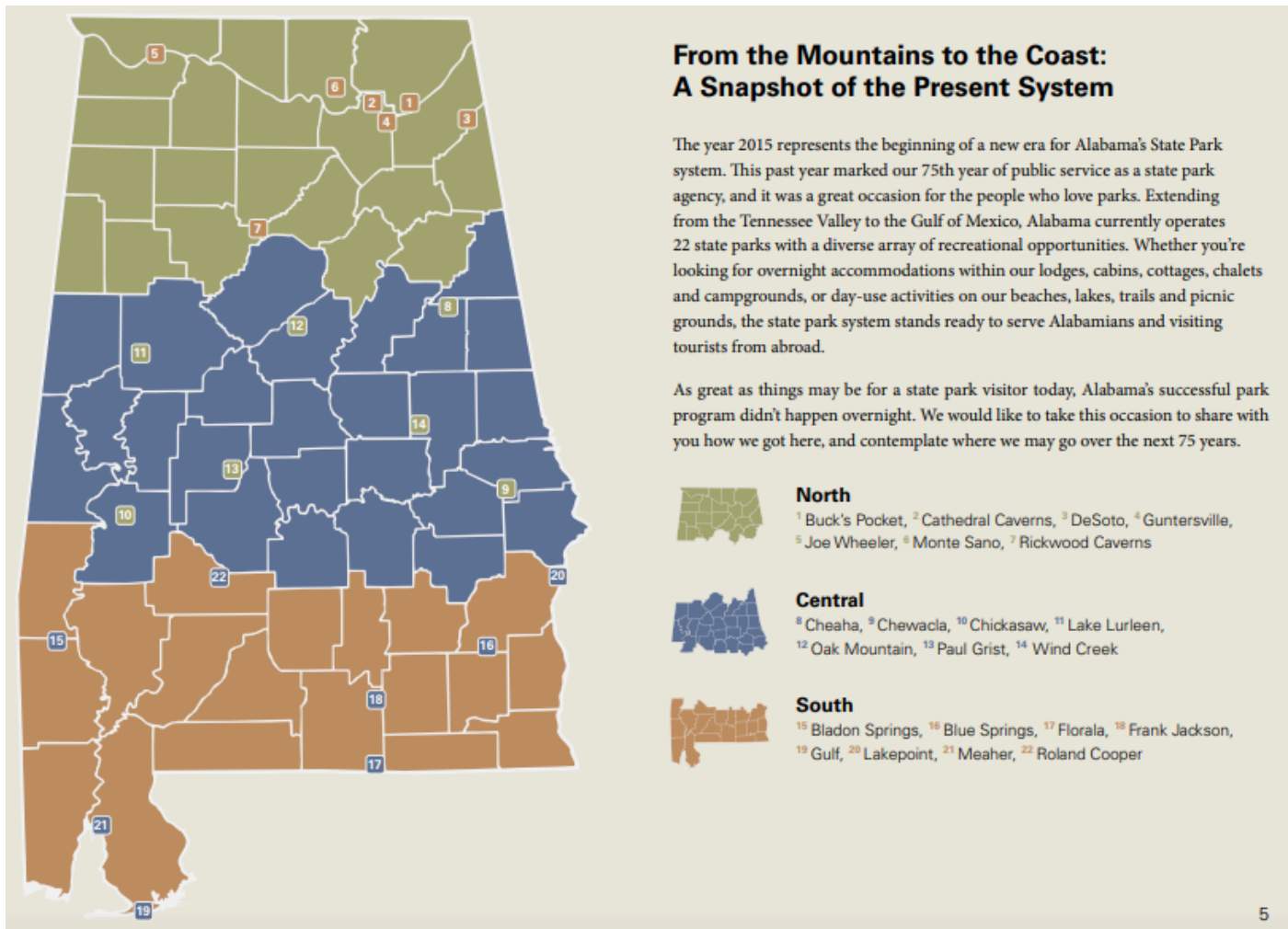
To assist the Alabama State Parks System, enhance its operations and secure funding, it is important to research and discover if there are funding opportunities, operations, programming and new practices that would be beneficial to park guests, staff and volunteers. Generally, most state parks are funded by user fees with limited state general fund dollars. Our team chose to look at several states that were similar to Alabama but also different in population size and geography. Our team researched Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and Washington to compare and seek out commonalities and differences in funding, programming, and partnership activities with Alabama State Parks.

## ALABAMA

“The Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources receives no support from the state's General Fund. Instead, state parks are funded through special revenue sources that include federal money, cigarette taxes, user and license fees, and mandated interest from endowments and federal regulations. Additionally, user-generated funds in the form of entrance, rental, lodging, golf, and other recreational fees support the parks. In 2016, the budget for the division was \$45,328,890, of which \$24 million was generated from revenues. The state park system employs approximately 800 people during peak season and approximately 600 during the off-season. The staff is aided by a large cohort of volunteers.” (Ress, 2008)

As previously stated, funding for Alabama State Parks is mostly generated from a user-pay system. The amount of money generated by gate ticket sales and recreational activities within the park is used to determine the budget

for next year's finances. In Fiscal Year 2022, Alabama State Parks' total revenue was \$50,275,030 and 85% of that revenue was generated directly from park fees. (Alabama State Parks, 2022) Alabama State Parks partnered with the Alabama State Parks Foundation to help generate money through grants by individuals or companies. The Alabama State Park Foundation also encourages corporate sponsorship to help generate additional funds.

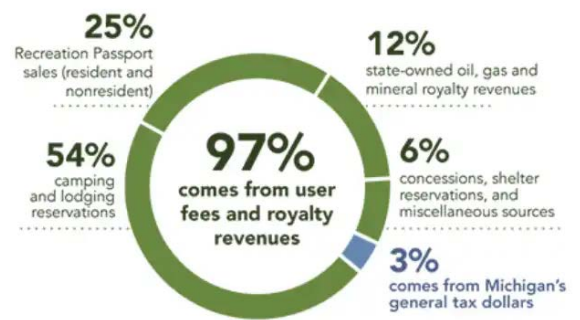


The 21 parks within the Alabama State Parks system are located from the “mountains to the coast” and display the unique and diverse geography, wildlife, landscape, and natural settings Alabama has to offer.



## MICHIGAN

Michigan State Parks fall under the Michigan Department of Natural Resources and consist of 103 state parks and recreation areas, 140 state forest campgrounds, and 360,000 acres of state park land. Based on 2022 data, Michigan state parks averaged 30 million park guests who visited the park system's 13,750 campsites, and 250 cabins, yurts, lodges, and other overnight accommodations (MDNR, 2023).



Like Alabama, Michigan State Parks are largely funded by user fees. Approximately 97% of operations and maintenance funding comes from user fees and royalty revenues. The funding sources include camping and lodging reservations fees (54%); Recreation Passport sales (25%); state-owned, oil, gas and mineral royalty revenues (which support the Michigan State Parks Endowment Fund) (12%); concessions, shelter reservations and miscellaneous sources (6%); and the Michigan General Fund (3%) (MDNR, 2023).



Michigan requires a Recreation Passport for motorized vehicle entry into state parks, recreation areas, state forest campgrounds, most boating and access sites, state trailheads and other outdoor spaces. The Revenue generated from the Recreation Passport program supports park maintenance, improvement of outdoor spaces and protection of natural resources. There are separate passport rates for different modes of transportation for residents and rates differ for non-residents. (MDNR, 2023).

From its inception, organizers were optimistic that owners would opt in and voluntarily purchase a Recreation Passport when registering their vehicle. This strategy worked and in 2010, the first year of implementation, 24.7 percent of vehicle registrants voluntarily purchased the passport generating \$7 million to benefit Michigan's state parks (MNA Staff, 2016). The Manistee News Advocate stated the funds distribution was based on a formula to improve both parks and recreation opportunities: 50 percent would support state parks infrastructure, 30 percent would support state park operations, 10 percent would support a grant program for community recreation agencies, 7 percent would support state forest campgrounds and pathways, 2.75 percent would support cultural and historic restoration and the remaining 0.25 percent would support marketing and promotion activities.

When Michigan implemented the Recreation Passport program, the revenue for park improvements increased from \$13.9 million in 2010 to 17.6 million by 2014 (Roelofs, 2015). In 2022, the Build Michigan Together Plan provided \$250 million in federal relief program funding (remaining COVID funds) to support state parks. The

new program has been successful since its inception in 2010 and has provided much needed funding to complete statewide park improvements and its popularity continues to grow. The agency reported in its FY2023 Legislative Report that FY22 revenue generated by the Recreation Passport Program was \$37,591,900 and voluntary participation in the program is anticipated to continue growing (MDNR, n.d.)

In 2020, Michigan created the Big Wild Forest Carbon Project and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources agreed to use its 109,000-acre Pigeon River State Forest for a pilot carbon project in collaboration with DTE Energy, the largest energy company in Michigan. This was the first program in the nation to leverage carbon storage for carbon credits in state forests. Carbon storage occurs when trees absorb carbon dioxide from the air and one mature tree can absorb 48 pounds of carbon annually (MDNR, 2023). Carbon credits are permits that allow the owner of the carbon credit to emit one ton of carbon dioxide, or the equivalent of other greenhouse gases (Thompson, 2021). Carbon credits can be generated from healthy forests, which help conserve carbon in the wood, vegetation, and soil within the forest (Forest Carbon Works, 2023). DTE Energy purchased the first decade of carbon credits, offsetting its carbon footprint by purchasing carbon credits generated by the state forest. An estimated \$18 million will be generated in the first decade of the 40-year project and will be injected into the state's Forest Development Fish and Game budget. The funds will be used to support natural resources management through tree planting, forest infrastructure, wildlife habitat improvements, recreational projects, and more. The success of the initial pilot project led the Department of Natural Resources to develop a second forest carbon project in 2022 located on over 120,000 acres in various parts of Michigan (MDNR, 2023).

## MISSISSIPPI

Mississippi State Parks fall under the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks (MDWFP). There are currently twenty-five state parks with nineteen open to camping. Park activities include water skiing, swimming, boating, fishing, hiking, horse riding, ATV/dirt biking and mountain biking. Available facilities include several 9-hole and 18-hole golf courses, disc golf courses, educational nature programs, and nature trails (MDWFP, 2023). For birdwatching enthusiasts, Mississippi State Parks attractions include the I-55 Corridor Birding Trial, which features 8 state parks, including LeFleur's Bluff State Park, home to the Mississippi Museum of Natural Resources, a state-of-the-art destination facility. I-55 is a major thoroughway that connects New Orleans, Memphis, TN, St. Louis MO and Chicago, IL (MDWFP Brochure, 2023). Another attraction, the Natchez Trace Corridor Birding Trail, connects Natchez, MS with Nashville, TN, and features six state parks and a natural area, including Tombigbee State Park, an original Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) park and is near Tupelo, the birthplace of Elvis Presley (MDWFP Brochure, 2023).



Much like Alabama's state park budget, MDWFP's funding is based on a user-pay system. Close to ninety percent of their budget is from lodging fees, license fees, registration fees, and permit fees. They also receive donations and support from the Mississippi State Parks Foundation. Mississippi State Parks is undergoing a statewide multi-year park revitalization project in partnership with the State of Mississippi to improve all state park facilities (MDWFP, 2023).

MDWFP also partners with other entities, such as the Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Mississippi Foundation. In 2020, the Foundation awarded a \$3,855,000 grant to the Mississippi Wildlife, Fisheries, & Parks Foundation for the LeFleur's Bluff State Park Education and Tourism Partnership. MDWFP's Mississippi Museum of Natural Science and the Mississippi Children's Museum partnered to use grant funds to support the LeFleur's Bluff State Park Playground, Pavilion and Museum Trail, a 21<sup>st</sup> century, state of the art complex that will provide physical and educational activities for visitors at this state park. The play and educational area will provide 80 play activities, a pavilion for educational learning experiences, and a museum walking trail. On its website, the agency shared that Sheila B. Grogan, President of the foundation said, "The LeFleur's Bluff State Park Playground, Pavilion and Museum Trail align with the Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Mississippi Foundation's strategic focus to provide sustainable health and well-being opportunities for Mississippians. Encouraging children, families, and others to spend more time outside engaging in fun play activities, taking a walk or learning together in an outdoor setting develops life-long positive attitudes about maintaining healthy lifestyles" (Newsroom, 2020).

## MISSOURI

Missouri State Parks is a division of the Missouri Department of Natural Resources and is responsible for administration of the state park system and coordination of the statewide outdoor recreation and trails program. (Missouri State Parks, 2023). The park system includes more than 93 state parks and historic sites and includes the trails at Roger Pryor Pioneer Backcountry, a 60,000-acre tract that is Missouri's largest privately owned forest. More than 160,000 acres make up the park system that is available to the public and includes 2,000 structures, 3,500 campsites, and more than 1,000 miles of trail for hikers, backpackers, bicycle rides off-road vehicle users and horseback riders. Park activities include fishing, camping, swimming, historical and natural interpretive programs, rock climbing, cave tours, metal detecting, and boating. The primary source of funding for state park operation and development comes from half of the dedicated constitutional tax of one-tenth-of-one-percent Parks, Soils, and Water Sales Tax and remaining funds come from user fees and federal grants. The park system does

not receive general revenue funds. The constitutional tax funding was first approved by voters in 1984 and reapproved in 1988, 1996, 2006, and 2016 (Missouri State Parks, 2023).



Visitors who shop at participating state parks and historic sites in Missouri, can donate their extra change to the Missouri State Park system through its newly created Round Up program. In July 2023, round up donations supported events and program for veterans at state parks (Holden, 2023). Donation figures have not been released because this is a new program.

Funds raised will be donated back to support park or site operations (Missouri State Parks, 2023).

## SOUTH CAROLINA

The South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism (SCPRT) is a cabinet agency that manages and operates 47 state parks and 6 historic properties. The parks division is directed to promote the parks as part of state tourism (SCPRT, 2023). The park system manages more than 9,000 acres of natural and cultural resources, which includes 1,500 buildings, 155 cabins, 80 motel rooms, 3,000 campsites, two 18-hole golf courses, fishing piers, ponds and more than 300 miles of hiking and riding trails. Park activities include hiking, biking, fishing, rafting, bird watching, scuba diving, geocaching, and historic sites. The South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism helps fund parks throughout the state through grant programs which support recreational programs and marketing assistance (SCPRT, 2023).



In its legislative budget request, SCPRT reported that in FY20 the agency changed its revenue accounting, to create a distinction between earned and deferred revenue that is reported. State Parks were closed from March 27 – April 30, 2020, but were still able to obtain more than \$42 million in earned revenue in CY 2020 which is a 13.5% increase over CY 2019 (earned revenue totaled more than \$37 million). The report indicated that the increase could be attributed mainly to dynamic pricing strategies and targeted state parks marketing strategies. An example provided to the legislature was that in November and December 2020, the parks generated 3,638 reservation nights through its discount program, 12 Days of Deals, which was an increase of 122% from the reservation nights generated during the discount program in 2019. The reservation nights growth produced \$83,625 dollars in revenue, which was a 133% increase from the revenue generated in 2019. (South Carolina State House, n.d.). At its introduction in 2019, the 12 Days of Deals program was promoted through the state park's Facebook page and deals started on December 14 and went through December 25. For these deals,

reservations could be made on the day the deal was offered. You had 24 hours to make the reservation to receive the deal for the day it was offered. Each deal was different, i.e., discounted camping, discounted passport price, discounted golf fees and were offered in 12 different parks (SCPRT, 2013).

## TENNESSEE



The Tennessee State Parks system was established in 1937 and currently consists of 57 state parks, with more than 248,000 acres of land operated under the direction of the Bureau of State Parks and Conservation which is a division of the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation. The park system manages over 1,300 miles of trails with 80+ waterfalls, one of which is a 256-foot fall, one of the highest in the Eastern United States and there are 36 campgrounds providing over 3,800 campsites, 372 cabins, and 6 lodges (Tennessee State Parks GIS, 2023). According to the 2022 annual report of the

Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, approximately 36 million people visit the state parks annually, with Falls Creek Falls State Park being the most visited (Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation Annual Report, 2022). Tennessee State Parks is one of only seven state parks systems in the country that do not charge admission fees. In 2021, the park system was named one of the top four parks systems in the nation by the American Academy for Park and Recreation Administration (NRPA) (Newsroom, 2022). Tennessee State Parks are open to the public seven days a week, 365 days a year (TDEC, 2023).

During an interview with our team, Mike Robertson, Tennessee State Parks Director of Park Operations, shared that Tennessee State Parks is funded through two primary sources: state appropriations and revenue generated from park operations. He said a portion of real estate taxes are used to support land acquisitions, trail maintenance, and other costs, but the park system relies heavily on state funding and user fees generated from camping/lodging and other recreational activities, much like the Alabama's State Park System. Tennessee State Park leaders have focused on many innovative ways to increase the operational budget for the park system. One of those ways is through "My TN State Parks Fundraiser". This annual event was first launched in April 2021 and allows people to make donations toward their favorite state park. The public donates \$1 per vote to cast a ballot for their favorite state park. In 2023 Tennessee State Parks partnered with the Tennessee State



Parks Conservancy, to host the fundraiser and more than 1,600 donations were made totaling more than \$113,000. The fundraiser has provided over \$100,000 each year to fund major improvements to park facilities and other recreational benefits at various parks (Blog, 2023).

Our research of each state's park system has shown us the importance of partnerships. Another example is a partnership between Tennessee State Parks and the BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee Foundation. "BlueCross Healthy Place" as it is known at Henry Horton State Park is the result of two men who had a vision for a playground where children of all abilities could play and enjoy. The two men, Dan and Ryan, contacted BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee with plans to turn their vision to reality. Their efforts paid off and they were awarded a \$600,000 grant to build an accessible playground at Henry Horton State Park and another \$120,000 to provide ongoing maintenance funds for the playground's future care. BlueCross Healthy Places program creates active, healthy spaces including playgrounds, fitness equipment, and other structures for visitors of all ages to enjoy. These spaces are provided through BlueCross BlueShield Foundation for visitors to play, connect with one another, and enjoy healthy activities together (Newsroom, 2019).

During the interview with Mr. Robertson, our team learned about staffing support. Tennessee State Parks has placed value on having a full-time revenue and marketing manager on staff. This employee is tasked with generating and growing sales for the state parks system through collecting and analyzing key marketing data to track success, advocating for Tennessee State Parks through social media and other digital avenues by engaging in conversation and providing customer service, and assisting with graphic design, marketing, and fundraising. Specifically, this is accomplished through analyzing current market rates to maintain competitiveness and creating marketing campaigns to drive low park attendance upward. Our research has shown that since the hiring of this position approximately 10 years ago, Tennessee State Parks has seen a recognizable growth in revenue from advancements made by this position. The implementation of dynamic pricing has also shown to be an effective strategy to increase park funding for Tennessee. Dynamic pricing is a variable pricing strategy where businesses adjust consumer costs to account for the ever-changing consumer demand. Tennessee State Parks saw a 25% increase in revenue in 2022 and a 17% increase in revenue in 2021 due to dynamic pricing.

Tennessee is also considering carbon credits as a source of funding. During the interview with Mr. Robertson, he shared that carbon credit projects are being discussed as a potential revenue stream to support Tennessee natural resource management. He also stated that an advisory committee was formed to bring ideas to the table on how the forest carbon market can be of benefit to the state of Tennessee.

## VIRGINIA

Virginia State Parks, established in 1936, offers recreational activities along the Atlantic Ocean, Chesapeake Bay, and along the Blue Ridge Mountains. The 41 state parks are managed under the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation. The park system offers more than 670 miles of trails and 306 cabins scattered over 75,895 acres. Twenty-nine of the parks offer primitive camping, totaling over 1,800 campsites (Virginia State Parks, 2023). Virginia State Parks features equestrian campsites, environmental education sites, historic sites, music and concert series, festivals, natural trails, and activities such as fishing, paddle sports, swimming, hiking, mountain biking, horse riding, boating, geocaching, and playgrounds. The park system also has a Customer Loyalty Program allowing visitors to earn points for free and discounted overnight stays (Virginia Parks Guide, 2023).

Virginia State Park operations are funded similarly to that of other states our team researched. On average, approximately 45% of the annual operating expenses come from the state's general fund. The remaining 55% can be attributed to annual park revenues generated primarily through lodging and parking fees. Other revenues such as admission and reservation fees, merchandise sales, food and beverage sales, and rentals also contribute to the annual operating budget.

Like state parks around the country, Virginia State Parks seeks revenue for park expenditures. An innovative program that came out of this search was the “round-up” sales program (Report, November 2021). While Missouri's Round Up program is newly created, the Virginia Round Up For State Parks program was spearheaded by Virginia State Parks Director Craig Seaver in the summer of 2016. Visitors voluntarily round up to the nearest dollar when they make a purchase in a state park gift shop or make lodging or camping reservations and donations support the State Parks Project Fund (Report, November 2021). All donations made to the “Round Up” program support park operations and are tax deductible (Blog, 2018). In 2017, the program collected more than \$12,000 which helped complete projects at 4 state parks. In 2018, park visitors donations totaled \$30,000 and those funds were used to install bottle filling water stations in 31 parks and park headquarters. Seaver said, “The bottle-filling stations allow us to better serve our mission to preserve and protect the environment and keep hundreds of pounds of plastic out of landfills or recycling centers every year” (Press Release, 2019). The Round Up For Parks program is also promoted during Giving Tuesday, a global day of giving to support worthwhile causes (Blog, 2018).



## WASHINGTON

Established in 1913, the Washington State Parks system is one of the oldest in the country, even older than the National Park system and includes 124 developed parks, and 600 historic properties (Washington State Parks, 2023). The park system is managed by the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission. The parks are rich in diversity and offer views of Native American rock art, mountainous regions, a lighthouse, military history, an observatory, and coastal marine regions. Washington State Parks include 123,000 acres and over 400 miles of hiking trails that are visited by nearly 40 million people each year (Washington Trails Association, 2023).

On its website the agency reported that while the park system does receive state general funds, the majority of its operating budget is generated through earned revenue and fees: boating, camping, reservation, winter recreation, and other fees. In 2019, park visitors contributed more than \$116 million in state and local tax revenues, compared to the \$40 million the agency received from the state general fund (Washington State Parks, 2023). After general tax dollars dwindled in 2011, the Discover Pass, a motor vehicle permit program, was created by the Washington State Legislature and the Governor to support parks and other recreation lands and facilities operated by Washington State Parks, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) and the Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) (Discover Pass, 2023). In its May 2023 financial report to the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission, the agency reported that 70% of its income came from camp fees and Discover Pass sales. Discover Pass sales were up almost 11% (\$4.4 million dollars) compared to two years ago. (Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission, 2023).

In April 2022, the Washington State Department of Natural Resources reached an agreement with Finite Carbon to launch a carbon project, creating over a million carbon credits that will generate millions of dollars of funding for schools and counties throughout the state. (Newsroom, 2022). This agreement, similar to Michigan's, is another example of a state agency's carbon project using state lands. The Washington State Department of Natural Resources offered up the carbon credits generated from 10,000 acres of western Washington state forests to large companies to help offset their carbon footprint through Finite Carbon, who will ensure that the carbon credits offered are legitimate and verifiable. Over 900,000 carbon credits will be generated in the first 10 years of the project, generating millions of dollars for schools, colleges, and critical local services. This initiative signifies the first time a government agency has used carbon markets to delay planned timber harvests of ecologically valuable forests.



## SOCIAL MEDIA

Our research found that most state parks are user-pay systems and need to generate their own funding to be self-sufficient. In a world of likes, tags, and shares, social media is crucial when it comes to funding state parks all across the country. “Social media can be a very powerful force in influencing travel decisions,” says Kelli Burns, associate professor at the University of South Florida’s school of advertising and mass communications who researches social media influencers. “There’s a lot of pent-up desire among people to travel now, and so they are going to social media to look for where that destination could be.” (Schulz, 2022).

The National Park Service uses social media to promote its activities and news for 400 parks and its programs (NPS, 2023). The agency’s social media accounts have become very popular reaching celebrity status: Instagram, reached more than 4.9 million followers; Facebook, 1.7 million followers and X (formerly Twitters), 1.2 million followers. (Brooks, 2023). The influence of social media led to the influx of visitors to Horseshoe Bend in Glen Canyon National Recreational Area, Page, Arizona. It is one of the most visited places in the national area and saw more than 700,000 visitors in 2022 (Ruland, 2023). “It was just a local place for family outings,” recalls Bill Diak, 73, former three-time mayor and 38-year resident of Page, Arizona in an article from The Guardian (Simmonds, 2018). “But with the invention of the cellphone, things changed overnight.” Horseshoe Bend became Instagram famous. Digital photos of this public land spread quickly through social media and surprised the unprepared 7,000 Page residents and local land managers. In the article, Mr. Diak said that visitation grew from a few thousand annual visitors historically to 100,000 in 2010, which was the same year Instagram was launched. By 2015, an estimated 750,000 people had visited and the expected visitor count in 2018 was expected to reach 2 million. “Social media is the number one driver,” said Maschelle Zia, who manages Horseshoe Bend for the Glen Canyon national recreation area. “People don’t come here for solitude. They are looking for the iconic photo.” (Simmonds, 2018).

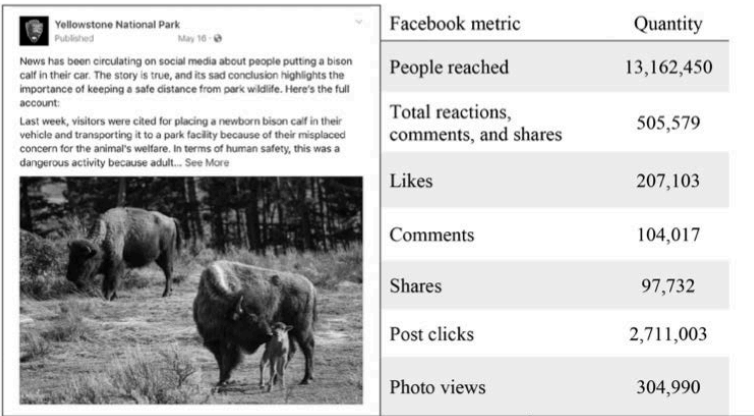
Social media has changed and increased rapidly over the years. As of the 2020 world data, there were 4.54 billion internet users, while 3.80 billion of them use social media. Internet usage increased 7% from the previous year, while social media usage increased 9.2% (Mammadli, 2021), and as of 2023, there are over seven-billion people in the world with social media usage at around 85% of the 5.27 billion mobile phone users, utilizing many of the 123 social media platforms currently available (Ruby, 2023). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, as of 2022 there is just over five-million people in the state of Alabama, with an 82% broadband internet usage rate (Census.gov, 2023), which based on the usage data of 85%, we can extrapolate there are over four-million social media users in Alabama, using multiple sites at any given time.

Social media sites and social media influencers (SMI) have emerged as highly effective and productive methods for users to connect and communicate with others and promote their brands (Riga, 2016). Social media influencers have become an impactful solution to the problem of marketing services and products to a range of consumers. An influencer is an individual who can have an impact on purchase decisions because of their perceived power, information, or relationship with an audience. Much like a profession, there is a significant investment by influencers to see their status and brand grow, connect with an audience, engage with other influencers, and obtain new followers or increase viewership (Glucksman, 2017).

One avenue for connecting social media sites and influencers with each other is through daisy chaining. Daisy chaining is a technology term used to explain a technique that connects multiple ad networks and exchanges to serve ads to a wider audience (Adquick, 2023). Social media posts are not limited to the SMIs and their followers but can be daisy chained from one influencer to another, as they often follow each other, which extends to a new host of followers. The ability to chain posts or reposts, links to social media pages through likes and other

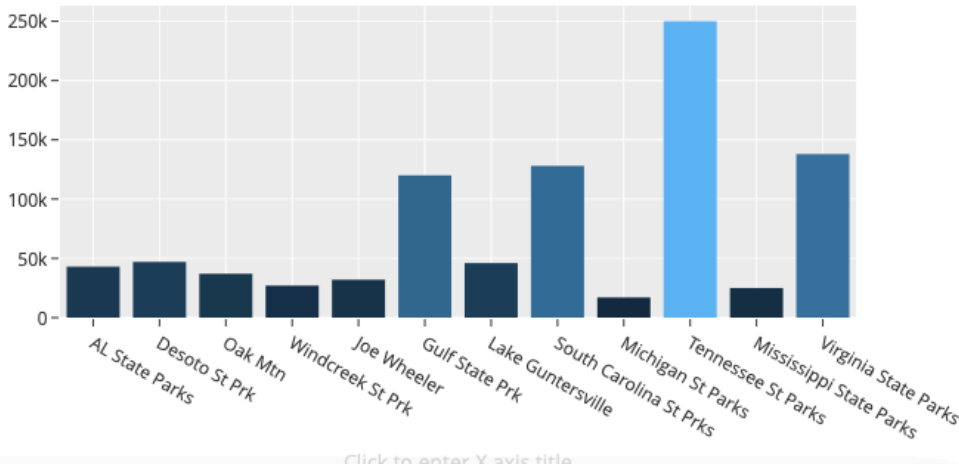
connections that social media offers between members and sister sites increases the indirect marketing capabilities exponentially.

Social media is pervasive in society today and provides the potential to communicate with large numbers of people. Public land agencies, like the NPS, have started using social media to help achieve management goals in a digitally connected society. (Miller, et al., 2019).



**Figure 1.** A single post by Yellowstone National Park on May 16th, 2016 reached over 13 million people.

Parks and Facebook Follower Counts



Currently, the Alabama State Parks system has a social media and website presence that include: 405,000 Facebook Friends, 51,000 Instagram followers, 10,000 X (formerly Twitter) followers and 23 webpages (1 main webpage and 22 individual state park pages). (Alabama State Parks, 2022). While these are substantial numbers, Alabama and other state

park organizations could all benefit by using social media marketing to increase their potential in the ever-growing world of websites and influencers.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has identified benefits provided by Alabama State Parks, provided comparisons between the Alabama State Park system and other state park systems, and highlighted the successes of Alabama State Parks, including the establishment of the Alabama State Parks Foundation, elected officials, public and corporate support for park improvements and the introduction of new park activities like “glamping”. After gathering and analyzing research from numerous sources, our team proposes the following recommendations to further strengthen Alabama State Parks, by identifying additional programs, initiatives, and new funding sources that revolve around three P’s: Presence, Programs and Partnerships.



For 84 years, the Alabama State Parks system has continually served the public to enhance quality of life and protect areas of natural beauty in the state. The goal of these recommendations is to help increase the presence of Alabama State Parks to the public and potential partners in order to share knowledge of Alabama’s natural environment, the health and wellness benefits for citizens and their economic importance to communities and the state. The recommendations will also help identify new programs and initiatives that will maintain park operations and enhance the experience of park visitors. And finally, the recommendations will help develop and enhance

partnerships between Alabama State Parks, the Alabama State Parks Foundation and other entities to support cooperative efforts of shared goals.

## PRESENCE

### SOCIAL MEDIA, STAFF, AND INFLUENCERS

Alabama State Parks has an existing social media following on many platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Based on our research, we recommend expanding the social media program to include influencers. In cooperation with the Alabama State Parks Foundation, we recommend Alabama State Parks develop a program like the National Park Express Influencer Program; allowing influencers to register with the organization, and if accepted they will be granted special access to parks, tours, and experiences, as well as access to employees and experts for social media interviews. This type of initiative can increase both the presence and programs of Alabama State Parks. It would increase its brand and audience through influencers with large followings, increase its online footprint through online searches as influencers share park information, and increase park traffic as influencers could possibly attract an audience that shares an organic interest in all the parks have to offer.

We also recommend the hiring of staff dedicated to marketing and social media for both Alabama State Parks and the Foundation. Our team's research of Tennessee provided evidence that having a dedicated staff person focused on social media, helped their state parks generate more sales, increased fundraising dollars and increased their social media presence and public engagement activities.

## PROGRAMS

### RECREATION PASSPORT PROGRAM

To maintain state parks and continue to provide experiences to the citizens of Alabama and park visitors, the park system must find programs to increase funding. Based on our research, our team recommends Alabama State Parks initiate a Recreation Passport program to support maintenance and improvement of state parks similar to the Recreation Passport program implemented by Michigan State Parks and the Discover Pass program implemented in Washington. The Recreation Passport would be a permit for motorized vehicle entry into state parks. The passport would allow park visitors access to all state parks, campgrounds, trails and more. Alabamians would have the option to purchase the recreation passport at the time of vehicle registration and annual tag renewal. The passport could also be purchased online. This voluntary program is a beneficial source of earned revenue in both Michigan and Washington state parks, proving that citizens love their state parks and are willing to support them financially to keep them operating and functioning properly.

## ROUND UP PROGRAM

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Based on our research, we recommend that Alabama State Parks and the Alabama State Parks Foundation create a “Round-Up for Parks” sales program. This proposed program would allow park visitors to voluntarily round up to the nearest dollar when they make a purchase in any state park, gift shop, restaurant, or make lodging reservations. Funds generated from this program could be used to directly benefit park operation, park enhancements and could be designated as tax deductible. This program could also be implemented by the Alabama State Parks Foundation by partnering with various retail establishments: stores and manufacturers of camping equipment, binoculars, bird seed, and related outdoor apparel and equipment. This program would also increase the presence, programs, and partnerships of the Alabama State Park Foundation. Through this program the Foundation would experience more growth and support which will in turn benefit Alabama State Parks. Virginia State Parks created their program in 2016 and has seen a steady increase of financial support and volunteers and funds have helped with several park enhancements that visitors enjoy. While Missouri’s program is new and program figures are not yet available it is another example of a state park providing a voluntary opportunity for visitors to support the state parks they love.

## PROMOTIONAL PROGRAM

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While Alabama State Parks provide various discounts to park visitors and veterans and other groups throughout the year, a formal and targeted marketed strategy using discounts could lead to increased revenue significantly similar to South Carolina State Parks. Discounts could be provided for golf courses, zip lines, park passes, and other activities. Reservations would have to be made to stay at the state park to receive the discounted deals increasing reservation revenue. The discount option could help secure more reservations at various times when these parks are not historically busy.

## CARBON CREDITS PROGRAM

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Interest in carbon credit programs as a conservation and funding mechanism for states is growing across the country. As shown in our research, Michigan was the first state to sell carbon credits from state-owned land. Washington soon followed by using carbon credits to protect state forests that were scheduled for harvest. Washington has introduced legislation, which gained bipartisan support, to make it easier for the state to enter and navigate the carbon market. Both states will use the revenue generated to improve conservation efforts on state managed lands. Therefore, like Tennessee’s advisory committee, we recommend that the Alabama State Parks also consider an advisory committee to explore ways to model the carbon credit programs led by Michigan and Washington. This type of program would be the first of its kind in the southeastern United States and would need careful and thoughtful planning to successfully capitalize on this innovative concept. Doing so could allow

Alabama to develop state resources not previously considered. Monetizing the carbon produced by forests found in state parks has the potential to add thousands of dollars to Alabama State Park's budget.

## PARTNERSHIPS

### STRENGTHEN AND ESTABLISH HEALTHY LIVING PARTNERSHIPS

We recommend that Alabama State Parks and the Foundation continue to strengthen and establish partnerships with healthy living and wellness organizations in the state to promote shared goals that would support park improvements and building a healthy Alabama. As our research has shown, Mississippi and Tennessee have partnered with private organizations such as Blue Cross Blue Shield state foundations and were awarded million-dollar grants for the construction and development of physical and educational programs that promote healthy living and physical recreational activities for people of all ages and abilities at state parks. Also, the State of Mississippi has partnered with multiple states to capture birdwatching enthusiasts with the development of trails that connect various state parks from one end of the state to the other. Alabama could consider using existing trails to connect state parks and build partnerships with healthy living and wellness partners whose support could enhance park operations and programs. While seeking to build new partnerships, Alabama State Parks should also seek innovative ways to build upon current partnerships with partners like Bassmaster, Hilton and local and civic groups who are park supporters.

Developing partnerships with healthy living and wellness organizations Alabama State Parks and the Foundation would provide needed resources and opportunities that could improve state parks and assist Alabamians improve their physical, mental and social health and support community wellness. This will also fulfill a goal identified in the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Report of Alabama State Parks.

## CONCLUSION

There are many wonderful things to celebrate about Alabama State Parks and its successes and growth over the past 80 years. Alabama State Parks showcase the majestic beauty of Alabama's diverse landscapes. From the mountains to the coast, all 21 state parks are unique and represent the many breathtaking views of Alabama. The history of these 21 parks has continuously evolved since 1927. This report has shown the perseverance and agility of the state parks to make changes when necessary and reaching out to form partnerships with camp guests, volunteers, staff, elected officials, the business community, and other park enthusiasts to make state parks stronger for generations to come.



The Department of Conservation and Natural Resources along with the Alabama State Park Foundation have been an integral part of helping to manage and sustain the state park system. As we go forward, additional funding will be crucial in helping to maintain and improve state parks in Alabama. Annually, park visitor numbers have been consistently high. An \$85 million bond grant was approved by the citizens of Alabama to support park improvements, proving that people see a need for state parks, love state parks and are willing to provide financial support to keep them operating. Companies such as Buffalo Rock and Alabama Power have also made corporate donations to help maintain and improve state parks.

While these are milestones to celebrate, there remains a challenge of continued stable funding so Alabama State Parks can maintain and protect the natural resources and biological diversity preserved within the state and continue to serve the people. By implementing the recommendations presented to enhance the presence, programs, and partnerships of Alabama State Parks, securing funding could be made easier for present and future generations. Along with major cities expanding within Alabama, it is always nice to know that there are certain places where people can escape to and enjoy the scenic and natural beauty of the forests, streams, and diversity of Alabama's natural resources.

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