

Strengthening Awareness of Alabama State Parks



Alabama's Natural Legacy

Celebrating Alabama's Progress | Certified Public Manager® Program
CPM Solutions Alabama 2026



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Figure 1-Oak Mountain State Park

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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 the above diverse group of participants in the Certified Public Manager® Training Program.

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INTRODUCTION

Alabama's state parks are invaluable resources, and it is imperative that we protect and preserve them so they remain places where future generations can create their own experiences and lasting memories. With this purpose in mind, the CPM Alabama State Parks Team examined the current marketing efforts of the Alabama State Parks System and the fundraising strategies of the Alabama State Parks Foundation (hereafter referred to as "the Foundation"). This project presents research-based recommendations for strengthening the Foundation's fundraising capacity and enhancing the Park System's marketing strategies to better communicate the services, recreational opportunities, and public benefits offered throughout Alabama's state parks. Ultimately, the team believes these recommendations will ensure that Alabama State Parks continue to thrive for generations to come.



Figure 2 - Lake Lurleen State Park

ALABAMA STATE PARKS SYSTEM



Figure 3 - Alabama State Parks [Logo]

The Alabama State Parks System is a division of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR) and "administers 21 state parks..., encompassing 48,850 acres" of state land stretching "from Gulf Coast beaches to the Appalachian Mountains" (Capps, 2025). During the 2024–2025 fiscal year, the division served more than 5,233,000 guests throughout the state (Capps, 2025). The division's mission "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" (Ress, 2023).

Current Services Provided by the Agency

The Alabama State Park System currently offers a wide variety of attractions and services to the public, many of which have been upgraded or developed because of recent investment in the park system. Although not every park offers the same facilities, and some amenities are seasonal, each park provides unique experiences for its guests. The system offers Alabamians and visitors a range of lodging options, including primitive and modern campsites, family cabins, glamping (glamorous camping) accommodations, hotels with convention and

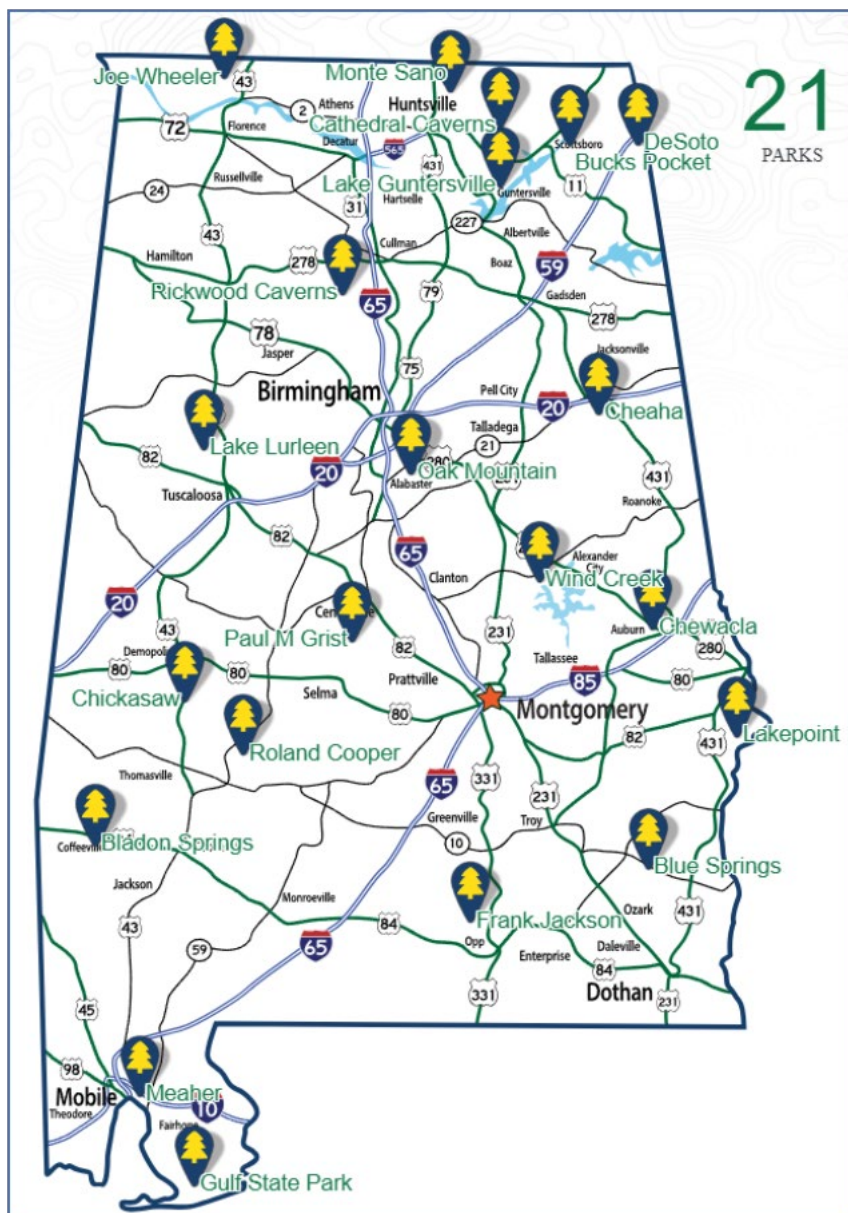


Figure 4 - Map of Alabama State Parks

meeting spaces, and group lodges. These facilities also provide rental opportunities for weddings, receptions, family reunions, conferences, and other large events. Many parks feature a variety of outdoor recreational activities and amenities, including marinas with boating access, swimming

and fishing opportunities, walking and biking trails, and playgrounds for children. Several parks offer unique attractions such as 18-hole golf courses, guided educational tours, tennis courts, and resort-style accommodations (ADCNR, 2020). Additional modern amenities found throughout the park system include three zip-line courses and geocaching (ADCNR, n.d.). With more than three million geocaches hidden worldwide, geocaching has become the world's largest treasure-hunting activity (Geocaching, n.d.).

There has been no shortage of headlines and awards recognizing the significant improvements made throughout the Alabama State Park System in recent years. Most notably, the system received the 2025 Sweet Home Alabama Attraction of the Year Award (Lundy, 2025). In addition, the Hugh S. Branyon Backcountry Trail at Gulf State Park was named USA Today's Readers' Choice Top 10 Best Recreational Trail for four consecutive years (2023–2026) (10BEST Editors, 2026). Matthew Capps, Director of the Alabama State Parks System, also shared several noteworthy accomplishments achieved by the park system during the 2024–2025 fiscal year:

- Partnered with the Alabama State Parks Foundation to provide educational programming through outdoor classrooms, serving more than 13,600 participants.
- Began or completed renovations to campsites, cabins, lodges, playgrounds, campground offices, camp stores, educational facilities, and recreational facilities at approximately 15 state parks.
- Launched the first Alabama State Parks Ambassador Program, which attracted nearly 800 applicants for 75 ambassador positions.
- Created and distributed the Division's electronic newsletter, which achieved an average open rate of 36.8%, exceeding the industry benchmark for newsletters.
- Marketed more than 2,400 educational programs and professional development opportunities.

Of all these recent accomplishments, the Alabama State Parks Ambassador Program is particularly unique. The program recruits volunteer ambassadors who are passionate about Alabama's state parks and outdoor recreation. Each ambassador is assigned to a specific state park and serves as a community advocate by regularly creating and sharing original content on

social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. Ambassadors showcase the park's natural beauty, recreational opportunities, seasonal events, hiking trails, camping experiences, wildlife, and other amenities through photographs, videos, stories, and personal experiences. (ADCNR, 2025).

In the effort to expand educational services, the park system recently developed a Junior Park Ranger Program that launched in Quarter 1 of 2026. The program is open to children of all ages but is specifically designed for those ages 5 to 12. It is offered free of charge at all



Figure 5 - AL State Parks Junior Rangers

Alabama State Parks. According to Renee Raney, Alabama State Parks' Chief Naturalist, "this program opens the door for children and families to explore all 21 State Parks as outdoor classrooms, building curiosity, stewardship and lasting memories together" (Rainer, 2026). Upon enrolling, each participant receives an activity book and is encouraged to complete age-appropriate activities during their visit to a state park. After sharing what they have learned with a park ranger or park naturalist, participants receive an official Junior Park Ranger badge and a Certificate of Achievement (Rainer, 2026).

To encourage visitation and increase accessibility, the Alabama State Park System periodically offers promotional incentives in addition to its standard discount programs. Year-round discounts are available for adults aged 62 and older, veterans, active-duty military personnel, individuals with disabilities as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and Alabama state employees. Eligible guests receive a 15% discount on overnight accommodations at locations managed and operated by the State Park System. Additionally, Alabama state

employees traveling on official business may reserve standard lodge rooms for a special rate of \$50 per night, Sunday through Thursday (Alabama State Park System, Rates and Discounts). The Alabama State Parks System has enhanced its statewide impact by expanding recreational amenities, investing in facility improvements, introducing innovative marketing initiatives and youth engagement programs and offering accessible pricing and discounts that encourage visitation.

Funding Structure of the Agency

Knowing that many of the new services and renovations are not free for the State Park System to implement, any attempt to market or spread awareness of these services requires an understanding of how the system is funded. Unlike many state park systems across the United States, the Alabama State Parks system operates under a largely, self-sustaining funding model. The ADCNR receives no recurring support from Alabama's General Fund for the operation of its State Parks Division. Instead, the majority of operating revenue is generated directly through park users, including campground and lodging fees, golf course revenue, marina operations, park admission fees, cabin rentals, restaurant concessions, and other recreational services. This user-pay model requires each park to generate sufficient revenue to support its daily operations, staffing, maintenance, and visitor services. Because operating funds depend heavily on visitation, park revenues can fluctuate significantly due to economic conditions, weather events, or seasonal tourism trends, creating financial uncertainty for long-term planning (Ress, 2023). Over the last 20 years, Alabama State Parks have hosted anywhere from four to five million visitors each year. The money that these visitors spend makes up 80 to 90 percent of the parks' operating costs, not taxes. This makes the Alabama State Park System one of the most efficient in the nation (Alabama State Parks, n.d.).

In addition to earned revenue, the Alabama State Parks System receives funding from several dedicated sources established through state law. The State Park Fund serves as the official repository for gifts, bequests, federal appropriations, state appropriations, and other designated funding that supports park operations. Capital improvements are frequently financed through voter-approved bond initiatives and the Alabama State Parks System Improvement Fund, while

a portion of bond proceeds is reserved specifically for long-term maintenance through the Alabama State Parks System Maintenance Fund. Alabama also benefits from dedicated revenue streams such as specialty license plate sales, federal recreation grants, and other restricted funding sources that help finance infrastructure improvements rather than routine operating expenses (Justia US Law, 2025).

In May 2022, Alabama voters elected to implement the State Parks Bond Amendment, which allocated \$80 million towards improvements to Alabama State Parks; the Park System was also able to acquire an additional \$35 million from the Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM) to provide drinking and wastewater upgrades to park facilities (Capps, 2025). This has led to a notable number of renovations and improvements across the Park System over the course of three years, with some projects still ongoing as of the system's 2024-2025 FY Report and scheduled for completion in 2026.

The State Park System receives further financial support through the Alabama State Parks Foundation, a nonprofit organization established to strengthen and enhance Alabama's state parks through private fundraising and philanthropic partnerships. The Foundation serves as a bridge between the public and private sectors by encouraging individuals, businesses, civic organizations, and charitable foundations to invest in the preservation and improvement of Alabama's natural resources. Rather than replacing state appropriations, these private contributions provide supplemental funding that allows the park system to undertake projects and initiatives that may not otherwise be possible through traditional government funding sources.

During our initial research and meetings with stakeholders, our team found that the Park System's self-sustaining funding is sufficient to keep the parks operational; however, its budget leaves limited capacity for expansion, capital improvements, or comprehensive marketing efforts. Additionally, we found that the parks largely operate independently, each maintaining its own social media presence, staff, and event schedules. This decentralized approach has resulted in a fragmented marketing strategy that allows more popular destinations, such as Gulf State Park in

Orange Beach, to receive greater visibility, while smaller parks, such as Roland Cooper State Park in Wilcox County and Blue Springs State Park in Barbour County, are often overlooked by potential visitors. Of all the funding sources available to the Park System, the Foundation offers the most flexibility in what it can offer to the system. This highlighted the need for our team to examine the Alabama State Parks Foundation and how it could help make more marketing strategies possible for the Alabama Parks System.

ALABAMA STATE PARKS FOUNDATION

Alabama, like many park systems throughout the country, has established an affiliated foundation to provide additional financial support through charitable giving, private donations, and fundraising initiatives. The Alabama State Parks Foundation is recognized as a Section 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization under the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, allowing it to accept tax-deductible charitable contributions. Their day-to-day activities are overseen by a volunteer Board of Directors composed of members from a variety of public and private-sector organizations. Through its efforts, the Foundation works to advance its vision and tagline, “Parks for People, People for Parks,” by supporting initiatives that enhance Alabama’s state parks and visitor experiences (Alabama State Parks Foundation, n.d.).



Figure 6 - Alabama State Parks Foundation [Logo]

The Foundation is a relatively young organization, established in 2018, with a mission to “seek gifts that will support and enhance park programming, park facilities, and park experiences” (Alabama State Parks Foundation, n.d.). Their primary role is to encourage charitable giving from individuals and corporate partners. The Foundation states on their website that “these funds will



Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Alabama

Figure 7 – BCBS The Caring Foundation [Logo]



Figure 8 - Buffalo Rock [Logo]



Figure 9 - Alabama Power [Logo]



Figure 10 - The Thompson Foundation [Logo]

be used to develop trails, hire naturalists, improve aquatic features, refurbish playgrounds, create pickleball courts as well as archery parks, disc golf courses, dog parks, ADA-accessible piers and trails, and enhance minority and youth programming” (Alabama State Parks Foundation, n.d.). Corporate partners represent a significant source of support for the Foundation and are publicly recognized on its website through giving tiers based on donation levels. The list of corporate partners includes several prominent organizations such as Blue Cross Blue Shield of Alabama, Buffalo Rock, Alabama Power Foundation, and the Thompson Foundation (Alabama State Parks Foundation, n.d.). In addition,

hundreds of individuals have contributed charitable donations to support the Foundation's mission and initiatives.

Foundation's Successes

Through the generosity of its donors, the Foundation has supported numerous projects that enhance visitor experiences throughout the state park system. The Foundation has funded the construction of new playgrounds at Joe Wheeler State Park and Rickwood Caverns State Park, purchased outdoor patio furniture for Wind Creek State Park, Lakepoint State Park, and Meaher State Park, and provided funding for a track chair at Gulf State Park to improve accessibility for visitors (Alabama State Parks Foundation, n.d.). The Foundation has also successfully expanded its



Figure 11 - Track Chair

membership network to include more than 1,000 Friends and Founding Members who provide charitable contributions to support improvements in park facilities, recreational programming, accessibility initiatives, and conservation efforts. Through its current “Campaign for the Parks,” the Foundation has established an ambitious fundraising goal of \$4.2 million over three years to support projects such as trail development, ADA-accessible piers and trails, playground renovations, archery parks, disc golf courses, naturalist programs, and expanded youth and minority outreach initiatives (Alabama State Parks Foundation, n.d.).



Figure 12 - Golfing at State Parks

One of the Alabama State Parks Foundation’s recent successes was its inaugural golf tournament held at Oak Mountain State Park. The four-person scramble took place on April 21, 2026, and featured 17 participating teams. In addition to providing an opportunity for participants to enjoy a round of golf on a scenic course, the event served as a meaningful fundraising initiative to support Alabama’s state parks. The tournament generated \$42,500, with all proceeds directed toward improving the Alabama

State Parks System. This event marked the Foundation’s first public-facing fundraising initiative, and, due to the success of the inaugural event, the tournament is expected to become an annual fundraiser (Alabama Political Reporter, 2026).

Furthermore, financial reports demonstrate the Foundation’s steady growth, with annual contributions increasing significantly and net assets rising from approximately \$228,000 in 2022 to more than \$658,000 in 2024 (ProPublica, n.d.). This sustained growth reflects the Foundation’s increasing ability to leverage private philanthropy to supplement the user-funded Alabama State Parks System while supporting the preservation of natural resources, expanding recreational opportunities, and enhancing the overall visitor experience throughout the state. The Alabama State Parks Foundation is not a state agency and, therefore, is not subject to the procurement laws outlined in Alabama Code Section 41, Chapter 4. As previously discussed, the Foundation is

a nonprofit organization established in accordance with Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, allowing it to operate as a tax-exempt charitable organization.

During our stakeholder meetings, our team observed the importance of the Foundation to the long-term growth of the Alabama State Parks System and the need for an even greater alignment that can further the growth of our Alabama State Parks. Our team concluded that researching other state park foundations could provide valuable insight into how the Foundation and the Park System can develop a stronger, more formalized partnership as the nonprofit continues to expand its resources and statewide impact.

BEST PRACTICES FROM OTHER STATES

In order to advance the mission of Alabama State Parks, our team examined best practices from high performing state park systems. We further explored successful strategies from State Park Foundations, other nonprofit organizations, and outdoor recreation organizations nationwide. The goal of the research was to identify proven strategies for increasing revenue and stakeholder engagement, through marketing and Foundation fundraising, to create sustainable support for Alabama's parks.

State Park Systems

Foremost, our team knew it would be best to research other state park systems, and we selected Arkansas, Florida, Michigan, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and West Virginia. These states were chosen due to their natural diversity, similarities to Alabama, and exemplary examples of successful programs. Our goal in our research was to identify initiatives these states use to best market themselves.

Pursuing Grant Funding to Support Operations

Our team found that many successful state park systems that actively pursue federal, state, and private grant funding as a key component of their financial strategy, reducing their reliance on legislative appropriations and user fees. One of the most significant funding sources is the Land

and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), administered by the National Park Service, which provides matching grants to states for land acquisition, park development, and recreational improvements. The program has funded more than 46,000 projects nationwide since 1965 and continues to provide substantial annual investments to every state. By aggressively pursuing these grants, states can improve park infrastructure, expand recreational opportunities, and conserve natural resources without placing a financial burden on state budgets (National Park Service, n.d.).

North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee serve as excellent examples of states that have institutionalized grant funding within its park system. Through the North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation, the state administers multiple grant programs that not only secure federal funding but also encourage partnerships with local governments to maximize matching dollars (North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation, *Grants*). Since 1965, North Carolina has received more than \$85 million in LWCF funding, supporting over 900 park projects, demonstrating the long-term value of maintaining a dedicated grant management program (North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation, n.d.). South Carolina and Tennessee similarly demonstrate the value of actively pursuing grant funding to support state park improvements and conservation initiatives (South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism, n.d.; Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, n.d.). These states' continued pursuit of grant funding demonstrates how dedicated grant administration can provide a reliable source of capital for park improvements and long-term sustainability (National Park Service, n.d.).

Expanding Visitor Engagement Through Incentive and Loyalty Programs

Other State Park systems, such as Texas and Tennessee, have implemented incentive and loyalty programs that encourage repeat visitation. Texas operates one of the nation's most established programs through the Texas State Parks Pass, which provides unlimited day-use entry to participating state parks, discounts on camping, park store purchases, and equipment rentals for an annual fee (Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, n.d.). The program encourages visitors to return throughout the year. Tennessee has implemented several visitor incentive and loyalty initiatives through their State Parks system. The Tennessee State Parks Annual Pass provides visitors with unlimited day-use access to state parks for an annual fee (Tennessee Department of

Environment and Conservation, n.d.). Tennessee also utilizes promotional campaigns, seasonal events, and the Tennessee State Parks Conservancy to strengthen visitor engagement and encourage philanthropic support. By combining affordable access incentives with opportunities for visitors to become long-term supporters, Tennessee has created a model that increases both customer loyalty and financial investment in its park system (Tennessee State Parks, n.d.).

Expanding Visitor Amenities Through Innovative Concession Models

Some state parks successfully use concessionaires as a strategy to enhance visitor services while generating additional revenue to support park operations. Concession agreements allow private businesses to provide amenities such as lodging, restaurants, retail shops, guided activities, equipment rentals, and recreational experiences that may otherwise require significant public investment. Tennessee has successfully incorporated concession agreements and public-private partnerships into its state park system to increase visitor services and revenue opportunities. Tennessee State Parks works with private vendors and partners to provide services such as restaurants, marinas, golf operations, lodging-related amenities, and recreational activities that complement the visitor experience. These partnerships allow the state to offer additional amenities without requiring the full financial responsibility for staffing, maintenance, and operations (Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, n.d.).

Creating a Statewide Brand Strategy to Increase Park Engagement

Several exemplary state parks have adopted centralized marketing approaches to create a consistent brand identity, increase public awareness, and maximize tourism opportunities across their entire park network. A centralized marketing strategy allows states to combine resources, coordinate messaging, collect visitor data, and promote parks through statewide campaigns rather than relying on individual parks to manage their own outreach efforts. Tennessee and North Carolina provide some of the strongest examples of a centralized marketing approach; however, the Tennessee State Parks system is a highly successful model due to their strong efforts to develop a unified, statewide brand strategy that markets all 57 state parks under one recognizable identity rather than relying on individual parks to promote themselves

independently. Through a centralized website, reservation system, social media presence, email marketing, and statewide promotional campaigns, Tennessee creates a consistent visitor experience while highlighting the unique features of individual parks (Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, n.d.). This approach allows the state to maximize marketing resources, collect visitor data, promote lesser-known destinations, and encourage repeat visitation across the entire park system. Tennessee’s emphasis on storytelling, outdoor experiences, lodging, events, and seasonal promotions demonstrates how a coordinated marketing structure can increase public awareness and strengthen connections between visitors and the state park brand (Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, n.d.).

Creating Sustainable Growth Through Tourism Collaboration

Leading state park systems across the country have strengthened visitation and revenue by developing close partnerships with their state's tourism agency to promote parks as premier travel destinations. Tennessee State Parks partners with the Tennessee Department of Tourist Development to feature state parks in statewide tourism campaigns, digital advertising, travel guides, and seasonal promotions that showcase outdoor recreation, lodging, dining, and special events (Tennessee Department of Tourist Development, n.d.). Likewise, North Carolina State Parks works with Visit North Carolina to market parks alongside other attractions, encouraging visitors to extend their stays and explore multiple destinations throughout the state (Visit NC, n.d.). Michigan State Parks collaborates with Pure Michigan to feature parks in nationally recognized marketing campaigns that drive tourism and economic development. These

successful partnerships demonstrate how aligning park marketing with statewide tourism organizations increases brand visibility, attracts new visitors, and leverages existing marketing resources (Michigan Economic



Figure 13 - Wind Creek State Park

Development Corporation, n.d.). By integrating state parks into broader tourism marketing efforts, these states have expanded their reach beyond traditional outdoor enthusiasts and attracted families, retirees, and leisure travelers seeking nature-based experiences.

State Park Foundations

Due to the unique relationship between the Alabama State Park System and the Alabama State Park Foundation and the fact that the Foundation is not governed as a state agency, our team felt it appropriate to expand our research to cover similar park system foundations and other non-profit entities. Our goal was to identify successful leadership methods as well as effective marketing techniques to best promote their mission and beneficiary's needs.

Developing Board Structure and Accountability in Foundations

Successful state park foundations often distinguish themselves through highly structured Boards that provide consistent leadership, fundraising accountability, and long-term strategic direction (National Association of State Park Foundations, n.d.). States such as Texas, Tennessee, and Florida have developed foundation governance models with clearly defined board expectations, membership requirements, and responsibilities. For example, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation operates with a board structure designed to include influential community leaders, conservation advocates, and philanthropic partners who actively support the mission of the foundation (Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation, n.d.). Board members are expected to serve as ambassadors for the organization, assist with fundraising efforts, participate in strategic planning, and use their professional networks to expand financial support. Similarly, the Florida State Parks Foundation utilizes a structured board model with defined leadership roles, committee participation, and expectations for board engagement (Florida State Parks Foundation, n.d.). These types of governance practices help ensure that board members are active contributors who provide financial, professional, and community support to advance the foundation's mission.

The success of foundations in states such as Tennessee is also connected to formal board recruitment, retention, and accountability practices. The Tennessee State Parks Conservancy demonstrates the importance of having boards composed of members who understand their role

as fundraisers, advocates, and organizational leaders (Tennessee State Parks Conservancy, n.d.). Many successful foundations establish expectations for board members through written commitments that may include minimum terms of service, attendance requirements, participation on committees, annual giving expectations, donor outreach responsibilities, and assistance with fundraising campaigns. These expectations create continuity and ensure that the foundation benefits from committed leadership rather than relying on short-term involvement (National Association of State Park Foundations, n.d.).

Implementing Marketing Campaigns to Increase Funding

While marketing is often viewed as a means for a business to sell a product, nonprofits also actively engage in what is known as cause marketing to “identify potential supporters, make sure supporters know... the great work the nonprofit is doing, and give them opportunities to be involved” (Salesforce, n.d.) Our research found multiple examples of cause marketing in other states.

Leveraging Accessibility Campaigns

A popular marketing campaign identified in other states emphasizes the need to expand accessibility and inclusion in public parks. Florida's State Parks Foundation promotes the Florida parks' services by annually recognizing the accessibility features available throughout the park system during the month of July, which commemorates the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and is widely recognized as Disability Pride Month. As part of this initiative, the foundation publishes editorials on its website highlighting accessible amenities available across Florida's state parks. These features include fully accessible river tour boats, beach-accessible wheelchairs—including all-terrain and floating models at select parks—beach access matting for wheelchair users and individuals with mobility limitations, wheelchair-accessible electric trams, accessible fishing piers, and the William J. "Billy Joe" Rish Recreation Area, a facility specifically designed for individuals with disabilities, their families, and caregivers (Gill Woodward, 2024). In addition to raising awareness, the foundation encourages financial support through its Access for All campaign. The campaign's page on the official Florida State Parks website serves

as a centralized resource, providing the park system's accessibility and inclusion policy, information on wheelchair and power-driven mobility device use, and guidance regarding the service animal policy (Florida State Parks, Access for All).

Promoting Health and Wellness Campaigns

Another common marketing campaign our team identified was the use of health and wellness to promote state parks around the country. West Virginia's State Parks System, State Parks Foundation, Department of Health, Department of Human Services, and Department of Health Facilities, in collaboration with Governor Patrick Morrisey, developed the Mountaineer Mile initiative. This campaign includes designated one-mile walking trails at each of the state's 32 parks, statewide wellness messaging across the departments, and public health participation. It was reported that the campaign "encourages all West Virginians to walk one mile each day as part of a broader effort to foster wellness and improve health outcomes across the state" (West Virginia Department of Health, 2025).

While not specifically led by a nonprofit, another example of cause marketing focused on health and wellness in parks is Tennessee's "Healthy Parks, Healthy Person" campaign. It served as a collaboration between the Tennessee State Park System and the Tennessee Department of Public Health to develop an app that allows users to log physical activity done at any park in the state, even local parks. It aims to promote the parks as a form of preventative healthcare and recommends them as tools for supporting physical and mental health, obesity prevention, stress reduction, and chronic disease prevention. Their website currently boasts over 11,000 app users (Healthy Parks Healthy Person, *What is HPHP?*).

Implementing Nature & Conservation Campaigns

Nature-based conservation campaigns provide an opportunity to generate new revenue while simultaneously advancing an agency's mission of protecting the state's natural resources. Special events centered on outdoor recreation—such as fishing tournaments, bird-watching competitions, wildlife photography contests, hiking challenges, and native plant identification

events—can attract a broad audience of outdoor enthusiasts. Unlike traditional fundraising efforts, these events connect participants directly with the natural resources their contributions help preserve, strengthening emotional connections that encourage continued financial support



Figure 14 – Monte Sano State Park

and long-term donor engagement (National Association of State Park Directors [NASPD], 2024; National Audubon Society, n.d.). These events often receive financial support from corporate sponsors, outdoor retailers, tourism organizations, and local businesses that benefit from increased visitation.

Texas Parks and Wildlife, in coordination with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation, hosts numerous fishing tournaments, birding festivals, and wildlife observation events throughout its state parks that attract thousands of participants annually while promoting conservation education and local tourism. One of the strongest examples is the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's Great Texas Birding Classic, the nation's largest birdwatching tournament. The event generates conservation funding through team registration fees, corporate sponsorships, and donations. In 2025, the tournament attracted 226 teams and more than 1,300 participants, raising \$60,000 for bird habitat conservation grants. Since its inception in 1997, the event has generated more than \$1.275 million to support habitat restoration, wildlife conservation, and nature tourism projects throughout Texas (Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, n.d.).

Driving Checkout Donations for Charitable Giving

When researching best practices beyond state park foundations, we found that nonprofit organizations are partnering with private-sector organizations to generate donations through checkout campaigns, including both fixed-dollar contributions and round-up options. We found the group Engage for Good, which researches effective strategies for nonprofits engaging in cause marketing. Their 2025 annual report determined that overall, “brands [working with

nonprofits] that made giving easy through integrated payment systems and paired that ease with relevant, emotionally compelling causes saw strong results” (Engage for Good, 2025, p. 3). While many foundations and charities in the report are associated with a private, retail business, one of the most successful nonprofits identified is the Children’s Miracle Network which raised over \$53.3 million in charitable giving in 2024 via partnerships with Walmart and Ace Hardware.

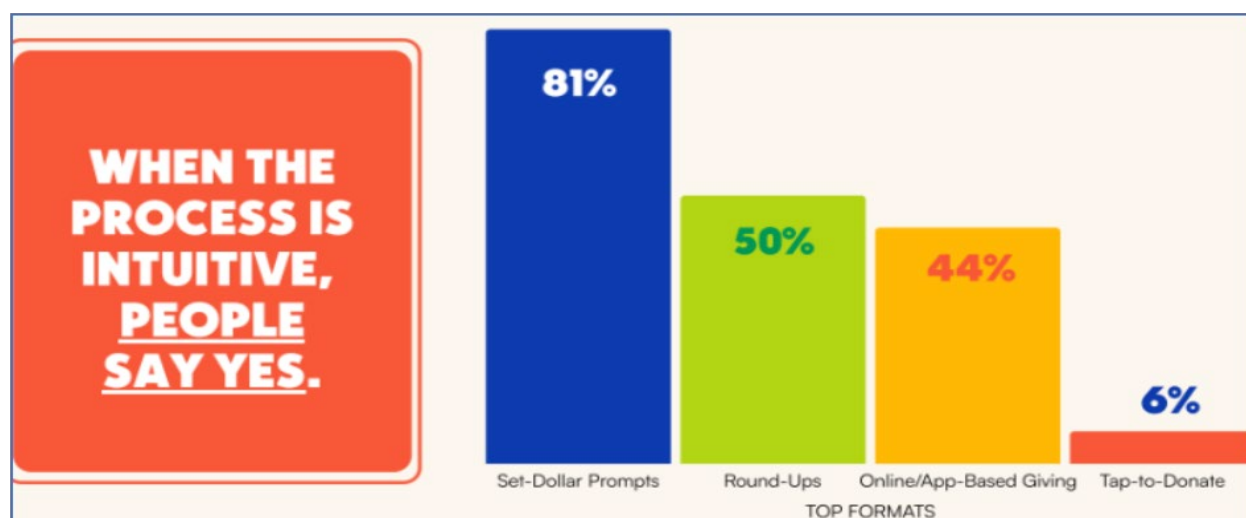


Figure 15 - Top Donation Formats (Engage for Good, 2025, pg. 7)

Most surprising from the report is the fact that set-dollar prompts and round-ups at checkout with a business are the most successful options for potential donors to a nonprofit. As shown in Figure 8, set-dollar donation prompts at checkout were more than 80% more effective because "round-up prompts and set-dollar options helped reduce hesitation and decision fatigue. When donors didn't have to overthink the ask, they gave more often and with greater confidence" (Engage for Good, 2025, p. 7). These findings suggest that offering a simple donation process at a point of purchase can significantly increase participation and overall fundraising success for a cause marketing or fundraising campaign. With this information in mind, our team expanded our research outside the eight states we initially selected and found that the Ohio State Parks Foundation has conducted what was called the “Pennies for Parks” campaign, where business sponsors could offer round-up donations on behalf of the Ohio foundation. While we found no specific financial results publicly available during our research, the campaign provides a blueprint for how a foundation could implement a similar program (Daris, 2022).

Developing Sponsorship and Partnership Opportunities

Several state park foundations have successfully expanded financial support by developing long-term sponsorship and partnership programs with corporations, nonprofit organizations, and local businesses. Rather than relying solely on individual donations, these organizations cultivate strategic relationships that provide recurring funding, volunteer support, and increased public visibility. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation has established numerous corporate partnerships that support conservation, public access, educational programming, and capital improvement projects throughout the Texas State Park System (Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation, n.d.). This diversified partnership model has enabled the foundation to generate substantial private support for projects that extend beyond available state appropriations, demonstrating how corporate sponsorships can become a sustainable revenue source for state parks (Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation, n.d.).

Additionally, we found that the Florida State Parks Foundation and the Tennessee State Parks Conservancy has similarly developed sponsorship programs by partnering with corporations, community organizations, and philanthropic foundations to fund various park improvements. By aligning sponsorship opportunities with projects that reflect a company's corporate social responsibility goals, these foundations have created mutually beneficial relationships that provide long-term financial and promotional value (Florida State Parks Foundation, n.d.; Tennessee State Parks Conservancy, n.d.).

RESULTS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The team's findings from researching other state park systems demonstrates benchmark examples of practical, realistic approaches that serve as foundational strategies to promote park awareness with the public. Our additional research into successful state park foundations and private nonprofit organizations demonstrates how strategic partnerships, diversified revenue streams, and enhanced donor engagement can benefit Alabama's state parks. Overall, our team determined that the challenges we were tasked to address can be effectively approached

through two areas of focus: fundraising and marketing. These two priorities can then be divided between the Alabama State Park System and the Alabama State Parks Foundation.

Alabama State Parks System

The Alabama State Parks Agency has significant opportunities to strengthen its long-term financial sustainability by expanding revenue-generating initiatives while continuing to protect the state's natural resources. By leveraging Alabama's diverse natural landscapes and expanding funding from grants, incentive and loyalty programs, concession models, brand strategies, and partnering with the Department of Tourism, the Alabama State Parks can build sustainable funding streams while preserving its parks for future generations.

Pursue Grant Funding to Support Operations

Because the Alabama State Parks System operates under a self-sustaining funding model that relies heavily on user-generated revenue, expanding grant funding represents a significant opportunity to strengthen its long-term financial sustainability. Our research demonstrates that, while Alabama has successfully leveraged recent bond funding and private philanthropy to support capital improvements, comparable state park systems have institutionalized grant acquisition as a core component of their funding strategies. States such as North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee routinely pursue competitive funding opportunities through programs such as the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), the Recreational Trails Program, and other federal initiatives to finance park acquisitions, trail development, accessibility improvements, and recreational infrastructure. With more than \$85 million in grant funding awarded for parks and outdoor recreation projects, North Carolina illustrates the substantial financial resources available through competitive grants—resources that Alabama could more aggressively pursue to enhance its state parks.

To capitalize on this opportunity, our team recommends that the Alabama State Parks System adopt a more coordinated and proactive grant funding strategy to explore grant opportunities such as LWCF and RTP, when appropriate, and when any long-term federal restrictions make sense for a particular project. Such an approach would build upon the park system's

demonstrated success in educational programming, accessibility initiatives, and facility improvements. Our research further indicates that Alabama's diverse natural resources and recent investments in park infrastructure positions the system as a strong candidate for competitive grant opportunities. By establishing grant development as an ongoing strategic priority rather than an occasional funding source, Alabama State Parks can diversify its revenue portfolio, accelerate priority projects, and strengthen its ability to preserve and enhance the state's parks for future generations

Expand Visitor Engagement Through Incentive and Loyalty Programs

To increase the Park System's offerings to the public, our team recommends targeting the established market of Alabama's public employees. Our research found that the Alabama State Parks System already offers eligible state employees discounted lodging rates when traveling on official business, demonstrating an existing commitment to serving the state's workforce. However, best practices identified in other state park systems suggest that broader incentive and loyalty programs can encourage repeat visitation while creating sustainable revenue streams. For example, Texas and Tennessee have successfully implemented annual pass programs and other visitor incentive initiatives that promote repeat visits, strengthen customer loyalty, and encourage visitors to explore multiple parks throughout their respective systems. These programs increase visitor engagement while supporting long-term financial sustainability.

Building upon its existing employee discount program, the Alabama State Parks System should explore expanded recreational incentives designed specifically for state employees, encouraging them and their families to visit parks outside of work travel. To ensure that any expanded offers are limited to public employees—one of the state's largest workforce populations—the park system could utilize existing forms of employment verification. Most Alabama state government employees possess official identification badges or can provide proof of membership through the Retirement Systems of Alabama (RSA). Likewise, many public-school employees have school-issued identification cards or name badges that verify their employment.

The Park System can also leverage existing communication channels to promote these incentives. The Alabama State Personnel Department distributes a regular newsletter to state employees via email, while the RSA publishes a monthly Advisor newsletter for its members. These established, no-cost communication platforms provide valuable opportunities for the Park System to share positive news stories, highlight upcoming events, and promote exclusive discounts or incentives for public employees. By encouraging greater park visitation among this audience, Alabama State Parks can increase attendance, foster a deeper appreciation for the state's natural resources among public servants and their families, and generate additional revenue through lodging, camping, dining, golf, and other park amenities.

Expand Visitor Amenities Through Innovative Concession Models

The Alabama State Parks System has an opportunity to increase visitor satisfaction while generating additional revenue by expanding self-service or automated vending options for recreational equipment, camping supplies, and everyday necessities such as food and beverages. Our research highlights that high-achieving state park systems enhance the visitor experience through public-private partnerships that provide these amenities without requiring the park system to assume the full operational burden. Tennessee and Florida, for example, utilize concession agreements to expand visitor services while creating additional revenue streams. Florida State Parks demonstrates the revenue potential of a diversified concession model, generating more than \$82 million annually through combined user fees and concession activities while operating more than 90 concession partnerships statewide. These examples demonstrate that strategically expanding access to recreational equipment and convenience items can improve the overall visitor experience while supporting the long-term financial sustainability of the park system.

Alabama is already a leading example of innovative concessions. Some potential examples include outsourcing lodging operations, such as at Lake Guntersville and Cheaha; pursuing food and beverage options at Joe Wheeler; exploring inflatable watersport opportunities at several parks; or expanding glamping opportunities at parks like Oak Mountain, Lake Lurleen, and Gulf State Park. The State Parks System also operates park stores and maintains partnerships with

major hospitality brands such as Marriott and Hilton; however, our team recommends that the park system broaden its solicitation of vendors to expand park services. Allowing vendors to independently operate self-service kiosks or maintain inventory would reduce the park system's operational responsibilities and the costs associated with purchasing, stocking, and managing these products. Implementing these expanded vending and rental opportunities, where appropriate, could increase participation in outdoor recreation, generate supplemental user-based revenue, and further strengthen the park system's self-sustaining funding model while continuing to provide exceptional recreational experiences across Alabama's diverse state parks.

Create a Statewide Brand Strategy to Increase Park Engagement

Our research found that the Alabama State Parks System does not have a dedicated marketing director whose sole responsibility is promoting the park system. The Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR) oversees a broad range of conservation programs beyond state parks, and its environmental messaging requires a different skill set than the tourism-focused marketing needed to increase park visitation and revenue. Hiring a marketing director with experience in nature-based tourism would enable the Alabama State Parks System to establish a distinct brand identity while complementing, rather than competing with, ADCNR's Outdoor Alabama brand.

Best practices from Tennessee and North Carolina further demonstrate the value of centralized marketing leadership. Both states promote their entire park systems under unified brands, enabling more efficient use of marketing resources, increasing awareness of lesser-known destinations, and encouraging repeat visitation across their park systems. Establishing a dedicated marketing director would provide Alabama State Parks with similar advantages by leading coordinated branding efforts, strengthening partnerships with the Alabama State Parks Foundation and tourism organizations, and ensuring consistent marketing and communication across all 21 state parks. This position would also allow the park system to implement long-term marketing strategies, measure campaign performance, and build greater public awareness of Alabama's diverse recreational opportunities.

Create Sustainable Growth Through Tourism Collaboration

Our team further recommends that the Alabama State Parks System establish a stronger, more formal partnership with the Alabama Department of Tourism. The department's primary mission is to promote Alabama as a travel destination to visitors from outside the state, making it a natural strategic partner for expanding awareness of Alabama State Parks. Our research found that Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Arkansas, West Virginia, Texas, and Michigan all collaborate closely with their respective tourism agencies to feature state parks in travel guides, digital advertising campaigns, seasonal promotions, and destination marketing initiatives. These coordinated efforts have strengthened brand visibility, increased visitation, and attracted new audiences to their park systems.

Alabama has a unique competitive advantage, with state parks spanning from the Gulf Coast to the Appalachian foothills, positioning the park system as a year-round destination for outdoor recreation, heritage tourism, and conservation education. To capitalize on this opportunity, the Alabama State Parks System should work with the Alabama Department of Tourism to participate in regional and national travel, tourism, and media events. A representative from the park system—ideally the individual responsible for marketing—could attend these events to showcase Alabama State Parks, engage with travel writers, journalists, tourism professionals, and tour operators, and promote the state's diverse recreational opportunities. Expanding the park system's presence at these events would increase national visibility, generate valuable media coverage, and position Alabama State Parks to attract more domestic and international visitors.

Alabama State Parks Foundation

Although the Alabama State Parks Foundation has experienced significant growth since its establishment in 2018, opportunities remain to expand its fundraising infrastructure, diversify revenue streams, and strengthen donor engagement. Adopting proven strategies used by established park foundations—including strengthening its board structure, implementing marketing campaigns, implement checkout donations, and increase sponsorships and partnerships.

Develop Board Structure and Accountability

The Alabama State Parks Foundation (Foundation) has an opportunity to strengthen its fundraising capacity and long-term sustainability by transitioning from a primarily volunteer governing board to a more active working board with clearly defined fundraising and leadership responsibilities. Our research demonstrates that the Foundation has experienced significant growth since its establishment in 2018. At the same time, the findings identify opportunities to further strengthen its fundraising infrastructure, broaden donor engagement, and expand philanthropic support.

Best practices from leading state park foundations in Texas, Florida, and Tennessee demonstrate that high-performing organizations establish clear expectations for board members. These expectations include active participation in fundraising, donor cultivation, strategic planning, committee service, and leveraging professional and community networks to expand financial support. Many foundations further reinforce these responsibilities through written board commitments that outline attendance expectations, annual giving requirements, and active involvement in fundraising initiatives. By adopting a similar working board model, the Alabama State Parks Foundation could better position its directors to support donor development, cultivate new corporate partnerships, expand statewide awareness, and advance the Foundation's long-term fundraising goals. Such an approach would build upon the Foundation's existing momentum while creating a more engaged leadership structure capable of sustaining philanthropic growth and increasing support for Alabama's state parks.

Implement Marketing Campaigns to Increase Funding

Developing strong marketing campaigns represents one of the most effective strategies for the Foundation to increase charitable giving and strengthen donor engagement. Targeted, mission-focused campaigns can help connect supporters to the Foundation's purpose while clearly demonstrating the impact of their contributions. Our research indicates that campaigns are most successful when they present charitable giving as an opportunity to become part of a meaningful cause. Personalized messaging that speaks directly to prospective donors can effectively communicate how contributions will be used and the tangible outcomes they will achieve.

One example of a targeted campaign would focus on the health benefits of outdoor recreation. Many people may be unfamiliar with the extensive trail systems and recreational opportunities available within Alabama State Parks. Developing a health-focused campaign in partnership with organizations such as the Alabama Department of Public Health, the State Employees' Health Insurance Plan, or the Public Education Employees' Health Insurance Plan would provide the Foundation and Park System with immediate access to a large audience of potential participants and supporters. Similarly, an education-focused campaign could highlight programs such as the Junior Park Ranger Program while increasing awareness among families, K–12 school systems, colleges, and universities of the educational opportunities available throughout Alabama's state parks.

Our research also found that conservation-focused campaigns, such as those implemented in Texas, can significantly strengthen the Alabama State Parks Foundation's visibility while expanding its donor pipeline. These initiatives attract highly engaged outdoor enthusiasts who are often deeply committed to



Figure16 - Lake Guntersville State Park

protecting public lands, making them strong candidates for long-term philanthropic support. Building on the success of the golf tournament, our team recommends that the Foundation establish an annual series of signature conservation events, such as birding championships, 21 parks nature challenge, or a bass tournament series that could highlight the parks waterfront locations and nature trails. By combining outdoor recreation, conservation education, and charitable giving, these signature campaigns would diversify revenue sources, strengthen community partnerships, increase statewide awareness of Alabama State Parks, and cultivate a lasting culture of stewardship that supports the long-term financial sustainability of both the Foundation and the Alabama State Parks System.

Drive Checkout Donations for Charitable Giving

While corporate donors are an important source of support for nonprofit organizations, smaller individual donations can accumulate into a significant and sustainable source of funding over time. Our research identifies checkout donation campaigns as an increasingly effective fundraising strategy used by nonprofit organizations in partnership with private-sector businesses. According to the Engage for Good 2025 report referenced previously, campaigns that integrate charitable giving into the checkout process and make donating simple and convenient for customers consistently generate strong fundraising results. Furthermore, the “Pennies for Parks” campaign conducted by the Ohio State Parks Foundation provides an example of how a nonprofit can work to raise charitable giving for a park system.

Our team recommends that the Alabama State Parks Foundation work with private businesses to implement checkout donation campaigns, beginning with retailers that have strong connections to outdoor recreation, such as Bass Pro Shops or Academy Sports + Outdoors. We recommend initially implementing a round-up-at-checkout program, as this format is familiar to most consumers and requires minimal effort to participate. If successful, the Foundation could expand these efforts to include fixed-dollar donation options, which our research suggests can generate even greater contributions. Strategic partnerships with local and regional businesses would increase public awareness of the Foundation while encouraging widespread participation in supporting Alabama State Parks. The Park System can also implement round-up donations at checkout for their online booking or offer fixed amount donations when processing park fees. For example, if every visitor who visited Alabama State Parks in the 2024-2025 fiscal year had donated just ten cents during their transaction to the Foundation, the Foundation would have earned \$523,300.

To maximize the effectiveness of these campaigns, the Foundation should collaborate closely with the Alabama State Parks System to develop a marketing campaign centered on a specific, highly visible need within the park system, such as expanding accessibility initiatives or improving trail infrastructure. Together, the Foundation and Park System could create a comprehensive marketing toolkit that includes signage, messaging, digital graphics, and other promotional

materials for participating businesses. Providing partners with consistent, professionally designed campaign materials would strengthen public recognition and encourage customer participation. By establishing these checkout donation partnerships, the Foundation could create a reliable, sustainable revenue stream while increasing public awareness of its mission and generating long-term philanthropic support for Alabama's state parks.

Develop Sponsorships and Partnerships Opportunities

Lastly, our team found that the Foundation has an opportunity to strengthen its long-term financial sustainability by developing a more comprehensive sponsorship and partnership program that engages corporations, nonprofit organizations, and community stakeholders in supporting Alabama's state parks. Our research demonstrates that the Foundation has already established relationships with several prominent corporate partners and has successfully leveraged private philanthropy to fund park enhancements. While these accomplishments reflect significant progress since the Foundation's establishment in 2018, our research identified best practices from state park foundations in Texas, Florida, and Tennessee that illustrate how strategic partnerships can extend well beyond traditional charitable giving. These organizations cultivate long-term relationships with businesses, outdoor recreation companies, conservation organizations, tourism partners, and philanthropic foundations to support major initiatives. Many of these partnerships combine financial sponsorship with in-kind donations, employee volunteerism, and collaborative marketing efforts that increase visibility for both the foundation and its partners. By developing sponsorship opportunities that align with corporate social responsibility objectives and specific park improvement initiatives, the Alabama State Parks Foundation can create mutually beneficial relationships that generate recurring financial support while expanding public awareness of its mission.

CONCLUSION

Alabama's state parks are more than beautiful places to visit—they are where families connect, traditions are passed from one generation to the next, and lasting memories are created. Our research demonstrates that both the Alabama State Parks System and the Alabama State Parks

Foundation have achieved significant success. Record visitation, national recognition, major capital improvements, expanding educational programs, and sustained philanthropic growth provide a strong foundation for the future. However, these accomplishments should not discourage the pursuit of practical opportunities for continued improvement. The recommendations presented in this report are intended to strengthen the partnership between the Park System and the Foundation so they can better fulfill that mission for years to come. As we consider the future of Alabama's state parks, we should remember that we are not simply investing in public lands—we are investing in the experiences, traditions, and memories that future generations will cherish for a lifetime.

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