

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS

Parks Division

OVERVIEW

The Parks Division is responsible for managing and conserving the scenic, historic, archaeological, and recreational resources at 55 park sites throughout the state. They vary in size from one-acre parks like Elkhorn Ghost Town State Park near Boulder, to over 11,000 acres at Makoshika State Park in Glendive. Montana's state parks provide diverse recreational opportunities for the public, including historic townsites; significant Native American sites; and recreational hiking, camping, and boating destinations. The Division is also responsible for outdoor recreation grant programs that provide funding to benefit public recreation statewide. This includes six grant opportunities for projects, involving recreational trails, off-highway vehicles (OHV), snowmobiling, and the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) program.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

State Parks

- In 2019, state parks had nearly three million visitors, and in 2020 our preliminary estimates show over 3.5 million visitors. There were over 79,000 camping nights booked in 2020 at 20 parks with 1,170 reservable sites. The statewide average of those camping in state parks was 65% resident and 35% non-resident.
- Infrastructure Projects: Several state parks had improvement projects completed, including lighting at Anaconda Stack State Park; water lines at Makoshika; and lighting, septic system replacement, shade shelter construction, and concession building improvements at Lewis and Clark Caverns.
- Fort Owen State Park: Public access and parking issues were resolved in partnership with the adjacent landowner by securing a site to relocate public parking. The parking area is anticipated to be ready in the spring of 2021. The Friends of Fort Owen contributed \$25,000 to replace roofs on two historic buildings and the State Parks Foundation secured a large private grant to help fund this project.
- Big Arm State Park: A permanent recreation easement negotiated between FWP and DNRC added 23 acres along Flathead Lake to the existing Big Arm site in perpetuity.
- Montana State Parks AmeriCorps Program: In 2020, 21 members contributed over 24,600 service hours to 28 state parks and promoted healthy, active, and environmentally aware communities by enhancing park land, enriching educational opportunities, increasing volunteerism and stewardship, and improving community outreach.
- Volunteer Program: A total of 432 volunteers provided 30,573 hours of service hours for state parks in 2020. This is the equivalent of 14.70 FTE.
- Interpretation and education programs continued in 2020. We delivered programs using social media and other virtual platforms, allowing people from all over the country to learn about Montana's state parks. Additionally, over 10,000 people enjoyed modified, in person programs at parks.
- The Heritage Program continues to engage in important partnerships with the Museum of the Rockies, National Park Service, University of Montana, and Montana State University to advance objectives of the Heritage Program Plan. These partnerships assist with artifact collections, archeological site surveys, and historic site consultation.
- The Division has focused on maintaining strategic partnerships and engaging constituents in a manner that is transparent and supportive of the entire state parks system. The Division will continue to build on these efforts while taking a comprehensive, inward look at its core assets and opportunities, to clearly define management objectives using the **2019 Classification and Investment Policy**. This policy is instrumental in achieving Park's vision to create a healthy and resilient park system.
- We are more proactive in working effectively with key partners such as Friends groups and the State Park Foundation and are finding new successes to diversify our funding portfolio through philanthropic measures and securing grants for projects.

- We recognize the important role that technology and communication tools play in serving the public. Working with FWP's Technology Services Division staff, we are identifying and prioritizing key needs, particularly in internet service capability. Given how remote some of our state parks are, there are communication challenges, but with technological advancements we hope to improve service.
- The Division is making data-driven decisions a standard practice within its operations. This includes using quantitative and qualitative data to ensure we are strategically directing resources to our highest priorities. We are using this approach to assess our infrastructure and maintenance needs to develop a clear picture of the current condition of our assets, evaluate deferred maintenance needs, and develop a plan of action for the important cultural, historic, and recreational resources we steward. We also are developing a process to track our progress over time and to ensure we do not lose institutional knowledge when staff transitions.
- We have partnered with the University of Montana to improve our visitation estimation using more and better data. We have added 100 new visitation counters at nearly every entry point throughout the 55 parks, and we are gaining a more accurate read on visitation. These data help inform site-specific planning and is an important factor in the management and operations of our parks.

Recreational Grant Programs

- We provided over \$410,000 in winter snowmobile grooming grants to 25 private snowmobile clubs statewide. We purchased replacement snowmobile trail groomers for use by the Bozeman, Dillon, and Haugen/St. Regis Snowmobile Clubs. Through the snowmobile program, significant efforts have been made to support avalanche education and awareness training.
- We awarded \$178,985 in grants for OHV projects to 11 sponsors statewide.
- Recreational Trails Program grants were awarded to 45 sponsors, totaling approximately \$1.6 million.

CHALLENGES

- We are continuing to address significant deferred maintenance projects across our state parks. Some of our parks' aging infrastructure systems are far beyond their useful life, and maintenance of these is a costly endeavor. These systems must be replaced with consideration for the health and safety of all. We are developing a Facility Condition Inventory tool that will track the numerous projects we need to address across the state. The tool will help determine priorities using important factors such as public health and safety, need, cost, and urgency. This is a short-term solution, and a long-term one is needed.
- Low staffing levels limit the ability to effectively manage programs. We have static FTE, but visitation is increasing throughout much of the calendar year. Our reliance on volunteers limits our ability to effectively address visitor safety and provide quality customer service in many of our parks.
- We cannot hire seasonal help early or keep them on longer to address the steady shoulder season (early spring and late fall) visitation that we are experiencing.
- Montana's state park system includes more than 200 recorded historic and archaeological sites, including seven National Historic Landmarks and 10 sites listed in the National Register of Historic Places. We need to both promote and protect these important cultural and heritage resources. This requires a lot of time and attention with limited capacity.
- We continue to partner with FWP enforcement staff to address compliance issues related to state park rules and regulations. However, there are demands on enforcement staff beyond state parks. We anticipate visitation will continue to increase, and more people using state parks in the shoulder season when staffing levels are low will only exacerbate this challenge.
- Each year, the outdoor recreation grant programs require increasing amounts of staff time, accounting, and documentation. Federal appropriation amounts and timing have been unpredictable, causing inconvenience for the public and in administration.