

Cape Cod Times

June 8, 2006

State parks have lost their luster due to neglect.

Massachusetts: a proud history when it comes to setting aside and protecting public lands.

1634: the first public common in America.

1868: the first playground.

1876: the first hiking club.

1890: the first land trust.

1893: the first metropolitan park system.

Today, among the last in per-capita spending on state and local parks and recreation and dead last as a percentage of personal income.

From 2001-2005, funding for state parks dropped 34 percent, according to a report by the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation.

The state estimates that it faces a backlog of \$750 million in maintenance projects at state parks.

Since 2003, the number of employees at the state Department of Conservation and Recreation has declined by 158.

"While 45 park rangers patrol the Statehouse every day, there are only six park rangers to staff the 450,000 acres of parkland outside the metropolitan-Boston area," Michael and Kitty Dukakis wrote last month in an op-ed in the Globe. "Half of the state park campgrounds that sleep almost 4,000 visitors a night are not staffed around the clock."

Nowhere is this neglect more evident than in the filthy bathrooms of many of our state parks. Doesn't the state realize that state parks represent a major economic engine for local businesses? If they are not well kept, visitors will not return.

The shocking state of our parks has prompted a well-organized effort to turn things around. Katherine Abbott, former DCR commissioner, is leading the

Common Cents for the Common Wealth Campaign, a project of the Trust for Public Lands that aims to boost public funding of state parks.

Abbott is trying to get all the gubernatorial candidates to commit to increasing state park funding by \$10 million a year in each of the winner's four years in office. Currently, the state spends only \$82 million on its parks, which is one-third of 1 percent of the state budget. By contrast, New York City spends 1 percent of its operating budget on its parks.

But Common Cents Campaign is more than fighting for dollars. It's mobilizing the myriad of private, nonprofit environmental groups across the state to support the parks. It's also convincing nonenvironmental groups, such as public health organizations, to see the connection between parks and campaigns to reduce obesity. It's convincing religious organizations to become better stewards of God's creation by hosting state park cleanups.

Abbott should also consider forming a private, nonprofit group, similar to the National Parks Foundation, that can also leverage more private and public funding for our parks. That does not mean that we should rename the Shawme Crowell State Forest in Sandwich the Gillette State Park, but this is a perfect opportunity for public-private partnerships to improve the state of our parks.

(Published: June 8, 2006)