

## NEW HAMPSHIRE STATE PARKS

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### *A Study on the Impacts of Public Funding and Specialized Parks Departments*

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

New Hampshire has the only state park system in America that is entirely self-funded. The New Hampshire State Legislature is interested in determining whether the current self-funding scheme can provide sufficient funding to maintain the quality of New Hampshire's state parks. To address this question, we provide a benchmark comparison between New Hampshire's state park system and those of other similar states. We then assess whether a state park system's funding scheme affects the quality of state parks, based on empirical evidence from the states.

The New Hampshire State Legislature is also interested in determining whether the organizing structure of the state park system affects the quality or key statistics of state park systems. Based on empirical evidence from the states, we assess whether the existence of a specialized parks department has any such effects.

Our research yielded two key findings. Most importantly, one of the potential problems of a completely self-funded system is the volatility of important key variables. New Hampshire's state park system has proved to be especially susceptible to this volatility in attendance, operating budget, and dedication of budget to capital expenditures. Additionally, we conclude that the existence of a specialized parks department does not by itself appear to impact a state park system's revenue or operating expenditures. We also found, however, that having a specialized parks department is associated with increased attendance.

## **1. BACKGROUND OF NEW HAMPSHIRE STATE PARKS**

### *1.1 Change in Funding Structure*

In the early 1990's New Hampshire, along with the rest of the country, was suffering from an economic recession. With less tax revenue in the General Fund, the New Hampshire State Legislature was forced to cut expenditures wherever possible, and ultimately mandated that the New Hampshire state park system become entirely self-funded. New Hampshire is the only state in the union that provides no general funding for its state parks.

When the New Hampshire State Legislature discontinued general funding for the state park system in 1991, they also established the State Park Fund, which is comprised of the Park Account, and the Ski Area Account.

### *1.2 Current Snapshot of the New Hampshire State Park System*

Here we provide a current snapshot of key information about New Hampshire's state park system. The inventory that we compiled focuses on the state park system's size, budget, attendance, and staffing, as of 2008. Table 1.2.1 details these figures.

**Table 1.2.1 New Hampshire State Park Inventory Information, 2008**

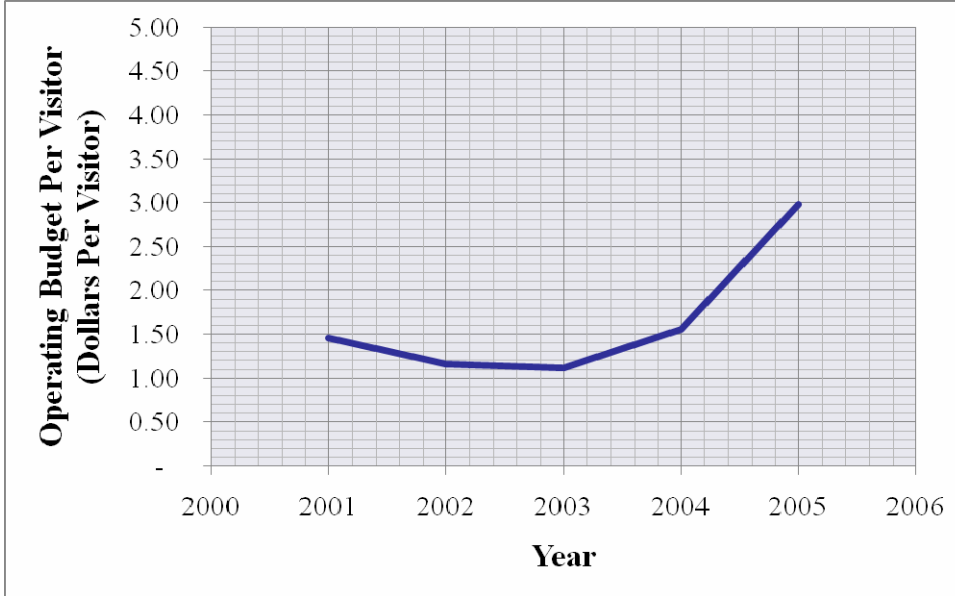
Number of Parks	73
Acres of Parks	231,554
Total Operating Expenses	\$7,370,936
Total Operations Revenues	\$4,324,297
Attendance - Total	1,625,683
Total Attendance in Fee Areas	1,043,338
Total Attendance in Non-Fee Areas	582,345
Total Day Attendance	1,414,266
Total Overnight Attendance	211,417
Total Personnel	487
Permanent Personnel	47
Seasonal Personnel	440

We use many of these key inventory categories throughout our report. Analyzing trends in these inventory categories provides insight into potential changes in the state park system’s quality. The inventory information presented above is the most current snapshot of the New Hampshire state park system. At the outset, it is important to note that the total operating expenses outstrip the total revenues by a significant degree, implying that the park system started the year 2009 with a deficit of over \$3 million. As will be seen and analyzed in the report, some of the key statistics like attendance and operating budget vary greatly from one year to the next.

*1.3 Recent Trends of Important Park Statistics*

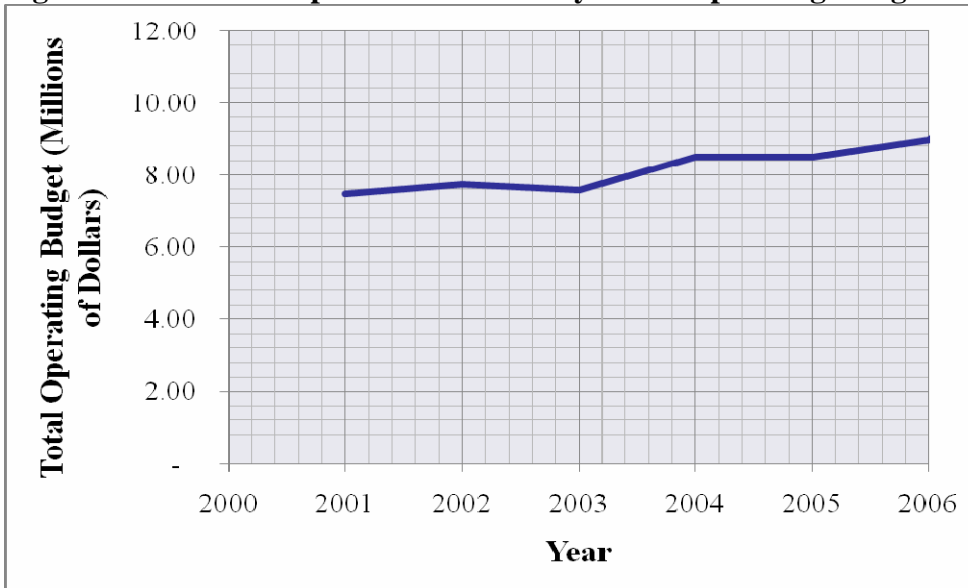
One important trend that we examine in this report is state park system expenditures per visitor over time. An increase in this statistic could imply the creation of additional trails, more amenities, or more of another item per visitor. This would likely impact the amount that each visitor enjoys the park system. We shall discuss the implications of expenditures per visitor over time as a quality metric in later sections of the report. Here, however, we provide a baseline of trends relating to the New Hampshire state park system’s operating budget and attendance over time.

**Figure 1.3.1 New Hampshire State Park System's Operating Budget Per Visitor**



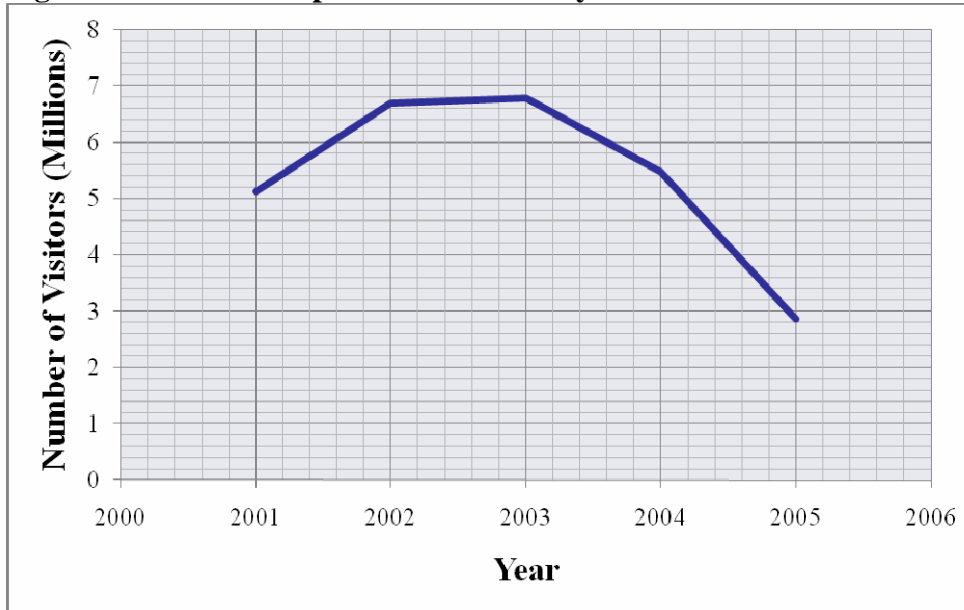
The graph above reveals a significant upward trend in the statistic of operating budget per visitor between 2004 and 2005. Without further analysis, it would be reasonable for one to conclude that the park system quality might be improving, since more money is being spent per visitor to the parks.

**Figure 1.3.2 New Hampshire State Park System's Operating Budget**



However, upon closer analysis of the breakdown of the operating budget per visitor, it becomes clear that knowing which variable is changing is important in interpreting changes in the statistic. As we can see from Figure 1.3.2, there is virtually no change in the operating budget between 2004 and 2005. Thus, the trends in attendance must be examined to find the source of the change in the operating budget per visitor.

**Figure 1.3.3 New Hampshire State Park System Attendance**



As evident in the graph above, attendance decreased significantly in the later portion of the years studied. While the initial statistic of operating budget at first appeared to be a good proxy for quality, it has some serious flaws. There is likely a minimum amount of money that needs to be spent on the parks to maintain quality from year to year. Thus, a large drop in attendance could be accompanied by a smaller drop in operating budget, leading to a reported increase in the statistic of operating budget. This increase of operating budget per visitor would not necessarily imply greater park quality. It is also important to note the significant variability in both the operating budget and attendance of the New Hampshire state park system. This variability will be studied further in comparison to other states.

## **2. COMPARISON OF NH STATE PARKS TO THOSE OF SIMILAR STATES**

### *2.1 Discussion of Quality Metrics*

One of the chief goals of this report is to determine whether there is a relationship between a state park system's funding structure and its quality. The "quality" of a state park system is an inherently subjective measure. With no universal standards to evaluate the quality of state parks, we determined several proxies that would best approximate quality metrics. The proxies we examined for quality were as follows:

1. State park system attendance trends
2. Standardized Operating and Capital Expenditures Per Acre
3. Standardized Operating and Capital Expenditures Per Visitor

In our attendance measures, we examined both long-term trends and the yearly variability of state park data. By analyzing this attendance information we are able to glean a few pieces of important information. First, any long-term trends can be seen as an indicator of state park system “demand.” We use any changes in demand as a gauge of park quality. Consistent increases in attendance most likely indicate a consistent or improving state park system, whereas consistent decreases in attendance most likely indicate a state park system of declining quality. Second, the yearly variability of a state park system’s attendance is particularly useful to know in the case of New Hampshire. Being completely self-funded, the New Hampshire state park system relies entirely on user fees to meet the needs of its operating and capital expenditures budget. Any volatility in attendance could have implications on the funding of the state park system.

While examining trends in attendance is useful, it is important to acknowledge the potential problems with using attendance trends as a proxy for quality. The most obvious difficulty of using such data is that we can never be completely sure that the data is accurate. The accuracy of attendance figures is only as accurate as the reporting and recording conducted by state park system workers. Attendance figures reported from non-fee areas are especially prone to error. However, to attempt to minimize any possible inaccuracies, this report uses yearly attendance figures from the same source. Accordingly, we increase the likelihood that the attendance information presented in this report has been collected with the same methodology from year to year. Hopefully, by using attendance figures from the same source, any potential errors in reporting methodology are, at the very least consistent over the years. While we took every measure to ensure the consistency of reporting methodology, there is no way to confirm the accuracy of the attendance figures that we present in this report. If there are substantial errors in collection of attendance data, the conclusions we make will be inherently flawed.

The standardized operating and capital expenditure information by acre and by visitor are two other useful indicators of a state park system’s quality. The operating expenditure information represents the funds necessary to run the park throughout the year. The capital expenditure information represents expenditures specifically allocated for land acquisition or park maintenance and construction projects. By standardizing the operating and capital expenditure information by acre and visitor, we can provide a meaningful state-by-state comparison of quality proxies. Greater amounts operating or capital expenditures per visitor or per acre might indicate a higher quality of a state park system.

## *2.2 Discussion of Comparison States*

We compared New Hampshire's state park system to those of four comparison states. The four comparison states that we analyze throughout the report are Vermont, Maine, New York and Alaska. Each of these states has a state park system that is similar to that of New Hampshire's in some ways and differs from New Hampshire's in others. Using these variables, we can consider what causes variation between New Hampshire's state park system and those of our comparison states.

### *2.2.1 Vermont*

Vermont has the state park system most similar to that of New Hampshire. The state park system of Vermont has a similar geography, similar park characteristics and size, and financial and attendance statistics of similar magnitude to New Hampshire's. Also, the budget structure of Vermont's state park system is most similar to that of New Hampshire. In 1991 both New Hampshire and Vermont mandated that their state park systems be completely self-funded. Vermont has since dedicated a portion of the state's General Fund to provide funding for state parks. However, Vermont is still largely self-funded.

### *2.2.2 Maine*

Maine has a state park system that is in many ways similar to that of New Hampshire, but that also differs in one key way. The state park system of Maine has similar geography, similar park characteristics and size, and financial and attendance statistics of similar magnitude to New Hampshire's. However, Maine's state park system differs from New Hampshire's in the nature of its funding scheme. Whereas New Hampshire relies exclusively on park-generated revenue to fund its state park system, Maine relies largely on money allocated from the state's General Fund.

### *2.2.3 New York*

New York's state park system is similar to that of New Hampshire in many respects but varies according to a few key variables. New York's state park system and New Hampshire's state park system are similar in geography and park characteristics. However, the two state park systems differ in their park size and budget structure, and have financial and attendance statistics of contrasting magnitudes.

### *2.2.4 Alaska*

Lastly, we compare Alaska's state park system with that of New Hampshire. The two state park systems have similar geography, similar park characteristics, and financial and attendance statistics of a similar magnitude. However, Alaska's state park system differs from that of New Hampshire according to its contrasting park size, and contrasting



budget structure. Alaska’s state park system is significantly larger than New Hampshire’s, and receives a large portion of its budget from the state’s General Funds.

**3. ASSESSING IMPACTS OF VARIOUS FUNDING SCHEMES**

*3.1 Distinguishing Between Various Funding Schemes of State Park Systems*

State park systems can obtain funding from two primary sources: self-funding or external funding. Under a self-funding scheme, revenues are generated internally from the park system. The most common ways to generate revenues under a self-funding scheme are through park entrance fees, parking passes, parking meters, boat launch fees, campground fees, hunting and fishing licenses, and concessions. Many states supplement these traditional revenue sources with additional, more creative methods, such as sales of park products like firewood and souvenirs.

Whereas self-funding generates revenues from within the park system, external funding includes all other revenues provided for the park system by an outside source. The most common form of external funding is public funding, whereby a specific amount of tax revenue from a state’s general fund is allocated to the state park system. Other common sources of external funding available to state park systems include state and federal grants. The most common federal grants that state park systems receive are Federal Land and Water Conservation Funding grants. However, these federal LWCF grants tend to account for only a small portion of a state park system’s overall budget. State park systems can also supplement their budget through philanthropic donations or dedicated funds.

While the New Hampshire State Park System is completely self-funded by park revenues, all other states incorporate both self-funding and external funding into their funding scheme.<sup>1</sup> The following table breaks down the sources of each state park system’s funding.

**Table 3.1.1 Funding Composition of Operating Budget by State, 2008**

State	Park-Generated Revenue	General Fund	Dedicated Funds	Federal Funds	Other
New Hampshire	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Alaska	29%	63%	2%	0%	6%
Maine	0%	80%	18%	2%	0%
New York	28%	66%	4%	2%	0%
Vermont	88%	12%	0%	0%	0%

As is clearly shown in the above table, the New Hampshire park system is the only one that relies purely on park-generated revenue for its operating budget. However, Vermont has a roughly similar funding scheme, with only 12% of its revenue coming from a general fund. Alaska and New York are in similar situations, with 28-29% of their revenue coming from park-generated revenues. Maine is in a seemingly unique situation, with no revenue being generated by its parks going toward the operating budget. With these groups in mind, we then compared key statistics of these states, both at present and over time.

*3.2 Key Park System Statistics Standardized by Park Acreage*

We identified a few key state park system statistics to compare in order to assess whether New Hampshire substantially differs from the comparison states. We compared the number of visitors per acre, number of employees (per one thousand acres), and number of dollars per acre. We believe that each of these statistics has the potential to act as a proxy for park quality. The statistics for each state park system are detailed below in Table 3.2.1.

**Table 3.2.1 Key Park System Statistics, 2008**

State	Visitors Per Acre	Employees Per 1000 Acres	Dollars Per Acre
New Hampshire	7.02	2.103	31.83
Alaska	1.48	.045	2.36
Maine	2.12	.307	8.81
New York	45.97	5.317	151.68
Vermont	10.13	5.907	111.26

There are several insights that can be drawn from this table. First, Vermont and New York both have over twice as many employees per 1,000 park acres as New Hampshire does, and Vermont spends more than three times as many dollars per acre as New Hampshire does. For all of these key statistics it appears at first that New Hampshire seems to be doing better than Alaska and Maine. However, characteristics specific to the park systems of these two states likely account for much of the difference. Both Alaska and Maine have a greater proportion of undeveloped park acreage to developed park acreage. Developed acreage by nature needs to have more dollars and employees, and would likely have more visitors than undeveloped acreage. Thus, the standardization by acreage is less effective in comparing these two states to the other three.

### 3.3 Impacts on Operating Budget and Attendance

The figure below uses the New Hampshire data from Figure 1.3.1 and adds the information from the other three states with similar budget and attendance magnitudes, for ease of comparison. As stated before, the statistic of operating budget per visitor has the potential to be a proxy for park quality, but changes in each of the variables must be considered in order to interpret trends correctly.

**Figure 3.3.1 New Hampshire and Comparison States - Operating Budget Per Visitor**

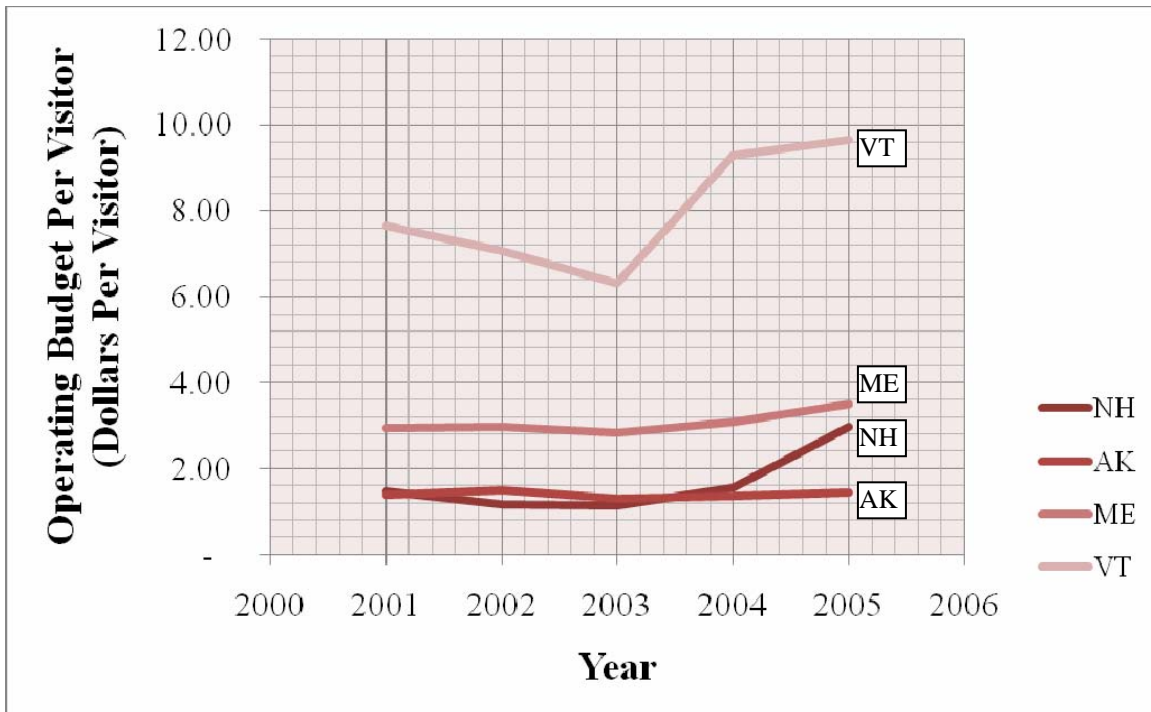
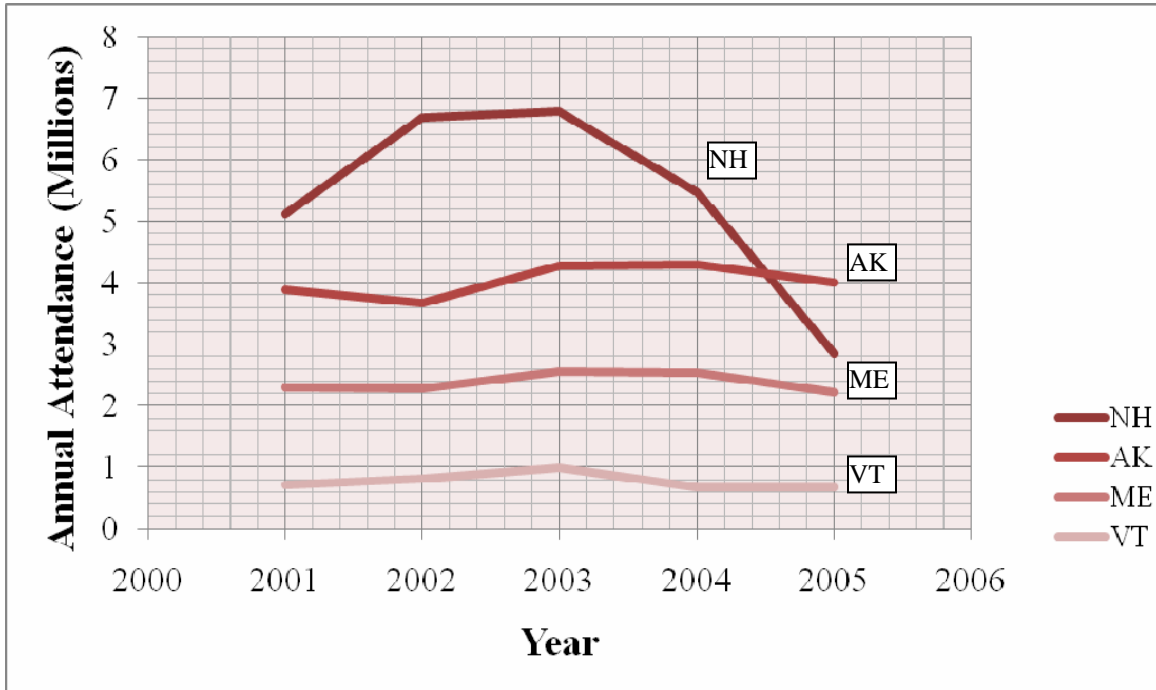


Figure 3.3.1 shows the trends over time of the operating budget per visitor of the comparison states. New Hampshire and Vermont, the two states that have the least amount of public funding, are clearly the most variable in the observed statistic. Additionally, New Hampshire consistently has one of the lowest operating budgets per visitor over the time period examined, and the increase at the end of the time period studied is due only to negative changes in attendance, not positive changes in operating budget.

**Figure 3.3.2 New Hampshire and Comparison States - Attendance**

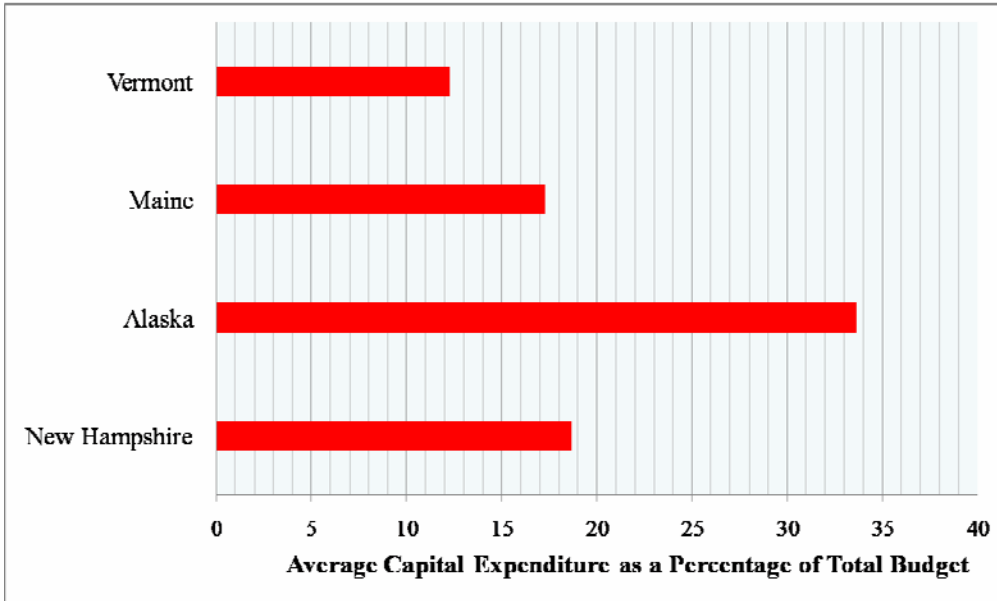


The figure above clearly shows the relative consistency in attendance of all states studied with the distinct exception of New Hampshire. While no other state shows significant changes in attendance over time, New Hampshire’s state park system exhibits a drop of over 50% percent in just the period between 2003 and 2005. Given the fact that New Hampshire’s attendance is so markedly variable from year to year, along with the fact that New Hampshire’s park operating budget obtains funds purely from park generated revenues, the goal of self-funding extremely difficult. Once again, we must recognize the problem with the reliability of attendance measures. Indeed, all attendance numbers were obtained from the same source, ostensibly implying all numbers were measured using the same methodology and same potential error. However, large errors in the methods of reporting attendance would greatly compromise the strength of conclusions given based on attendance data.

### 3.4 Impacts on Capital Expenditures

The capital expenditure information by acre and by visitor are also potentially useful indicators of a state park system’s quality. The capital expenditure information represents funds specifically allocated for land acquisition or park maintenance and construction projects. By standardizing capital expenditure information by acre and visitor, we can provide a meaningful state-by-state comparison of an additional quality proxy. Greater amounts operating or capital expenditures per visitor or per acre might indicate a higher quality of a state park system.

**Figure 3.4.1 Average Capital Expenditure as a Percentage of Total Budget, 2008**



New Hampshire appears to fare relatively well in this category, coming in second place among the states studied. Only Alaska surpasses New Hampshire in terms of average capital expenditure as a percentage of the total budget. However, there is a large probability that there are characteristics of park systems besides quality that inherently make them require more capital expenditures as a percentage of the total budget. Additionally, the average capital expenditure, though valuable information, does not tell the whole story. The variability of capital expenditures over time must also be examined.

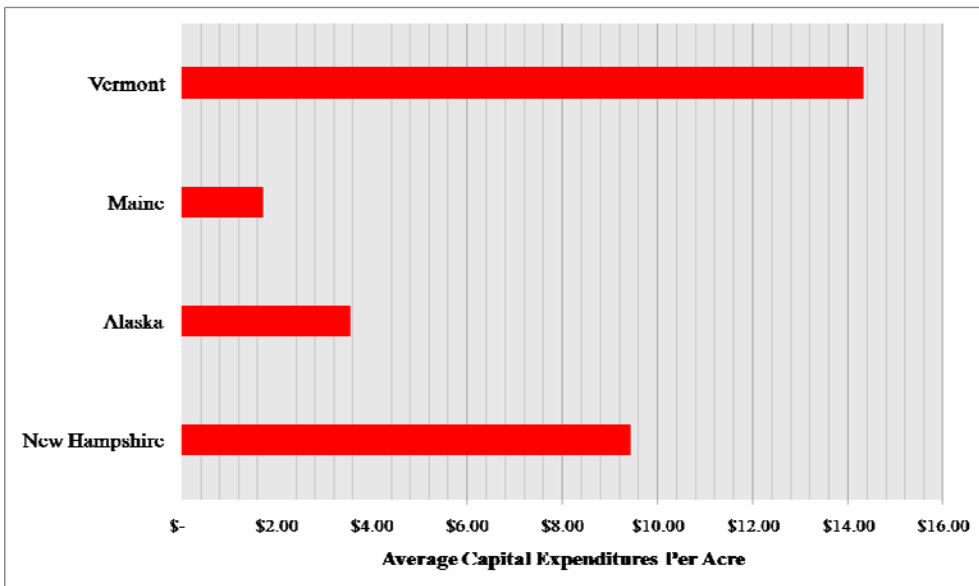
**Figure 3.4.2 Capital Expenditures as a Percentage of Total Budget (2001 – 2008)**

State	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
New Hampshire	46%	21%	19%	10%	33%	0%	0%	20%
Alaska	31%	6%	36%	27%	41%	41%	57%	30%
Maine	16%	38%	24%	11%	13%	21%	11%	4%
Vermont	2%	5%	21%	11%	8%	22%	22%	7%

The variability over time of the percentage of capital expenditures of the total budget is shown in Figure 3.4.2. New Hampshire’s capital expenditures as a percentage of total budget are extremely variable from year to year compared to other states. Though other states seem to exhibit some degree of variability in this statistic, New Hampshire is the only state whose park system invests no money in capital expenditures for two consecutive years.

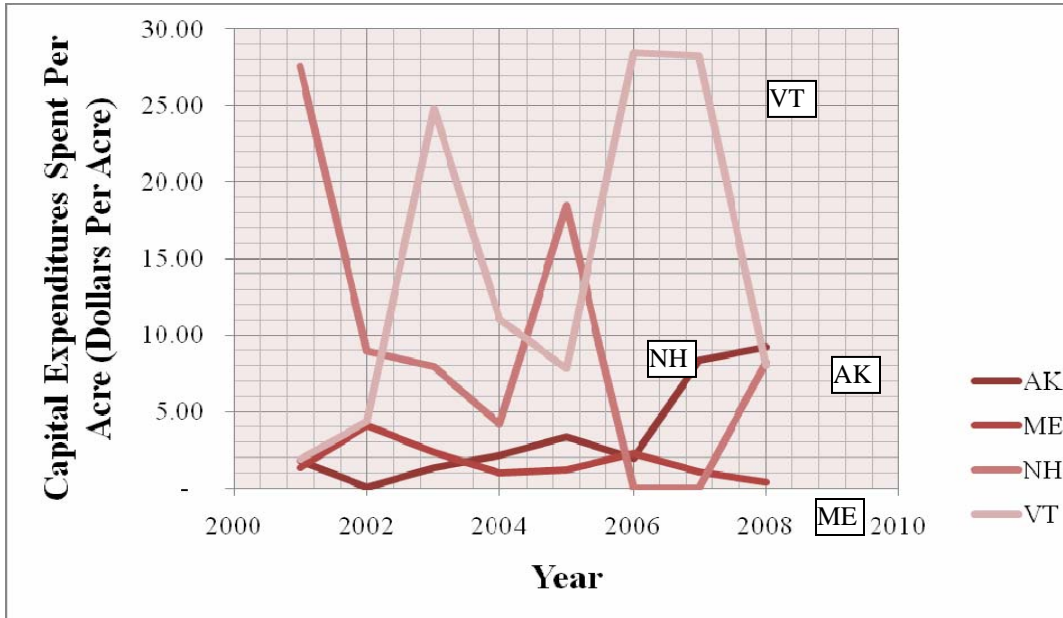
**Figure 3.4.3 Average Capital Expenditures Per Acre (2001 – 2008)**

Figure 3.4.3 shows the average capital expenditures per acre on average over the time period from 2001-2008. This might be a more effective measure of park quality, since some park systems might have a much larger acreage, thus requiring more capital investment per year.



Interestingly, New Hampshire and Vermont, the two states with the lowest amount of public funding, top the list in terms of how much on average they spend on capital expenditures per acre of their park systems. However, it is important to note that these two park systems have particular parks within their park systems that likely would require much more capital investment per acre than parks in Alaska or Maine. Mount Sunapee and Hampton Beach, for instance, likely fit in this category. Thus, though New Hampshire and Vermont top the list, their park systems might not necessarily have the best quality, just the most capital-intensive acreage.

Figure 3.4.4 Capital Expenditures Spent Per Acre (2001 – 2008)



Looking at the graph over time of capital investment shows the variability over time of the figure. Once again, the two states with the least amount of public funding exhibit by far the most variability in this key statistic.

Figure 3.4.5 Average Capital Expenditures Per Visitor (2001 – 2008)

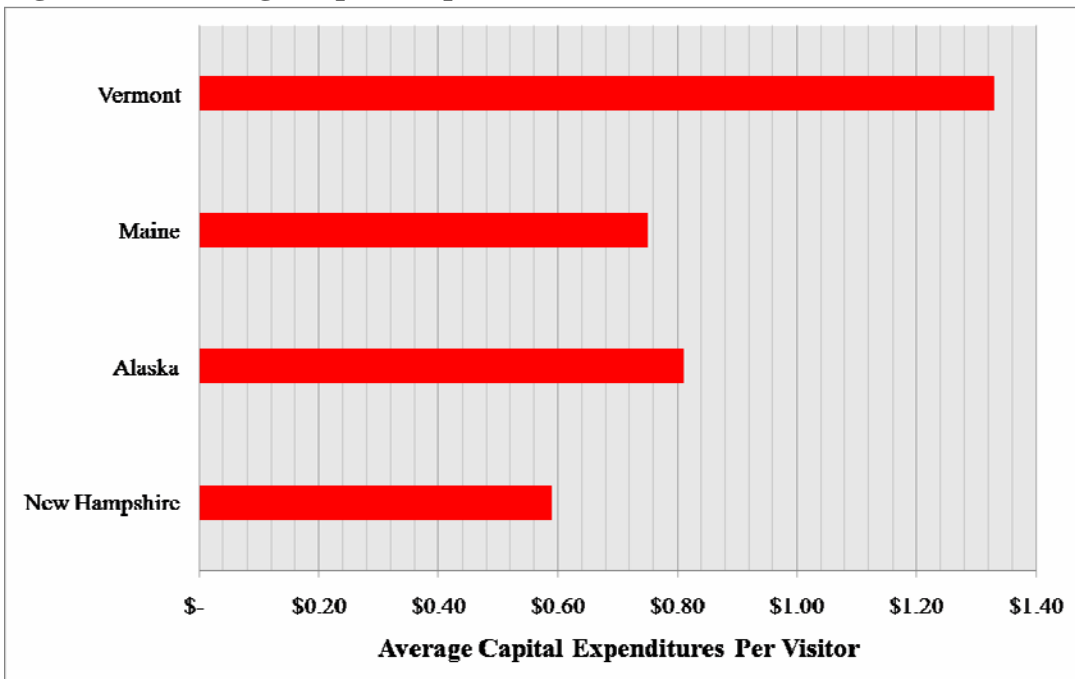


Figure 3.4.5 indicates that despite New Hampshire's dramatic decline in attendance in the later half of the time period studied, it still ranks last out of the park systems we examined in terms of average capital expenditures spent per visitor.

#### **4. ASSESSING IMPACTS OF A SPECIALIZED PARKS DEPARTMENT**

##### *4.1 Types of State Park Governance*

There are a number of ways that states have chosen to run their state park systems. There are numerous types of departments that can operate state parks systems. In every state the functions of the state park system varies. This makes it difficult to determine what the most appropriate type of department for state parks is. Most states have created a specialized department with sole purpose of governing state parks related matters. These departments are often called The Department of Parks and Reactions, The Department of Conservation, or The Department of Natural Resources. Other states have attempted to consolidate the number of departments and have placed the state parks under some other large departments. Some examples of these are the Department of Tourism, the Department of Environmental Protection<sup>1</sup>, the Department of Cultural Preservation, the Department of Energy, the Department of Commerce, and New Hampshire's own Department of Economic and Resource Development. Some states do not have their parks governed by any of department at all. Arizona's and Nebraska's, for example, are governed by special commissions out of their governors' office. We conducted an analysis to see if having a specialized department to manage state parks had any real impact on the parks themselves.

To start this analysis we divided each state park system into two groups, ones that were run by a special department and ones that had no such department. In total we found 14 states<sup>2</sup> that did not have a department with the specific focus of running state parks. Next we looked at the measures of revenue, operating expenditures, and attendance to see if there was any discernable difference between the two groups.

##### *4.2 Differences in Revenue and Total Operating Expenditures*

There is no clear connection between the department type and the revenue generated by a state park system or between the total operating expenditure for each state park and the type of park department in charge of operations. First we checked to see if there was a connection between the department category and the current amount of revenue a park generated or operating expenditures a park spent. To do this, we did a statistical analysis of the values from the Annual Information Exchange of the National Association of State Parks Directors against the type of department holding constant attendance levels, total

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<sup>1</sup> While these departments do handle natural recourses, much of their focus is on curbing issues surrounding pollution and environmental damage. This shifts their focus away from state parks no longer making them a specialized parks department.

<sup>2</sup> The 14 states without a parks department were Arizona, Connecticut, Florida, Louisiana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, and South Carolina



park acreage, and number of parks. The analysis showed that there was not a significant correlation between the levels of revenue and expenditure and the type of parks department. The next test we did was to see if there was a difference in the percentage change in the amount of revenue generation from 2001 to 2008. By looking at the average figures we found that there was not a significant change in revenue or operating expenditures. Ultimately we found no data to suggest that there is a link between a specialized state park department and operating expenditures, or revenue generation.

*4.3 Differences in Attendance*

In contrast, there does appear to be a link between the presence of a specialized state park department and increased attendance. When we ran statistical analyses assessing the effects of the presence of a specialized parks department and attendance levels we found a statistically significant link. We also found that the average attendance levels are higher in state park systems with specialized parks departments than in those without.

We also measured the percentage in attendance at each park from 2001 to 2008. As seen in Table 4.3.1, when comparing the average change from both groups we found that states with a parks department saw a significantly decreased percentage drop-off in attendance. All of these facts seem to point to some connection between higher attendance and having a specialized parks department.

There is no definitive explanation for the connection between attendance figures and the presence of a specialized state park department. While it is unlikely that the general public chooses to attend a park because of the name of the department that governs it, there are a few plausible explanations as to why the link between attendance and park departments exists. First, it is possible that the specialized parks departments have an increased focus on improving the number of visitors to the parks, wherein other large departments the upkeep of the parks is their sole focus. Perhaps specialized departments devote more resources to attracting new visitors and advertising. Another possible explanation is that since the parks attendance figures are more important to a specialized parks department they invest more resources in counting park attendance and thus increase attendance figures without producing any additional visitors.

**Table 4.3.1 Percent Changes of Key Statistics (2001 – 2008)**

	State Park Systems With a Specialized Parks Department	State Park Systems Without a Specialized Park Department
Revenue Generated	26%	27%
Operating Budget	26%	26%
Attendance	-13%	-19%

## **5. CONCLUSION**

There are several important conclusions that can be made about the effects of public funding and specialized parks departments on key statistics of park systems. First of all, New Hampshire and Vermont, the states most reliant on self-funding, have the most volatile operating budgets per visitor out of the states studied, suggesting that other funding sources help provide for more consistency in the trends of these variables. Secondly, New Hampshire, the only state studied without either public funding or a specialized parks department, was the only state that showed any extreme variability in attendance measures. Thirdly, New Hampshire and Vermont have the largest amount of capital expenditures per acre, but also the most variable. Fourthly, the existence of a specialized parks department does not seem to have a significant impact on operating expenditures or revenues. However, the existence of such a department does appear to have implications for changes in attendance for a park system.

An additional key conclusion from the report is that the existence of external and public funding does seem to have some effect on state parks. New Hampshire and Vermont are the only states with minimal amount of public funding, and are also the only states that exhibit such dramatic fluctuations in overall operational expenses and capital expenditures. New Hampshire's state park system has the additional disadvantage of having incredibly variable attendance, which in turn can make its revenues extremely unpredictable. As a result, the New Hampshire State Park System must sometimes begin the fiscal year with a budget deficit from the previous, preventing it from reinvesting in its parks, and possibly forcing services and recreational opportunities to be reduced. With fewer services and recreational opportunities, park attendance is likely to decrease further, establishing a feedback loop of decreased attendance and quality.

The closing thoughts of this report regard the reported attendance statistics from New Hampshire's park system. The incredible amount of variability in New Hampshire's park system attendance statistics, exhibited in figure 1.3.3, is difficult to explain. It cannot be purely explained by increases in park fees, because non-fee attendance dropped even more than fee attendance over the time period. It is unlikely that it is due to weather, given that Vermont, a state of close proximity, and thus similar weather, was included in the analysis, and had relative consistency in attendance. It is also unlikely that the changes in attendance are caused simply by changes in park quality, which realistically could not change so dramatically or so quickly as attendance. Discovering what is causing this large variance in reported attendance statistics is important, whether it is some unique characteristic of New Hampshire's park system or a faulty methodology, would enable more effective analysis of the effects of public funding and a specific parks department on park quality, by strengthening one of park quality's most powerful proxies.

## **6. REFERENCES**

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<sup>1</sup> Patricia McMahon. Telephone interview. 23 October 2009.

<sup>2</sup> The National Association of State Park Directors. *The 2001 Annual Information Exchange*. Vol. 23-30. Tucson, AZ: National Association of State Park Directors, 2001. Print. Annual Information Exchange.

## 7. APPENDIX

While the graphs, figures, and calculations in this report were determined using data from the National Association of State Park Directors Annual Information Exchange, we consulted a number of additional sources throughout our research process. While we do not explicitly cite these sources in the report, we thought it pertinent to include a list of such sources. We hope that these sources will serve as an additional tool for any further research that may be conducted concerning the funding structure of state park system.

### Web Resources

<http://www.unh.edu/stateclimatologist/>  
<http://www.erh.noaa.gov/er/gyx/climo/nrmlprcp.html>  
<http://www.naspd.org/>  
<http://www.ti.org/Parkstext.html>  
<http://home.nps.gov/applications/release/Detail.cfm?ID=785>

### New Hampshire

<http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/fishing.html>  
<http://www.census.gov/prod/2008pubs/fhw06-nh.pdf>  
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