

Opinion: California's natural treasures are threatened

By Robert E. Doyle

Park agencies, park rangers and in particular the California state parks system always have enjoyed a high level of public trust and credibility. But the disclosure that state park managers hid funds from the taxpayers has damaged that trust and angered the public, especially park supporters.

Yes, hiding the funds was a breach of public trust, but the revelation and the political fallout it caused have not changed the state parks' root problem – a decade of neglect. We must seize this moment as an opportunity to solicit new ideas and recommit ourselves to be wise stewards of our parklands. It is a time for tough choices.

Once the pride of California, the state parks have for more than a decade suffered deep cuts in funding for operations and maintenance while, at the same time, the public has approved bonds to add important lands to the park holdings. Since 1980, the state parks system has grown by more than 500,000 acres while the state's population has increased by more than 13.5 million. More than ever, the public seeks places of solace, beauty and recreation, and thus our parks are overflowing with visitors.

Yet state officials did not fund the parks to keep up with the increased use and added lands, or to maintain the aging infrastructure. In 1979, 91 percent of the parks' budget came from state taxes. Now it is 29 percent. While the conservation movement in California has been hugely successful, support for park maintenance and operations has taken a backseat. Many park facilities were built by the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s. They need to be maintained to

retain the value of the original investment.

Even worse, for the first time in the state's history, 70 of the parks we Californians own were "proposed" to be closed, with devastating potential effects on local communities. The response from citizens, donors and nonprofit organizations has been remarkable – volunteers and private foundations worked near-miracles to try to keep any state park from closing.

Read the whole story

Robert E. Doyle is the general manager of the East Bay Regional Park District. The district has managed state parks in the East Bay for 40 years.