

Vote “Yes” in November for State Parks

Article and photo by ILIANA PEÑA



In a private land state such as Texas, state parks enable that first connection to the natural world. For most Texans, a visit to a state park is the only way to experience nature free of vehicles, buildings and urban noise.

State parks belong to all Texans and are there for us to enjoy, explore and learn from. Parks can inspire such wonder and excitement in people; the experiences influence how they view

their environment and how they come to understand their role in it.

I am a product of state parks. My connection with the outdoors didn't come from one piece of land, farm or ranch; instead, it is rooted in camping and hiking experiences from all over this state. Growing up, many of my most precious memories are intimately linked to state and national parks. A tradition I actively continue today with my husband and our young daughter.

For many visitors, state parks (along with their talented staff) bring alive the science we learn in schools and the adventures we see on TV and in movies. They inspire art, music, writing, healthy living and exercise.

So, it is not surprising that Texas A&M University Department of Recreation and Tourism reports that our parks are the number one tourist attraction in Texas. An estimated 10 million people, a third of the Texas population, visited our state parks in 2017. They are the economic engines of many of our rural communities.

Texas enjoys great natural diversity. This state's landscape is made up of coastal, desert, pineywoods, grassland and mountain ecosystems. All of it is feeling the pressure of a growing population. A population that continues to grow evermore urban making it far too easy to be disconnected from the natural world and the ecosystem services it provides.

It is in all our best interest that Texans get to know their diverse state. A growing population needs space, clean and abundant water, and other natural resources. To use those sustainably, we must also have a citizenry who understands the role that healthy ecosystems play in helping our communities, both rural and urban, thrive.

State parks serve as nature's representatives. That is a great responsibility to bear and our state parks and historic sites deserve our support.

THE PROBLEM

In 1993, the legislature passed House Bill 706 (HB 706) stating that state parks and historic sites throughout the state could receive monies generated by a tax on the sale of sporting goods. Every time you buy sporting equipment like bicycles, soccer balls, exercise equipment, fishing tackle, hunting and firearm





equipment, in theory, you are supporting our 95 state parks and 22 historic sites.

However, from 1993 to 2015, the state legislature only appropriated to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) an average of about 40 percent of the estimated \$2.5 billion dollars generated through the sporting goods sales tax. That has resulted in a backlog of infrastructure and maintenance repairs totaling an estimated \$800 million across the state park system. It has also resulted in little to no investment in new state parks to match the growing needs of the Texas population.

In the spring and fall, when beautiful outdoor temperatures motivate a trip to the out-of-doors, many park-goers find themselves in long lines to enter parks. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department has turned to a reservation system to try and minimize long lines and park closures. TPWD currently sits on close to 80,000 acres of donated land. The various parcels are awaiting

sustainable funds to build and operate park facilities. These new parks will provide access to different regions of the state and help relieve visitation pressure from nearby parks.

IT'S NOW UP TO YOU

During the 86th Texas Legislature, with outstanding leadership by sponsors Sen. Lois Kolkhorst and Rep. John Cyrier (both TWA members), the House of Representatives and the Senate voted to make funding for state parks and historic sites permanent through a proposed constitutional amendment. Proposition 5 would add language to the Texas Constitution dedicating revenue from the sales tax on sporting goods to the TPWD and the state Historical Commission.

Whereas the current law allows the legislature to allocate the revenue for other uses, Proposition 5 would require a two-thirds vote in each legislative chamber to reduce the amount for the

parks, wildlife and historical agencies. Furthermore, the ballot measure would prohibit the legislature from decreasing the amount for the parks, wildlife and historical agencies by more than 50 percent.

In June of this year, Gov. Greg Abbott signed legislation allowing Texans to decide once and for all whether the sporting goods sales tax will be used exclusively for the purpose it was originally intended. A constitutional amendment would guarantee a continuous and uninterrupted stream of sales tax revenue for state parks thus creating the opportunity for long-term state park planning.

The Texas Wildlife Association understands how important it is for all Texans to have access to our beautifully diverse state. Texans overwhelmingly support their state parks. Let's show it by voting "Yes" in November to Proposition 5. 🗳️

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