

Public Organization Profile and Administrator Interview:

**California Department of Parks and Recreation**

**with perspective from  
Director Ruth Coleman**

by  
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The California Department of Parks and Recreation is guided by a unique vision referred to as the “Seventh Generation”. The credo is a Great Law of the Iroquois Confederacy and states:

*In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations.*

This idea of intergenerational responsibility may be voiced in other realms of public administration, such as in regard to national debt, but I am aware of no other agency that maintains this philosophy as their strategic vision.

## **I. Agency background**

The history and founding of the state park system reveal why the vision of the organization is focused toward future generations. In the 1880s, after the boom of the Gold Rush and a continued movement of settlers to California, small groups of individuals began to express concern about the impact of development on California’s natural resources, most notably the California redwoods. An editor, Ralph Sidney Smith, provided leadership and newspaper coverage about the need to preserve the redwoods. The parks system grew out of this humble beginning with the desire and dedication of small groups of individuals, especially the Save-the-Redwoods League, who had a vision to preserve California’s resources for future generations (Seventh Generation 2001).

The parks system gained momentum as California voters approved increasingly large bond acts to invest in the expansion and preservation of the parks. In 1967, the Department of Parks and Recreation was formed, which transformed the Division of Beaches and Parks into a department with an added focus on recreational opportunities. Reservoirs were created and soon after the Off-Highway Motor Vehicle program started. The functions of the department changed to a centralized approach of management. Area managers began reporting to district superintendents (Seventh Generation 2001).

The 1980s and 90s witnessed another large change, exhibiting features of new public management. Evaluations of the parks and parks systems during this period resulted in two large developments. The first was the Stewardship report, which justified increased funding for natural resource management efforts. The second was the development of the Phoenix Committee to enhance the structure of the park system. Their efforts led to the consolidation

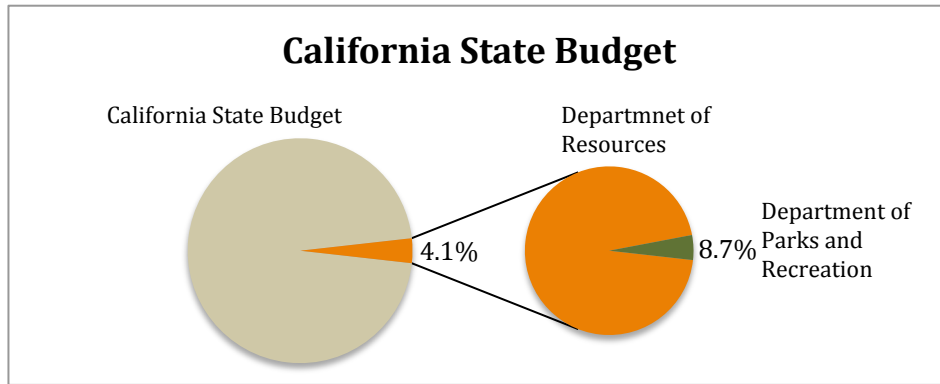
of the parks system from 55 districts to 23, while also resulting in greater decentralization. The focus of using evaluations to improve the agency continued with the adoption of performance-based budgeting practices in the mid-1990s and customer satisfaction surveys more recently. The continued improvement of the agency through these evaluation measures established the department as a leader in public service. The department was the first state agency to receive the Eureka Award for Quality & Service and the first government agency to receive the Arthur Andersen Best Practices Award, both in the 1990s (Seventh Generation 2001). Refer to Appendix A for more highlights of the park history.

The agency takes on two distinct roles that reflect the values of traditional and new public administration. Parks under the stewardship of the State are a public good, meaning they are safeguarded for everyone's enjoyment and are non-exhaustible (Rosenbloom & Kravchuk 2005, 9). As stewards of the parks, the state's first role is to preserve natural and cultural resources for the future. The Department's other role is to run a business by providing visitors with an educational and recreational service. Maintaining this balance is a struggle, especially in the context of traditional and new public administration principles. The agency aims to provide a customer-oriented product to visitors and yet it also has the responsibility of protecting the parks lands from damage by visitors. Parks' Director Ruth Coleman noted this discord within the organization. Often park staff feels a duty to protect the resources from the public. Coleman stated that there needs to be balance between protecting resources and the business role of the parks system to provide service to the public. The ideal, she states, is to draw the public into the parks and educate them about the resources and how to act responsibly (R. Coleman, personal communication, May 1, 2008).

The agency's statute under the Department of Resources and the California Code of Regulations is to "...administer, protect, provide for recreational opportunity, and develop the State Park System; to interpret the values of the State Park System to the public; to operate the Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Program; to administer the California Historical Resources Protection Program; and to administer federal and state grants and bond funds to local agencies." (Seventh Generation 2001). The Department is responsible for 278 units throughout California, which represents almost one-third of California's coastline and approximately 1.5 million acres. Over 76 million people visit State Parks each year and growing (California State Parks 2008). As Table 1 indicates, the Department of Parks and

Recreation is approximately 8.7% of the Department of Resources budget under the total California State budget (Governor’s Budget 2008-09 Proposal 2008).

Table 1. Budget allocation



## II. Main actors and stakeholders

As described by Director Coleman, the parks department is comprised of many individuals accountable to three main parties, each of which has many stakeholders (R. Coleman, personal communication, May 1, 2008). The mission of the Department is:

*To provide for health, inspiration, and education of the people of California by helping to preserve the state’s extraordinary biodiversity, protecting valued natural and cultural resources, and creating opportunities for high-quality outdoor recreation.*

Six core programs carry out this mission within the framework of the Strategic Vision Model as detailed in Appendix B and C. The staff who lead these programs and are the vital assets that work to accomplish the mission. See Appendix D for the organizational chart.

The Parks’ Department and Director Coleman herself serve three main parties: the elected Governor and other elected politicians, the diverse public as individuals and public interest groups (including the projected interests of unborn future generations), and the Department’s internal staff. Each of these parties plays a role in representing and balancing the desires of different public interests. Director Coleman asserted that accountability to the Governor’s office must be her first duty as a political appointee. She described the role as analogous to marriage—when she signed on to work for the State, she signed onto the Governor’s full agenda. This means of accountability through government structure also sets up constraints on the department to stay in-line with the Governor’s position and decisions.

The Director and her department also serve the public at large. Director Coleman stated that the department's focus on the "Seventh Generation" is the guiding principle for serving the public. This principle provides the "reason we can enjoy Point Lobos today—because generations before us had the foresight and desire to take these parks into state custody" (R. Coleman, personal communication, May 1, 2008). In addition to future generations, serving the people of California also means listening to and finding compromise among diverse groups of people. Some of the main stakeholder groups are Native American tribes, who have a strong tradition and connection to different land areas based on ancestry. Environmental organizations also are major stakeholders in State Park decisions.

Director Coleman maintains a participatory management style characteristic of new public management principles (Rosenbloom and Kravchuk 2005, 37). She views herself as serving her staff to better enable them serve the public. She mentioned that she is mindfully aware about extra work that a new initiative may mean for her staff. She said, it would be great to have all the parks put on an event each month, but to make that objective an edict would be unrealistic and unfair. Some parks already put on an event every month, but not all of them would be able to do it (R. Coleman, personal communication, May 1, 2008).

## **II. Key to understanding Public Administration: Managing organizational constraints & decision-making**

Director Coleman asserted that clear and active communication channels are her key to handling organizational obstacles. She humbly noted that maintaining the right amount of communication is not easy because of potential information overload and time constraints; but in general, the more that is communicated, the better the outcomes (R. Coleman, personal communication, May 1, 2008). Her communication systems involve all the people she serves. These systems materialize in proactive memos to the Governor's office to keep the Capitol apprised of new developments or potential threats, such as bringing a story to their attention prior to a press report.

Another communication stream involves department staff. The senior staff meet weekly with additional staff attending biweekly. To ensure effective, productive meetings individuals report any matter that would be of concern to more than one other person at the

table. Director Coleman is also planning to start a blog to enhance and foster greater communication within the department (R. Coleman, personal communication, May 1, 2008).

Lastly, Coleman says that effective communication practices are the key strategy to conflict resolution, decision-making, and attaining “buy-in” from stakeholders. “People need to feel heard,” says Coleman. To allow individuals and interest groups to be heard, the Department sets up numerous community meetings in the initial stages of a project. For example, in the planning of an urban park in Los Angeles, 54 meetings were held to get community feedback. Information was distributed in multiple different languages. Coleman said that creating opportunities for community feedback and allowing time for individuals to voice their opinions is a fundamental part of the Park Department’s community projects. She admitted that not everyone buys-in to each project, but it is necessary to have the majority of stakeholders behind a project or it will fail. Although public input often signifies a lengthy and arduous process, public participation is recognized as central to the success of the Park Department’s operations (R. Coleman, personal communication, May 1, 2008).

Director Coleman places a high value on promoting diversity of thought for decision-making. She actively requests counter-positions on decisions that seemingly have unanimous agreement. Coleman believes the perspective she gained from being a Peace Corps volunteer in the Kingdom of Swaziland has helped her maintain humility, tolerance, and reverence for different perspectives. “We don’t know it all,” she said. She values the diverse perspectives of the public as well as recognizing the different perspectives present within her organization’s departments (R. Coleman, personal communication, May 1, 2008).

### **III. Politics and administration**

Director Coleman is the only park director to have served under both a Democrat and a Republican Governor. Prior to being appointed as the Department Director, she worked at the Capitol on natural resource legislation under different elected politicians. When asked what role politics play in public administration, she said that politics are always a core piece of public administration because political representation is one way that the public expresses opinions (R. Coleman, personal communication, May 1, 2008). I believe Coleman would agree with Appleby (1945) in his statement, “government is different because government is politics”. Appleby’s perspective recognized the need for public administrators to have a

“special competence in handling relationships among all the varied and powerful forces, activities, and elements in the country” (Appleby 1945). Coleman acknowledged that the important and challenging part of dealing with politics is to understand each individual’s or group’s particular interests. She provided an example that if a legislator wants the department to build a sea wall to protect a small group of citizens along a coastline, the department must balance that request with the overall public good for the area. At its core, the department is accountable to the public and holds the public trust, so the department has a strong ethical responsibility when making decisions. However, individuals in the political realm hold a lot of power in state decision-making, especially in regard to the budget. Therefore, it is essential to maintain positive relationships with all stakeholders, while holding onto unwavering values (R. Coleman, personal communication, May 1, 2008).

#### **IV. Director Coleman’s personal perspective and the future of the parks**

Coleman said what she loves most about her job is that she doesn’t have to think about why she is going into work each day. She says the majority of her work is intuitive—protecting and preserving natural and cultural resources for people to enjoy now and in the future. She also feels proud to be part of the distinctive organizational culture that characterizes the “Parks’ family” because of its abundance of dedicated individuals. She noted that individuals in the Parks’ Department work with an affective and/or moral motivation to serve others both because of their dedication to the parks and the value they recognize the parks have for the public (R. Coleman, personal communication, May 1, 2008).

The Park’s department today faces many obstacles for the future, including budget reductions and changes in public values. This year the department faces the largest General Fund budget cut it has seen—\$13.3 million (Governor’s 2008-09 Budget Information 2008). The repercussions are expected to be huge—one in five parks are estimated to close. The divestment in parks has been gradual over the last few years. More of the burden has shifted to user fees—right now state parks receive over 30% of their funding from user fees relative to federal parks at 10% (R. Coleman, personal communication, May 1, 2008). Budgets are a statement of social priorities (Rosenbloom & Kravchuk 2005). The budget environment today is characterized by fiscal stress, which results in fierce competition for resources and political power (Caiden 1981). The fight for market share is one aspect that Coleman addressed in this

Spring's newsletter (State Parks Department 2008). California was lucky to have so much support for park expansion in the 1950s (R. Coleman, personal communication, May 1, 2008). However, today many facilities are in need of repair—the department reports \$1.2 billion in deferred maintenance costs (Legislative Analyst's Office 2008).

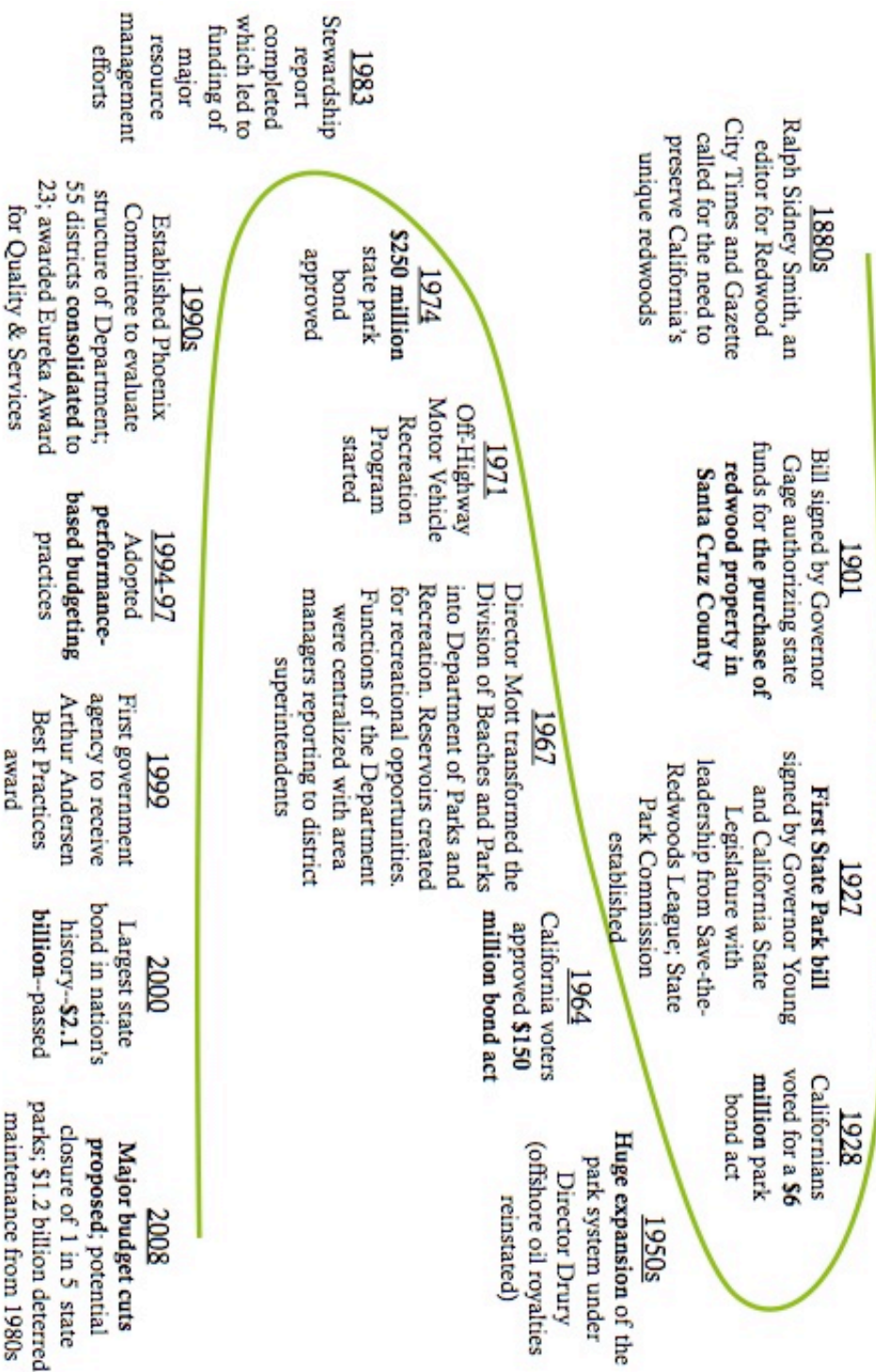
Coleman also mentioned the changing values of younger generations, where it is more common for children and youth to spend six hours a day in front of a TV or computer screen. Children's time is spent in supervised activities rather than less structured physical play outside. Childhood obesity and other health problems have risen because of more sedentary activities. A report the Department conducted on the importance of state parks stated, the "aggregate impact of health and social benefits make parks and recreation one of the most cost-effectiveness public services available to decision-makers" (Health and Social Benefits 2005).

Coleman believes the parks can be a solution to many societal problems, but she is concerned that "people don't protect what they don't know and love" (Stienstra 2006). Coleman has noted a change in the values of some stakeholders who now support putting a highway through a watershed rather than evaluating other possibilities. She doesn't enjoy this part of her work where common values for natural resources are not shared. There needs to be increased awareness about the benefits of parks to establish the need for further investment, but first funds will be necessary to foster that initial awareness. Fortunately, values may not have shifted too much—the Governor's office has received more public petitions regarding General Fund reductions for the State Parks over any other issue this year, including education cut-backs (R. Coleman, personal communication, May 1, 2008). Interestingly, at a time when park funding is threatened, the demand for park access is peaking. The need for more parks and access in such a highly populated state exceeds what the department can operate on the funds provided.

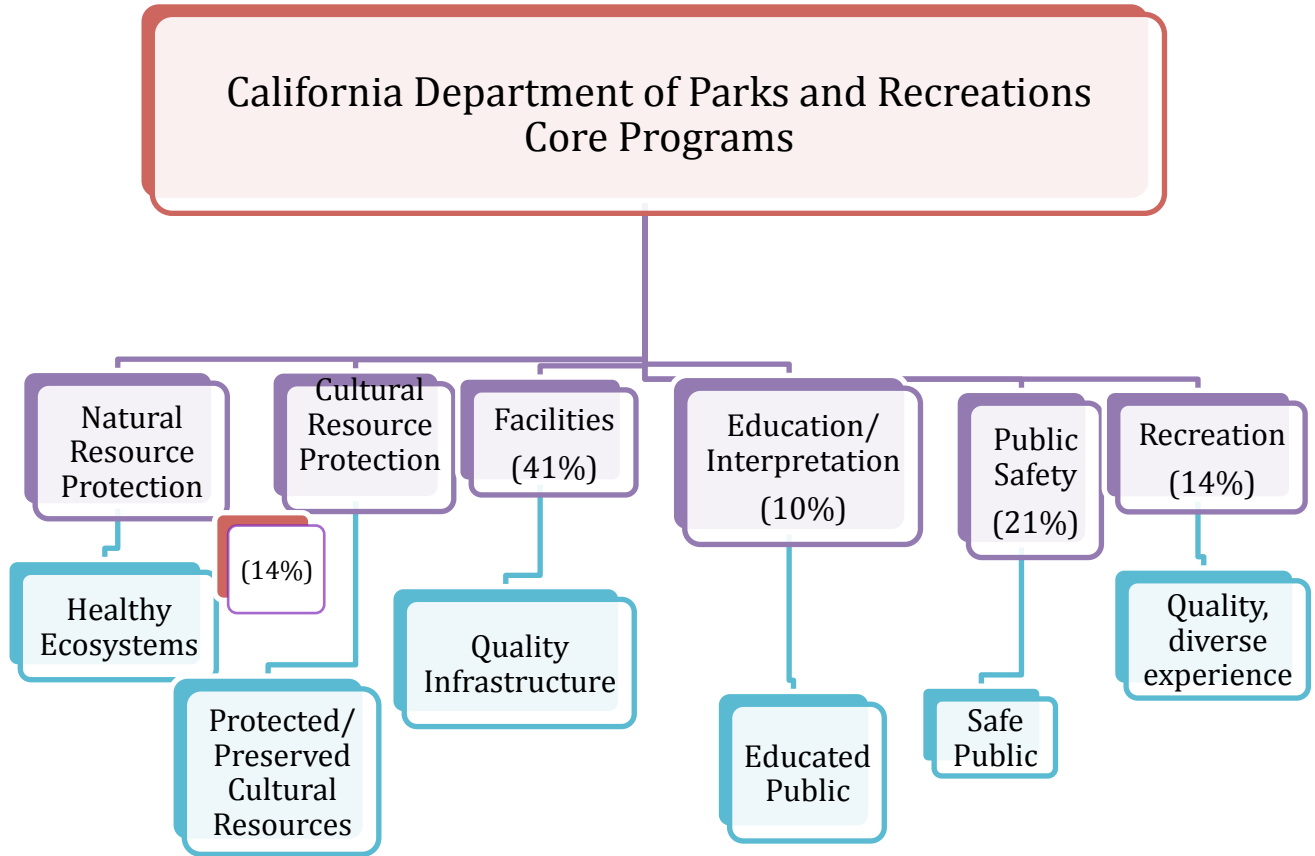
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## Selected highlights of California State Department of Parks and Recreation budget history

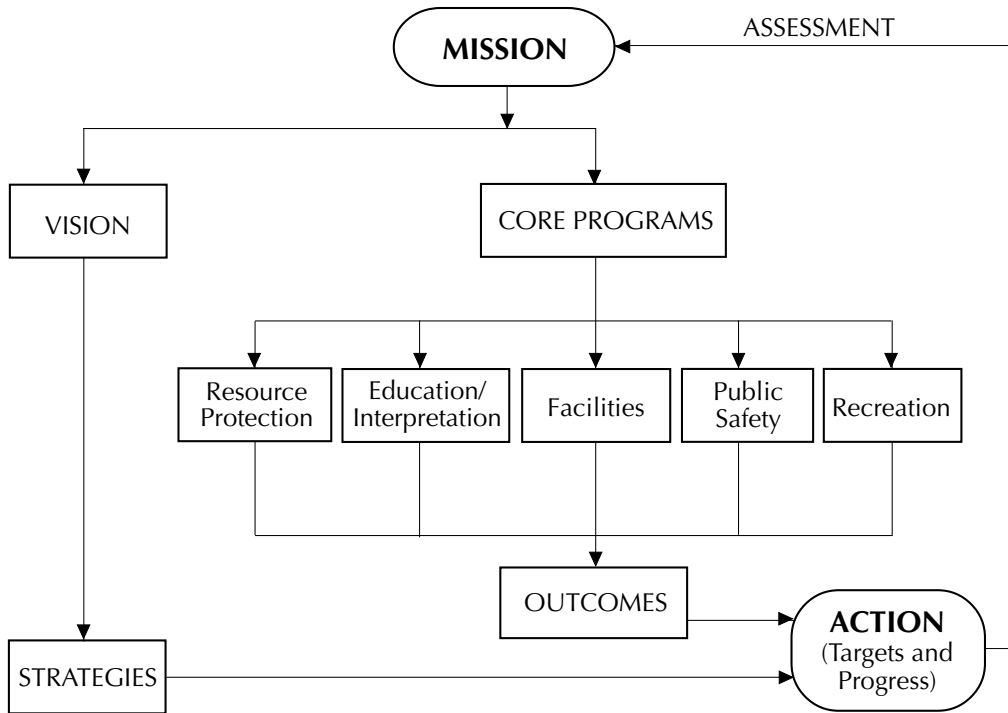


Appendix B



Appendix C

## Strategic Vision Model



(Areias, R.; Nicholis, M., Davis, G. (2001). *The Seventh Generation: The Strategic Vision of California State Parks*, p.10)

Appendix D



\*Selected representation (this chart does not include all departments)

Statewide Planning Unit Planning Division (2007). *California State Park System Statistical Report 2006/07 Fiscal Year*. Sacramento: California Department of Parks and Recreation.

## Appendix E

### California Department of Parks and Recreation Interview with Director Ruth Coleman May 1, 2008

#### General Questions

1. Whom do you serve?
2. How do you involve the people you serve?
3. What constraints does your organization face in carrying out its mission?
4. What motivates you to work in public service?

#### Politics and Administration

5. You are the only park director in history to be appointed by both a Democrat and Republican. In your experience, what role does politics play in public administration?

#### Intergovernmental Relations

6. How do you balance the organization's relationships with the multitude of stakeholders, many of whom have different goals and objectives?

#### New Public Management

7. How do you see public service as different from the private sector and how does the customer-service, results-oriented market model play a positive or negative role in public administration?

#### Additional

1. How has your Peace Corps experience influenced your career path?
2. How do you use performance measurements or program evaluations as part of your decision-making process?
3. What strategies do you use to motivate others, especially in the face of major obstacles?