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Endangered Parks

There are more than 13 million acres of state parks in the United States. The national park system is far bigger — some 84 million acres — but state parks are far more heavily used, if only because they are our neighborhood parks. As states look for ways to slash budgets during this recession, state parks are in serious trouble.

How bad is the problem? The National Trust for Historic Preservation has put all of the nation's state parks and state-owned historic sites on its list of America's most endangered historic places. New York had closed 55 of the state's 179 parks and historic sites, but the Legislature has now eked out just enough money to keep them all open for another year. In all, 26 states have already closed parks, limited hours, reduced staff and budgets, or deferred maintenance.

Closed parks do not simply lie there, waiting patiently for times to improve or for officials and legislators to behave more prudently. Their buildings, roads and bridges deteriorate. They lie open to vandalism. A closed park isn't just any shuttered property. It's a repudiation of the extraordinary value they offer residents.

While these times are especially bad, the problem is not new. Budgets for state parks have been slipping for years. The best hope of restoring the parks to solvency may well come from federal intervention, from increased private and nonprofit financing and from state programs that raise money from vehicle registration fees and offer, in turn, free admission to parks. It is critical to keep the parks open for the health of their lands and for the well-being of the citizens who use them — all of us.