

California boasts the nation’s largest state park system—over 1.5 million acres of natural, historical and cultural resources contained in 278 separate, state-owned parks that attract over 80 million visitors annually. But California’s extensive system of state-owned parks, beaches and marine reserves is in crisis—a victim of draconian budget cuts, chronic understaffing and over \$1 billion in deferred maintenance.

Recently, an unlikely, potential solution has emerged: increased reliance on the private sector for critically-needed state park funding, staffing and enforcement. All things considered, that’s a positive and welcome development.

Recent state budgets have been especially unkind to California’s Department of Parks & Recreation. The current-year state budget targets over 70 state parks and beaches for closure by July 2012, because public funds are simply unavailable to keep them open. The state park “hit list” includes many popular and heavily visited sites, such as the Point Cabrillo Lighthouse in Mendocino County, the Mono Lake State Nature Reserve and the historic Governor’s Mansion in downtown Sacramento.

Desperate times call for desperate measures. Last year the California Legislature, with little fanfare, enacted [AB 42](#), a law permitting the Department of Parks and Recreation to enter into agreements with qualified nonprofit organizations to allow those NGOs to operate and maintain individual state parks and beaches otherwise slated for closure. The early response has been quite encouraging: a number of non-profits have promptly stepped up and agreed to assume financial and operational responsibility for keeping a number of these threatened parks open. Good for them—and for the long-term viability of the parks involved, and the people who use and love them.

A similar saga is unfolding regarding California’s Department of Fish & Game, another state environmental agency that’s chronically understaffed and underfunded. Private organizations have recently announced plans to help DFG enforce California’s landmark Marine Protected Areas program. Enacted in 1999, the Marine Life Protection Act required state officials to designate a network of state marine preserves along California’s 1100-mile coast. The designation process for California’s new Marine Protected Areas has been both contentious and time-consuming: 50 Southern California marine sanctuaries were only established in 2010. They cover some 350 square miles from Point Conception to the U.S.-Mexico border, and establish “no-take” reserves where fishing is prohibited as well as other areas that allow only limited fishing.

Notably, creation of the new California marine sanctuaries was opposed by fishing groups and others—including the state warden’s union—who argued that DFG lacked the fiscal and

personnel resources to enforce sanctuary limits. But now the [Los Angeles Times reports](#) that environmental groups have plans to help DFG enforce fishing and related restrictions in California’s new Marine Protected Areas, through an initiative known as “MPA Watch.” The state’s network of private Baykeeper organizations plans to monitor human activity in the sanctuaries and report violations of sanctuary fishing and related restrictions to the relatively few Fish & Game wardens available to patrol California’s coastal waters. Kudos to these groups as well.

Are these ideal solutions? Certainly not. In a perfect world, the State of California would have adequate staff and funds to operate its park system effectively and ensure full enforcement of its offshore marine sanctuaries program. But these are not ideal times; indeed, California is currently facing an unprecedented fiscal crisis that cries out for new, innovative approaches.

Actually, precedents abound for both of the initiatives recounted here. For example, in New York City the Central Park Conservancy has for many years provided critical funding and auxiliary staffing that have proven instrumental to the success of the urban jewel that is Central Park. And citizen enforcement of state and federal environmental laws is a longstanding tradition in this country: for example, far more citizen enforcement suits are brought than enforcement actions pursued by environmental regulators themselves.