



Montana State Parks and Recreation Board Policy

Classification and Investment Strategy Policy

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06/20/19

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08/20/2024

Board Policy

The policy is intended to help the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks' (FWP) Parks and Outdoor Recreation Division identify management objectives and inform the development of short- and long-term investment strategies. It provides a framework for evaluating and revising park classification and for developing processes intended to direct the strategic allocation and investment of resources.

Purpose

Montana is a place where people have abundant opportunities to connect with outstanding state parks. These places help to define our state and, in many cases, our cultural identity. As such, the Division, in concert with counterparts throughout FWP, should be poised with the capacity and public support needed to ensure that park resources and experiences remain an essential part of Montana's culture, economy, and high quality of life.

Although opportunities to enjoy Montana's state parks are numerous, resources to maintain, manage, and develop them are often scarce. This policy is designed to assist the Division's leadership in developing and implementing strategies to better catalyze human and fiscal resources across the park system, while staying true to its mission of protecting and preserving important public resources and contributing to local economies.

By undertaking a categorical look at the different sets of state park resources that exist across Montana, and by pairing that with an understanding of the public's desire to experience those resources, the Division will be able to set in motion short- and long-term investment strategies; build and foster valuable partnerships; and ensure that the system has a solid foundation for sustainable management practices that can be enhanced through forward-thinking approaches.

The goals of this policy include the following:

- to ensure the Division's leadership has clear guidance for creating successful management practices

- that meet and adapt to changing visitor demands while fulfilling its mission;
- to ensure the public not only continues to enjoy a diverse range of high-quality park experiences, but also has meaningful guidance on what those experiences are likely to entail; and
- to encourage friends' groups and other park supporters to partner with the Division on efforts to improve or expand upon experiences at particular parks.

These goals reflect the following assumptions. Providing diverse visitor experiences across the system is an important element of any thriving park system. It is important to recognize that each park can contribute to the whole by filling a specific niche. Not all parks can or should be expected to serve all visitor demands.

Background

This policy is an update to and revision of the 2015 Classification and Prioritization of Parks Resources policy.

The 2015-20 Montana State Parks and Recreation Strategic Plan adopted by the board directs staff to manage parks and programs in a manner that considers the following attributes:

- allocation of resources;
- fiscal sustainability;
- visitor services and experiences;
- partnerships and engagement; and,
- awareness and outreach.

In 2018, a report issued by Montana's Legislative Audit Division included an analysis of steps the Division had taken to develop systems and processes to strategically prioritize and allocate resources. The report included a recommendation to "develop and implement a systemwide plan for regularly ranking, reviewing, and documenting resource allocations for capital projects, and for maintenance and operations of state parks."

A separate analysis of the Division, also in 2018, conducted by the Governor-appointed *Parks in Focus Commission*, identified the need to revise the Division's existing Classification Policy adopted in 2015. Among its many recommendations, the Commission encouraged the Division to work toward an approach that develops an investment strategy for building a "diverse, robust, and thriving park system."

Policy Guidance

The Division will use the following framework to evaluate and revise the parks classification criteria and process to better guide management and investment strategies for all Montana's state parks.

- 1. Establish service-level designations (Rustic, Core, Enhanced):** Develop three service-level designations to categorize the varying types of services and amenities that visitors can anticipate at a park and to inform park management and operations decisions (see Appendix A).

RUSTIC: Parks with **rustic services** attract visitors who expect a self-directed experience with limited developed amenities. Visitors may expect:

- Limited amenities, such as vault toilets or no toilets

- Gravel or paved road surfaces
- Campsites without paving or electrical service
- Trail systems that may be unpaved
- Sites without potable water
- Pack in/pack out trash
- Limited on-site staffing or active programming

CORE: Parks with **core services** provide a moderate amenity and service level. In addition to the amenities at the rustic service level, they offer some or all of the following:

- A combination of vault latrines and flush toilet comfort stations
- Campsites or overnight facilities
- Paved and unpaved trail systems
- Potable drinking water
- Developed day use facilities - boat ramps, group shelters, picnic areas, and other services such as small concessions
- Interpretive signage or programs
- Limited, but regular on-site staffing that may not be available year-round

ENHANCED: Parks with **enhanced services** have a high amenity level and offer several options for an enhanced visitor experience. In addition to the amenities at the core service level, they offer some or all of the following:

- Full-service comfort stations and in many cases showers
- A variety of overnight camping options
- Visitor centers with interpretive exhibits
- Regularly scheduled interpretive and educational programming and special events
- Full service concessions
- On-site staffing, typically full-time and year-round

Grouping parks into these service-level designations should accomplish the following key measures:

- Provide Division staff and leadership with clear management direction and guidance for amenity or service limitations and development possibilities.
- Inform leadership efforts targeted toward achieving greater consistency across and within service-level designations.
- Help visitors anticipate the kind of services and amenities they can expect, recognizing that diverse options throughout the state are purposefully managed in accordance with preconceived standards.
- Enable the Division to attract targeted investments and more clearly articulate its needs across and within service levels.

PRIMITIVE PARK STATUS: It should be noted that under the Montana Primitive Parks Act, currently nine state parks and one management area have been designated as primitive parks, per Section 23-1-116, MCA, because of their unique and primarily undeveloped character. There are limited development possibilities for these sites without legislative approval.

2. **Establish experience categories (Natural, Heritage, Recreational):** Group parks in a way that reflect the primary visitor experience offered and/or strongly connect with the reason the area was originally designated a state park. Placement in a particular experience category based on its primary or original purpose does not preclude the park from offering or expanding opportunities that may fall within another experience category (see Appendix A).

NATURAL: Parks that connect visitors with nature in ways that cause them to learn, reflect, and appreciate. These experiences may provide the opportunity for solitary reflection in the presence of Montana’s scenic beauty, or they may engage the visitor with others as they explore natural processes related to exceptional geologic, wildlife, botanical, paleontological, riparian, and riverine environments.

HERITAGE: Parks that invite reflection on the past by revealing the stories of Montana’s cultures and histories, often in the very places where they occurred. Heritage parks provide opportunities to view, explore, or learn about the cultural and historic features unique to the site.

RECREATIONAL: Parks that encourage play in adults and children alike through a variety of outdoor activities. A recreational park solely may provide a specific type of outdoor recreation (e.g., fishing, camping, hiking, boating) or a mix of diverse outdoor opportunities, ranging from active to passive and from solitary to social in nature.

Grouping parks into these *experience categories* should accomplish the following key measures:

- Assist with system-wide and park-specific management planning efforts.
- Inform leadership efforts targeted toward achieving greater consistency across and within experience categories.
- Help visitors anticipate the core experience they may have at a park and provide an understanding of the range of experiences they might anticipate.
- Enable the Division to attract targeted investments and more clearly articulate needs across and within each experience category.

3. **Identify Needs and Develop Resource Allocation Tools:** Establish a set of criteria for systematically assessing needs across all park service-level designations and experience categories. Consideration of needs may include capital improvement, maintenance, education and interpretation, visitor services, and other staffing and management facets. Utilize this information to prioritize human and fiscal resources, measure funding and investment gaps, and determine where partnerships can play a significant role in advancing efforts across the state. In doing so, ensure that the Division’s mission of resource protection is fulfilled while continually striving to ensure and improve visitor experiences.

4. **Develop Strategic Investment Strategies:** Use planning tools to develop systematic strategies to prioritize investment of major maintenance and capital improvement funds, review and prioritize needs within each

experience category and within each service level, address unmet needs, examine revenue potential, engage constituents, and build or foster productive partnerships. Create and support opportunities for all state parks staff to build effective relationships in their local communities and regions, specifically relationships that are aimed at strengthening the virtues of their park's mission as well as the system's capacity.

5. **Conduct Regular Evaluation and Measure Progress:** Establish performance measures and evaluation tools so that progress can be readily examined and necessary changes in tactics or strategies can be undertaken. Examine instances in which more work or different approaches may be necessary to address unmet resource needs by closely monitoring visitor demands and shifting user group preferences. Maintain high levels of visitor satisfaction while seeking new and improved visitor experiences within the bounds of service-level designations.
6. **Assess Classification Efforts:** Establish a solid feedback and assessment loop to assess conditions and identify where adjustments in classification may be needed. Because conditions and needs can change, complete a careful review of the classification system every two years by evaluating the relevancy of service-level designations and experience categories. Assess whether parks are situated appropriately, balancing the purpose of their original designation as a state park with their current and forecasted visitor use patterns.

Authority/Reference

23-1-101, MCA, State Parks Purpose

23-1-102, MCA, Powers and Duties of the Department

23-1-111, MCA, Powers and Duties of the Board

23-1-127, MCA, Maintenance Priority

Russ Kipp, Board Chairman

Dustin Temple, FWP Director

Appendix A. Service-Level Designations and Experience Categories

Rustic

Parks with rustic services attract visitors who expect a self-directed experience with limited developed amenities. Visitors may expect:

- Limited amenities, such as vault toilets,
- Campsites without paving or electrical service
- Trail systems that may be unpaved
- Sites without potable water
- Pack in/pack out trash
- Limited on site staffing or active programming

Core

Parks with core services provide a moderate amenity and service level. In addition to the amenities at the rustic service level, visitors may expect

- A combination of vault latrines and flush toilet comfort stations
 - Gravel or paved road surfaces
 - Campsites or overnight facilities,
 - Developed day use facilities- boat ramps, group shelters, picnic areas
 - Potable drinking water
 - Interpretive signage or programs
 - Other services such as small concessions
 - Trails – paved and/or unpaved
 - Limited, but regular on-site staffing
- Please note: On-site staffing and other services may not be available year-round.

Enhanced

Parks with enhanced services have a high amenity level and offer a number of options for an enhanced visitor experience. In addition to the amenities at the core service level, they will offer some or all of the following:

- A combination of overnight camping options
- Full-service comfort stations with showers
- Visitor center with interpretive exhibits
- Regularly scheduled interpretive and educational programming and special events
- Full-service concessions
- Natural/heritage/recreational experiences that supplement the predominant experience.

Parks with enhanced services are typically staffed full-time and open all year.

Natural

Parks connect visitors with nature in ways that cause them to learn, reflect, and appreciate. These experiences may provide the opportunity for solitary reflection in the presence of Montana's scenic beauty, or they may engage the visitor with others as they explore natural processes related to exceptional geologic, wildlife, botanical, paleontological, riparian and riverine environments.

Beavertail Hill (C)
Fish Creek (R)
Giant Springs (E)
Grey Cliff Prairie Dog Town (R)
Lewis and Clark Caverns (E)
Lost Creek (R)
Lone Pine (E)
Makoshika (E)
Medicine Rocks (R) (P)
Milltown (C)
Pirogue Island (R) (P)
Sluice Boxes (R) (P)
Somers Beach (C)

Heritage

Parks invite reflection on the past by revealing the stories of Montana's cultures and histories in the very places where they occurred. Heritage parks provide opportunities to view, explore, or learn about the cultural and historic features unique to the site.

Anaconda Stack (R)
Bannack (E)
Beaverhead Rock (R) (P)
Chief Plenty Coups (E)
Clarks Lookout (R) (P)
Council Grove (C) (P)
Elkhorn (R)
First Peoples (E)
Fort Owen (C)
Granite (R)
Madison Buffalo Jump (C) (P)
Missouri Headwaters (C)
Pictograph Cave (E)
Rosebud Battlefield (C)
Tower Rock (R) (P)
Travelers Rest (E)

Recreation

Parks encourage play in adult and child alike through a variety of options for outdoor activity. A park may provide a specific type of outdoor recreation – e.g., fishing, camping, hiking, boating – or a mix of diverse outdoor opportunities, ranging from active to passive and from solitary to social in nature.

Ackley Lake (R)
Black Sandy (C)
Brush Lake (C)
Cooney (C)
Flathead Lake (six units)- (E)
Frenchtown Pond (C)
Lake Elmo (C)
Lake Mary Ronan (C)
Les Mason (C)
Logan (C)
Painted Rocks (R)
Placid Lake (C)
Salmon Lake (C)
Smith River (R)
Spring Meadow (C)
Thompson Chain of Lakes (R)
Thompson Falls (C)
Tongue River Reservoir (E)
Whitefish (C)
Wild Horse Island (P)

'P' represents primitive park status under MCA 23-1-116