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Parks group continues legacy of giving

Washington's state parks offer superb outdoor experiences for all seasons. Hiking and biking, sailing and snowshoeing, beach exploring and wildlife viewing are just some of the activities that our state parks offer to enhance our quality of life.

The parks are a treasured resource we must preserve, enhance and protect for future generations. The Washington State Parks Foundation, a nonprofit organization formed in 2000 to garner financial support for parks improvement projects, is doing precisely that. The foundation merits community and statewide support.

From lush forests to sandy beaches, our parks are testament to the state's abundant natural beauty and geographic diversity. Washington boasts one of the largest and most admired state parks systems in the nation, created in 1913 through the generosity of a few visionary individuals. That year, the state's first parks — Larrabee near Bellingham and John R. Jackson House near Chehalis — were established through property donations. Over the following decades, donations have continued to build the state's parks system into the magnificent resource it is today.

The latest example comes from the Worthington family and their relatives, the Hamalainen family, whose donations of land and funding helped create Cama Beach State Park on Camano Island. The park opened in June.

Sandra Worthington, a longtime Olympia teacher and State Parks Foundation board member, expressed her feelings at the grand opening: "The original resort opened in 1934, with cedar cabins, wood stoves for heat and cooking. It fit the times, and people came year after year with their friends and families. The best part about Cama Beach State Park opening in 2008? It's definitely that once again people are enjoying this beautiful, restful setting — only this time with more comfortable, energy-efficient buildings. I love the facelift!"

Many donations

Today, nearly one-third of Washington state parks are on land provided through donations and land transfers. Ongoing gifts of financial support enhance parks by funding projects that provide enriching experiences and build on the legacy of giving started almost a century ago.

With more than 40 million visits annually, Washington's state parks system is one of the most visited in the nation. But demand has outpaced funding. While among the most visited, our parks are among the lowest in per-visitor funding. Additional support is needed to accommodate growing numbers of visitors and ensure that the state's parks remain among the best in the nation.

The State Parks Foundation has committed \$2.2 million for use in many of the state's 123 parks. Last year the foundation spent about \$130,000 for a new amphitheater at Sun Lakes/Dry Falls State Park, interpretive panels at Ginkgo State Park, the development of Cama Beach State Park, the Klickitat Trail, and tide pool restoration at Deception Pass State Park. The foundation also provided funding for Inside Out, a program to bring minorities and low-income children into the parks.

Enhanced opportunities

The foundation does not fund basic park operations and maintenance, which are the state's responsibility. It focuses on projects that enhance recreational opportunities, preserve and restore habitat, protect cultural and historic sites, and help educate visitors about the precious natural resources in state parks.

To carry out this mission, the foundation embarked on a \$4 million capital campaign to fund four new projects. These efforts include developing 100 miles of new trails, building 25 new rental yurts and cabins, constructing an interpretive center at Rosario Beach in Deception Pass State Park, and restoring historic buildings for use by the Center for Wooden Boats in Cama Beach State Park.

Olympia residents Ralph and Karen Munro recently provided funding to the State Parks Foundation for Lime Kiln State Park on San Juan Island.

An investment in the State Parks Foundation helps ensure that our excellent quality of life is preserved. While it might be difficult to see what individuals can do to enhance a precious natural resource, acting together, with the State Parks Foundation as the vehicle, we can improve our state parks and carry on the legacy started by those who came before.

(Peter Reid, a community representative on the editorial board, is a member of the Washington State Parks Foundation's board of directors.)