



RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES

Offering Ideas to Expand Visitor Experience

PLANNING DIVISION, RECREATION SECTION · 916-653-9901 · MAY 2009

GROUP AREAS FOR PICNICKING AND CAMPING

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INCREASED DEMAND FOR GROUP AREAS

At parks all across the United States, recreation agencies are responding to an increased demand for group areas by adapting existing camping and picnic sites for group use and/or adding new group areas.

This bulletin reveals reasons for the increased demand, summarizes key characteristics and preferences of those using group areas, outlines some park staff solutions, and offers design recommendations from California State Parks (CSP) staff. It also asks readers to weigh in with their ideas and suggestions for group areas.

WHAT'S DRIVING THE DEMAND

Two factors are helping to fuel the demand: Shifting ethnic-group demographics and the resulting change in visitor preferences.

Changing demographics

Until the 1980s, most picnickers and campers at California's state parks were of European heritage, reflecting the state's majority population. Today California's Latino, Asian and other non-European ethnic groups constitute a new majority, and their numbers are growing. By 2030, Latinos are projected to comprise 43 percent of California's population. Between 2000 and 2020, the Latino population will increase by 58 percent and the Asian/Pacific Islander population by 55 percent, while the population of Californians of European descent will increase by only 4 percent.^(1,2,3,8)

Changing visitor preferences

The "classic" park campsite was designed for a nuclear family of 2 parents and 2 children, and visitors came to parks in groups of 4-6.⁽⁷⁾ Park visitors focused on outdoor recreation. At meals, they typically sat at a family-sized table. If visitors prepared food, they used a small area and cooked on a small park grill.



Picnicking in the 1890s



Picnicking today

Today's park visitor is more likely to visit with a large extended family.⁽³⁾ According to CSP's recent *Survey on Public Opinions and Attitudes on Outdoor Recreation in California*, almost twenty percent of respondents visit parks in groups of ten or more. Of these, one-third visit in groups of twenty or more.

Representatives from two agencies shed more light on characteristics and preferences of today's park visitors:

U.S. Forest Service

Studies by Dr. Deborah Chavez of the Forest Service reveal characteristics of visitors in groups of from 50 to 100 or more. These visitors:

- Live in urban areas
- Seek safe areas in natural settings with room for their large extended families
- Visit parks to relieve stress and relax with friends and family
- Visit primarily to socialize rather than engage in recreation activities

These findings should be of special interest to CSP staff:

- First-generation immigrants typically lack both free time and discretionary income and are unfamiliar with camping and organized recreation.
- Latino visitors tend to return to outdoor recreation sites that provided them with a good family experience.^(4,5)

Three Rivers Park District, State of Minnesota

Research and evaluation manager Jon Nauman reports that Latino and Asian visitors seek these changes to traditional picnic areas:

- More tables, and tables closer together
- Cooking facilities and related amenities
- More shade^(3,4)



Ample-sized cooking facilities and shade are two desirable features.

HOW PARKS ARE MEETING THE DEMAND

CSP Planning Division staff surveyed CSP District staff and staff at other state and national parks to determine how they are responding to changing needs.

California State Parks (CSP)

Below is input from CSP District staff. Also see the informative article, "New Campground Design,"⁽⁷⁾ for related input from Kerry Gates, Supervising Landscape Architect, CSP.

Channel Coast District

Anne Dominguez, CSP Special Event Coordinator, points out changes at San Buenaventura State Beach (SB):

- Four group picnic areas were created by removing worn wind screens between some individual areas.
- When the park was redesigned in 2004, service pads, which provide paved site access, were added at two parking lots in group picnic areas. Each pad has a water spigot, drain and an electrical outlet. Pads are especially useful to outside vendors that deliver and set up services including commercial barbecues, DJs and inflatable bounce structures. Service pads also help keep vehicles on pavement and off landscaped grounds.

Danita Rodriguez, former Santa Barbara Sector Superintendent, notes an increased demand for group camp sites. In response, staff has:

- Converted eleven individual campsites to two small group sites at Refugio SB
- Combined two groups of individual campsites of five each and six each into two small group campsites at El Capitan SB

Scott Cramolini, Santa Barbara Sector Supervising Ranger, reports that at Carpinteria SB demand for group campsites was the reason for combining 66 adjoining individual campsites to create seven group campsites three years ago. Site amenities remain the same.



Group picnic area at San Buenaventura SB



Grange Grove picnic area at Millerton Lake SRA

Central Valley District

Among and Latino visitors come to Millerton Lake State Recreation Area (SRA) in multigenerational family groups. Staff developed the Grange Grove group picnic area (see photo above) in response to this need, according to Albert Orozco, San Joaquin Sector Park Maintenance Chief. The group picnic area includes larger food preparation areas, with sinks and counter space.

Southern Service Center

The Southern Service Center and the Angeles District plan to rehabilitate the popular Tapia day-use area at Malibu Creek State Park (SP). The plan proposes a large cooking area with sinks and a large indoor-outdoor area for socializing and dining. The proposed day-use area would maintain some historic uses and design characteristics and would meet today's needs as well as be adaptable to meet needs of future trends.

Oregon State Parks (OSP)

Kathy Schutt, OSP Planning Manager, reports that both group picnics and alternative camping are very popular in Oregon. Key points:

- Facilities and amenities at Oregon State Parks include RV areas as well as two types of villages—yurt and rustic cabin (see photo next column). The villages bring in significant revenue and seem especially popular with those who have never camped in tents.
- Alternative camping structures are watertight, important in Oregon's wet climate.
- Group camping is planned for all new parks.



Yurt village at Oregon's Beverly Beach SP

Washington State Parks (WSP)

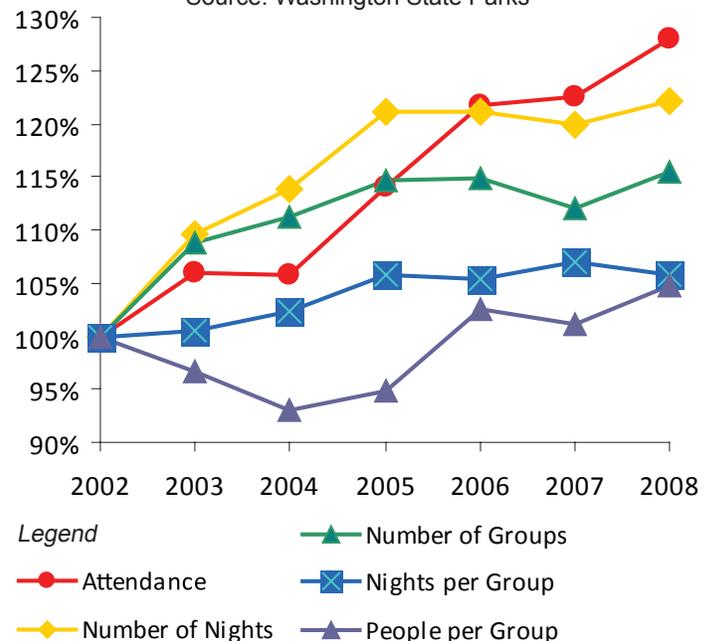
Don Powell, WSP Operations Program Manager, reports on new group campsites at three parks:

- Manchester SP, a 150-person campsite
- Rasar SP, three 80-person campsites
- Riverside SP, a 40-person campsite and a 60-person campsite

The new campsites feature restrooms with flush toilets and showers, centrally located picnic shelters, and large open turf areas for play and team activities. Spokane's Riverside SP has received many requests for large (for 100+ people) group campsites.

Group camping trends for 2002-2008 (see graph below) indicate an attendance increase at group camp facilities.

Washington State Parks group-camping trends, 2002-2008
Source: Washington State Parks





The renovated Applewhite Picnic Area at San Bernardino National Forest, featuring access to nearby Lytle Creek. Each site has a large table, two BBQ grills and a trash receptacle.

U.S. Forest Service (USFS)

USFS managers used ten years of survey data on the Applewhite Picnic Area for the renovation of the group picnic areas. Visitor data was key in securing funding.

- Before: Each picnic site had one barbecue and one table seating four to six. Several sites shared one trash receptacle.
- After: Each picnic site now has two barbecues, one table seating eight to ten, and one trash receptacle. Additionally, the park has improved signage for non-English speaking groups and hired an additional Spanish-speaking host.

After the picnic area was reopened, visitors remarked on a new “family feel” at the area, and that the area now had enough amenities to meet their needs.

National Park Service (NPS)

“North Cascades National Park (in Washington State) has enlarged campsites for extended families—often ethnic minorities—that travel together,” notes Michael Milstein in his *Portland Oregonian* article, “Camper Crunch.”⁽⁶⁾

Gerry Cook, an NPS Engineering Equipment Operator Supervisor, described the campsite features:

- The large tent pads are close to each other.
- The fire-ring area adds an intimate quality.
- The covered shelter includes picnic tables and stoves.

The differences in the enlarged group sites are subtle, but Cook points out that the designs acknowledge a preference for “camping in an intimate setting, which gives security and comfort.”

PROJECT DEVELOPMENT PROCESS FOR RECREATION FACILITIES

Whether CSP is developing a new recreation facility or rehabilitating an existing facility, the department typically follows this process.

1. District staff identify the need for a project. Sources for projects include, for example, an approved General Plan, District strategic plan or deferred-maintenance and public-health-and-safety items. District staff also identify the project scope, cost estimate and priority.
2. A designated District representative enters project information in CSP’s Park Infrastructure Database (PID), which is used to add or remove, modify and prioritize projects.
3. The project is selected and approved. The Planning Policy and Programming Committee approves capital outlay projects (from PID and other sources) and the Director approves them. The Park Operations management team selects and approves deferred maintenance projects.
4. District staff determine whether the District or a Service Center will manage and implement the project. Approved projects require funding, a program cost account (PCA), identified staffing needs, environmental documents and applicable regulatory approvals/permits, plan documents and bid documents.



A group enjoying the shade at Caswell Memorial SP



Drake Group Campground, El Capitan SB

DESIGN RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GROUP AREAS

In a December 2008 design discussion at the Northern Service Center, CSP staff from various disciplines—development, interpretation, maintenance and recreation—created guidelines for group area site design, construction and amenities. Key findings are presented here.

Site Design and Construction

- Design the group area for the context of the site (desert, mountain, coastal) and so that it is adaptable over time.
- Construct it to last for many years. Use durable materials (heavy timber, boulders, corrugated metal roofs; no recycled wood or plastic products).
- Create flexible, multi-use spaces that can be used either for one large group of 30-40 people or for several smaller groups. This is the “core family plus the next generation plus extended family” group size that is currently underserved. For example, in the drawing below, the group area, including the centrally located food-preparation area, is designed to accommodate either one large or two small groups.
- To create and delineate social gathering spaces, use fixed tables, counters, serving tables, existing landforms, boulders and trees.

Site Amenities

- ① **Provide private areas for sleeping.**
- ② **A public gathering space for cooking and eating is the focal point; sleeping areas are oriented around it.**
- ③ **Food preparation areas:**
 - Include counters for food preparation. Food preparation may very well be the gathering’s focus.

- Include sinks with drains. Visitors can use sinks, even those without running water or faucet, as tubs for ice or drinks.

④ **Cooking and campfire areas:**

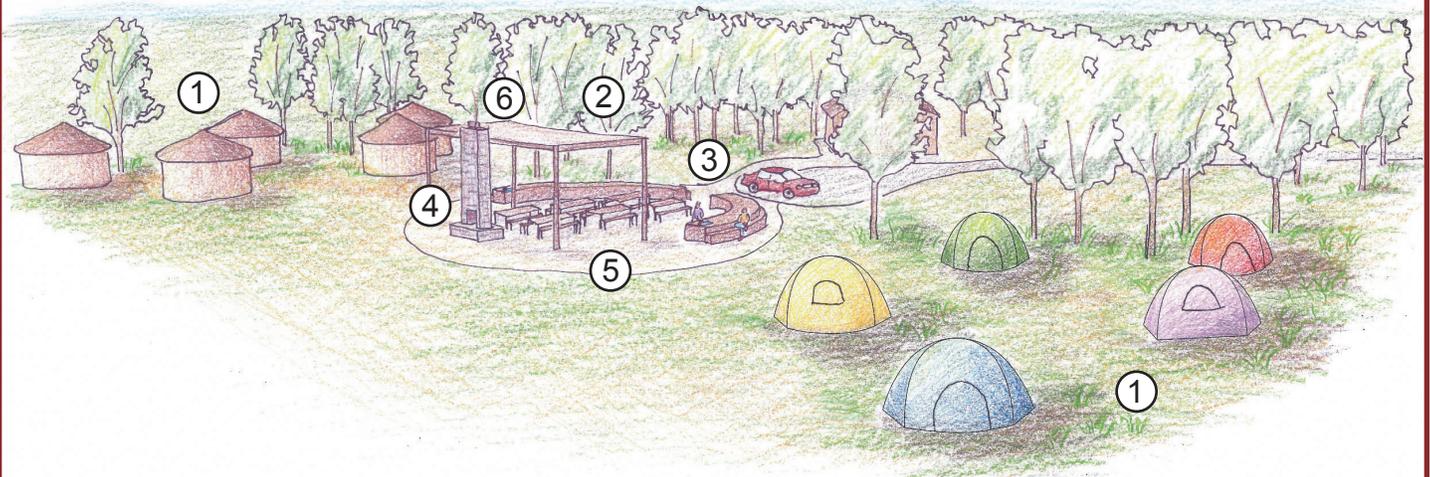
- Provide fire pits, stoves, upright fireplaces or barbecues.
- Consider providing propane barbecues; these amenities could provide revenue if you charge a fee for propane. Consider regulating propane use by a coin-operated device or timer.
- Consider featuring stoves or fireplaces made of native stone (such as ‘Diablo’-style stoves) as a focus of the gathering area. Include counters or food-preparation areas.

⑤ **Tables:**

- Ensure that all picnic tables are ADA accessible and seat at least eight people.
- Include multiple table heights and widths, such as tables at bar height and narrow serving tables.

⑥ **Shelters:**

- Consider including shelters, which extend the season and may provide an additional time of peak use for school groups in the fall or spring.
- Consider using screened shelters to protect visitors and food from insects. Such shelters may be most appropriate in “transitional areas” that are not urban or wilderness areas. Screened shelters could also help visitors unfamiliar with nature become more comfortable.
- Consider extending one or more fixed tables outside a sheltered area to provide visitors a mix of sun and shade.



WHAT'S HAPPENING AT YOUR PARK?

Trend research from local, state and federal park providers shows that the demand for group picnicking and camping continues to grow significantly.

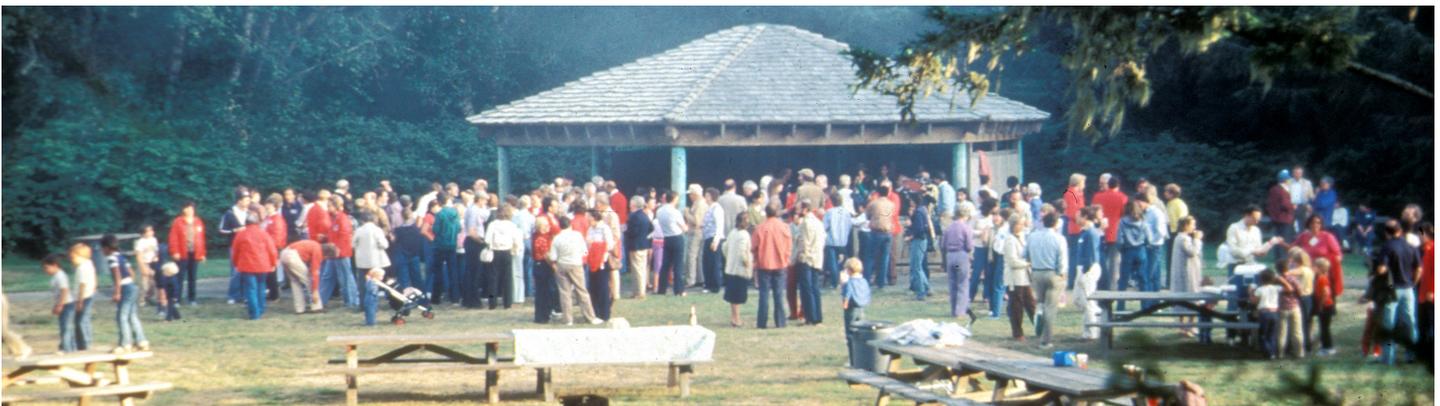
The Recreation Section created this Bulletin not only to provide information but also to stimulate ideas on group areas in state parks. Do you have ideas to share? We would like to hear from you. Please contact Eileen Hook, Recreation Section Supervisor, at ehook@parks.ca.gov or (916) 654-2442.

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Design/site visit and consultation, Millerton Lake SRA



Picnic at Sunset Bay, Oregon

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