

State Parks and Forests

Background

New Jersey's Green Acres Program has protected more than 1.2 million acres of open space and farmland across the state.¹ Of that, more than 441,000 acres are included in the State parks and forests system, representing approximately 8 percent of New Jersey's total land area (national average is about 1%). The system is comprised of 39 parks, 11 forests, 3 recreational areas, and 43 natural areas. New Jersey is ranked eighth in the nation and second in the northeast region for state park system acreage².

State parks and forests are available for a wide range of recreational opportunities, which include camping, swimming, hiking, boating, fishing and hunting, as well as other outdoor pursuits. These recreational uses generate economic benefits that contribute to New Jersey's multi-billion dollar tourism revenues.

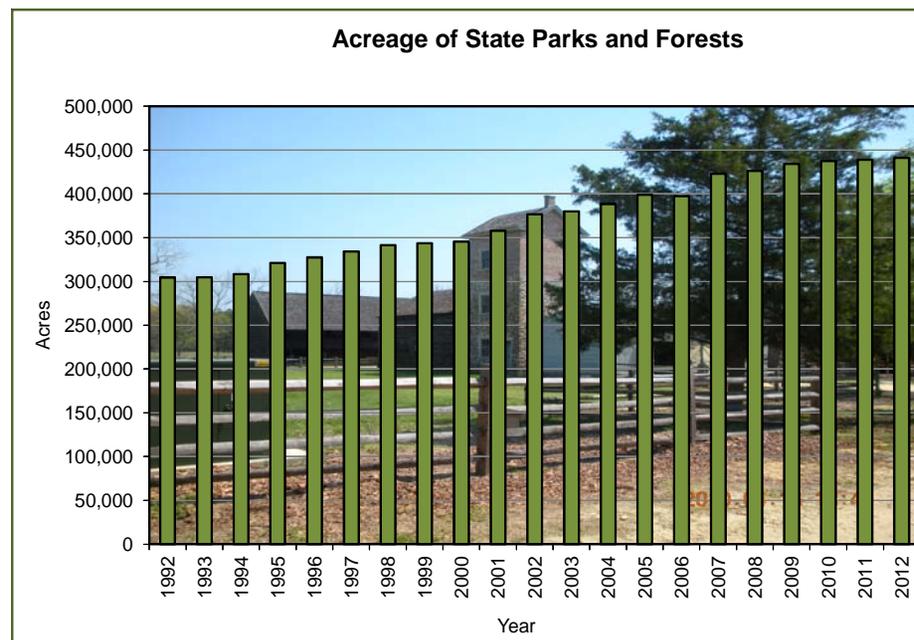
In addition, parks and forests benefit the State through ecosystem services – vital natural functions that could be costly to replicate artificially. Of critical importance is the watershed protection value of the parks and forests, many of which are located in the watersheds of some of the State's biggest water supply reservoirs and serve as "sponges and filters" for the water entering the reservoirs. These areas also serve as habitat for wildlife and help to promote the conservation of New Jersey's biological diversity. State park and forest lands contribute almost half of the area for watchable

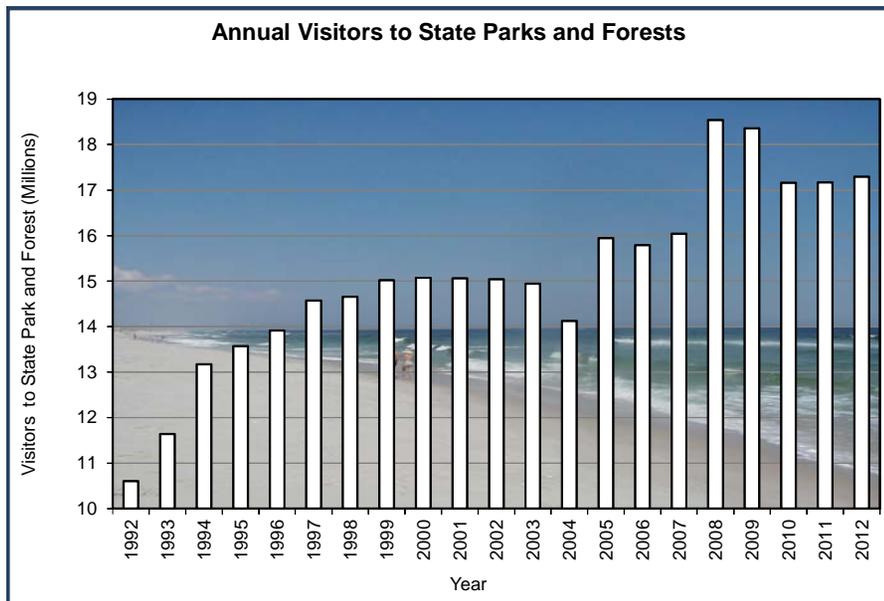
wildlife in the state. Healthy ecosystems within these State lands also play a vital role in mitigating greenhouse gas emissions and maintaining essential geo-chemical processes such as soil erosion control and groundwater protection.



Status and Trends

Over the period from 1992 to 2012 there was an increase in the acreage of State parks and forests from 304,539 acres to approximately 441,110 acres (see *Acreage of State Parks and Forests* figure)². Over the same period, visitation in the State Park system increased from 10,607,300 to 17,296,524 people² (see *Annual Visitors to State Parks and Forests* figure). This translates to an average use density (visitations per unit area) of 41 visitations per acre for the period. The annual use density for this period has varied from 35 to 44 visitations per acre, but shows no apparent trend. DEP has yet to consider the implications of this for the carrying capacity of the current park system. For the fiscal year 2012 (July 1, 2011 to June 30, 2012), average use density for all states in the United States was 50 visitations per acre.





Outlook and Implications

In addition to environmental benefits, the State parks and forests, in their current protected state, are responsible for substantial economic benefits to the State. A DEP study³ estimated that the economic value is at least \$1.2 billion annually, which includes the value of important ecosystem services. This “green infrastructure” also creates a buffer zone to regulate the spread of development, functioning as a protected area around which sustainable land-use could be implemented. These state lands form the backbone of a physical framework called the Garden State Greenways, which is a collaborative planning tool with which New Jersey communities can systematically and cooperatively coordinate and plan open space initiatives⁴.

For 2012, operating expenditures for New Jersey’s park system totaled just over \$28.5 million². The system’s share of the 2012 State budget was less than 0.1 percent compared to a national average of 0.21 percent. In terms of capital expenditures for that year, New Jersey spent \$10.5 million compared to the \$9.75 million national average.

More Information

Further information can be obtained from DEP’s State Park Service, which administers the State parks and forests, at <http://www.state.nj.us/dep/parksandforests>.

Much of the information in this report was provided by the NJDEP Division of Parks and Forestry and the National Association of State Park Directors Annual Information Exchange for 2012.

References

- ¹ Green Acres Success Stories. <http://www.nj.gov/dep/greenacres/success.html>. Accessed Jan 18, 2013.
- ² National Association of State Park Directors. 2013. Statistical Report of State Park Operations: 2011-2012 Annual Information Exchange for the Period July 1, 2011 through June 30, 2012.
- ³ NJDEP Division of Science, Research and Technology. The Economic Value of New Jersey State Parks and Forests (June 2004).
- ⁴ Information on Garden State Greenways is available at <http://www.gardenstategreenways.org>

