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Cheap summer getaways might go away this summer

By CHRIS CAROLA – 6 days ago

SARATOGA SPRINGS, N.Y. (AP) — Cash-strapped Americans looking for a cheap getaway at a state park or campground this summer are likely to find instead reduced hours, higher fees and closed beaches and pools.

State parks and historic sites across the nation have had to cut back because of budgets squeezed by the economic downturn, said Philip McKnelly, executive director of the National Association of State Parks Directors.

"Most states are trying to cut back in some area," McKnelly, former director of North Carolina's state parks system, said in a telephone interview this week from Raleigh.

While state parks are struggling, national parks that had service cutbacks two years ago are expecting an upswing fueled by federal stimulus dollars.

In Illinois, 11 state-run historic sites reopened in April after being shut down for five months to help close a budget deficit measured in the billions. Utah's 43 state parks and museums are hiring fewer seasonal workers and eliminating some positions because their budget was slashed 15 percent. In Georgia, the budget passed last month slashes state park money by nearly 40 percent, while Wisconsin has more than 230 fewer seasonal parks workers this year than it had two years ago.

And a year after they successfully fought California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's proposal to shut dozens of state parks, advocates again face the possibility of closures, depending on a May 19 special election on the state's complicated plan to close a huge budget shortfall.

"These (parks) systems need to be maintained. They don't take care of themselves," said Elizabeth Goldstein, a former New York state parks administrator who's now president of the California State Parks Foundation. "We are concerned that cuts might be proposed which are draconian to parks but have little financial ability to close the budget gap."

In New York, some state-run beaches and pools from Long Island to the shores of lakes Erie and Ontario will be closed or have reduced hours this summer, while campgrounds from New York's southwestern corner to the Adirondacks are opening for the season later and closing earlier.

At Saratoga Spa State Park, the Peerless swimming pool popular with families and summer camps will be closed on Tuesdays, the day when it usually gets the fewest visitors, parks officials said.

That decision left some local recreation departments scrambling to find other swimming spots for youths who attend day camps.

"We've been going to Peerless on Tuesdays for a kabillion years," said Tracey Kubis, assistant recreation director for the town of Wilton, just outside Saratoga. "They could have made a decision a little earlier."

In all, about 100 out of the 213 state parks and historic sites across New York will see some reductions in services.

While the admission price remains \$6 to \$8 per vehicle at most New York parks, fees for such activities as golf, camping and dock and pavilion rentals have increased, parks spokeswoman Eileen Larrabee said.

There is some good news in New York: none of the state's parks or historic sites have had to close despite a budget cut from about \$200 million to \$172 million.

New York state parks Commissioner Carol Ash said she has fielded some irate e-mails, phone calls and letters from people upset over the changes announced last month.

"I always encourage them to try and understand the economic reality we're living through," she said. "The lesson here is people love their parks and they consider them their neighborhood amenities, and when something happens to their neighborhood amenity, they get mad."

The service reductions come as many New Yorkers and other Americans look for inexpensive outings closer to home.

"It seems a shame in these times when everyone has less money and parks are one of the few affordable recreation outlets that they're cutting back," said Robin Dropkin, executive director of the advocacy group Parks & Trails New York.

The situation is far different for the National Parks Service, which instituted its own round of service reductions just a couple years ago. Under the Obama administration's spending plan, the agency will get a 7 percent budget increase, according to Jeffrey Olson, a national parks spokesman.

AP Associated Press

Map



"We have a huge stimulus package that's working its way out into the countryside, so we are going to be spending \$750 million in the next 18 months in national park units," he said.

Visits to the agency's nearly 450 parks, cultural sites, battlefields and other properties increased by 3 million, to 275 million, from 2006 to 2007 before slipping slightly last year, Olson said. This year, he said, "we think we're going to be in the same ballpark, maybe a smidge up."

The 50-state total for state-park visitations increased by 18 million to nearly 748 million in 2008, when gas prices topped \$4 a gallon, McKnelly said. With unemployment rates up and the economy still in the doldrums, he expects those attendance numbers to remain strong in 2009.

"A camping trip to a state park, that's typically going to be far less expensive than taking an extended trip and staying in hotels and motels," McKnelly said.

On the Net:

- New York state parks: <http://www.nysparks.com>
- National Park Service: <http://www.nps.gov>

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