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State announces deep cuts in visitation, programs at Marin parks

[Mark Prado](#)

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Marin residents will have less access to state parks beginning this weekend as budget woes have prompted deep cuts that include closures during weekdays, the shuttering of campgrounds and elimination of educational programs.

All six of Marin's state parks will suffer some type of hit in the cost reduction program, which will eliminate roughly \$1 million from a \$5 million-plus budget for Marin's state parks.

"This is an unprecedented time, we don't like to see parks closed like this," said Danita Rodriguez, Marin state parks district superintendent. "But we are trying to be somewhat accommodating and keeping the parks open when there are more users on the weekends and holidays."

There will be some big hits. Olompali State Historic Park north of Novato will be closed during the week beginning Monday through June 2010; at Samuel P. Taylor State Park, the Madrone Group Camp and Irving Group Picnic day use areas will be closed beginning Sunday through March 25, 2010; at Angel Island, environmental living and other interpretive programs will be canceled, among other cuts. No jobs were lost in the cost paring.

The cuts will be revisited at the end of the fiscal year in June, Rodriguez said.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger had threatened to shut down state parks to achieve budget savings to help close the state's budget deficit. Schwarzenegger switched gears at the end of September, saying parks would remain open, but then ordered the cuts that had to be made by state park officials to help make up \$14.2 million of the deficit.

"It's really a closure without calling it closed," said Larry Minikes, president of the Tamalpais Conservation Club, which has 800 members.

He said he would like to see fees assessed to park users via an annual pass to help generate revenue for the parks.

"I bet there will be a lot of disappointed tourists when they come to these places and find them closed, and the same for locals," he said.

Here's a look at how Marin's state parks will be affected by cuts:

- Angel Island State Park

Ayala Cove and the U.S. Immigration Station restroom facilities will remain open during normal operating hours. All other restroom facilities will only be open on weekends and some holidays through April 30, 2010.

Environmental living programs are canceled, and other interpretive programs not related to the immigration station will be conducted on a limited basis, until state park staff can be hired and trained to provide such programs. There will be delays in non-emergency responses to inquiries.

- China Camp State Park

Back Ranch Meadows Campground will be closed weekdays but open on weekends and some holidays on a first-come, first-served basis through March 25, 2010. Current reservations will be honored. Back Ranch Meadows Campground will go back on the reservation system starting March 26, 2010.

Weber and Buckeye Point day use areas and the lower China Camp Village parking lot will be closed weekdays and open on weekends and some holidays from Sunday through June 30, 2010. Restrooms at Weber, Buckeye Point and China Camp Village will only be open when those areas are open.

- Mount Tamalpais State Park

The upper mountain - from Pantoll to East Peak and West Ridgecrest - will only be open to vehicular traffic weekends and some holidays from Monday through June 30, 2010. Bootjack parking lot will only be open weekends and some holidays beginning Monday through June 30, 2010. These areas may be open during the weekdays the week before Easter and the week after Easter. Restroom facilities in all closed areas will not be open.

Alice Eastwood Group Camp will be closed Sunday through March 25, 2010. It will go back on the reservation system on March 26, 2010. Current reservations will be honored.

The Frank Valley Horse Camp will be closed Sunday through June 30, 2010.

The Pantoll walk-in campground will continue to stay open on a first-come, first-served basis. There will be new fee areas at Rock Spring parking lot and the parking lot on Panoramic Highway across from the Mountain Home Inn.

- Olompali State Historic Park

The park will be closed to public use Monday through Friday from Nov. 2 through June 30, 2010.

- Samuel P. Taylor State Park

Madrone Group Camp and Irving Group Picnic day use areas will be closed beginning Sunday through March 25, 2010. They will open and go back on the reservation system starting March 26, 2010.

Devil's Gulch Group Camp and Redwood Grove Group Picnic Day Use area will remain open.

The family campground - Creek and Orchard sections - will be opened as needed and will be available on a first-come, first-served basis through March 25, 2010. It will go back on the reservation system starting March 26, 2010. Restroom facilities in all closed areas will not be open.

- Tomales Bay State Park

The main park entrance, Shell Beach parking lot, and Millerton Point parking lot will only be open weekends and some holidays through June 30, 2010. These areas may be open the week before and after Easter. Restroom facilities in all closed areas will not be open.

Environmental living programs will not be conducted during the 2009-10 academic year.

Contact Mark Prado via e-mail at mprado@marinij.com