

# **Alabama State Parks:**

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A Reflection on 75 Years of Successful Public Service

## Message from Alabama State Parks Director Greg Lein



In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Alabama joined the national movement to develop a system of parks within our state that would serve the public and enhance our quality of life. This effort was manifested in our state law and through the creation of our Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, and widely represented in the following mission statement:

*The mission of the Parks Division is to acquire and preserve natural areas, develop, furnish, operate and maintain recreational facilities, and to extend the public's knowledge of the state's natural environment. This Division's goals are to maintain and operate the State Parks system in an economically sound and efficient manner on the most self-sustaining basis as possible; to provide and maintain high quality facilities and services to meet the needs of visitors; to provide an opportunity for personal growth and development of individuals through outdoor experiences; to promote use of State Parks facilities; to preserve unique natural features and integrity of State Parks for future generations and to promote good will and enhance the public image of Alabama, and the Alabama State Parks through dedicated, courteous employees.*

Over the past 75 years, Alabama's state park system has truly experienced a wide range of influences. Our parks have benefited from unique public programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps, and publicly approved bond initiatives to provide new customer conveniences and recreational

facilities. In the early years of the park system, World War II slowed the parks' development and had a related ripple effect on our economies. Natural and man-made disasters have caused setbacks in our progress as a public service program, and yet we have endured these ups and downs and remain a park system that is well regarded by our customers. As a user pay program, customer approval is the ultimate measure of a successful system.

Despite all our past challenges and successes, we must now look toward the future and work to understand how we may best attend to Alabama's state park mission. In undertaking this challenge for our next 75 years of service, we contemplate modern questions about how to strike a balance between **"preserving" the natural areas** that are our parks, and providing for **"recreational facilities"** in the parks. Many opportunities exist through greater partnering, on multiple levels. Further, as we now sit firmly within a digital age, we must also contemplate both the distractions of modern technology and the benefits. This same technology might be used to not only communicate more about the opportunities we offer Alabamians and visitors from abroad, but also how we can better fulfill our mission **"to extend the public's knowledge of the state's natural environment."**

We hope you enjoy this report, and ask one favor of you in service to the Alabama state park system. When you plan your next visit, please bring a friend. Your parks' prosper most when the public gets outside and uses them. Your dedicated state park employees, volunteers, and our many partners will make sure that the parks and the guests are both well cared for!

## Most Significant Misperception About Alabama State Parks

- "I pay my taxes, why do we have to pay for x, y, and z?" 70% of customers believe we are a tax supported system.
- Alabama State Parks are a user-pay funded system.
- Within the 22 state parks, a comparison of revenues vs. expenses show a small profit through customer derived revenues.
- The majority of customer revenue comes from overnight guests.



Boat house at DeSoto State Park

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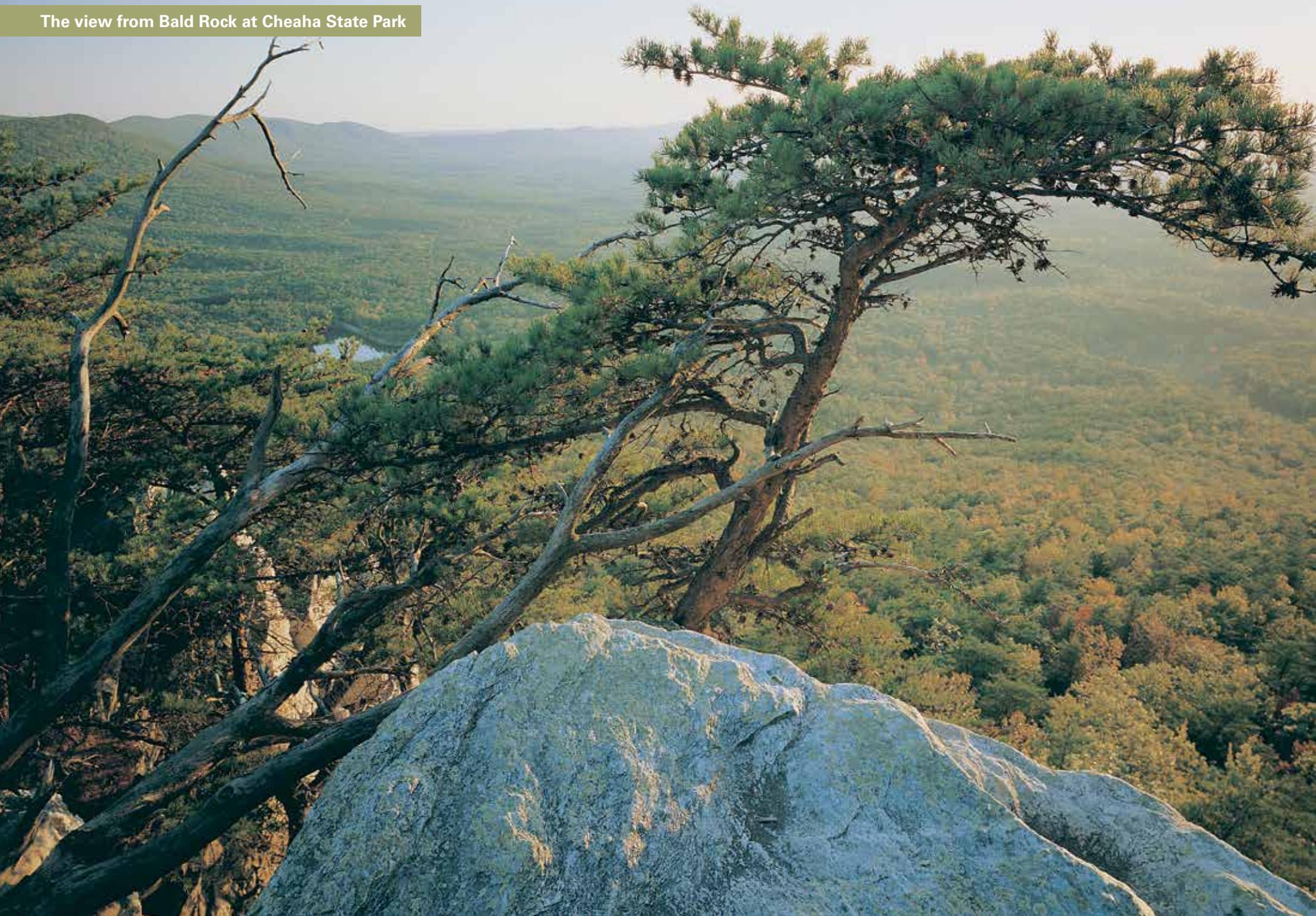
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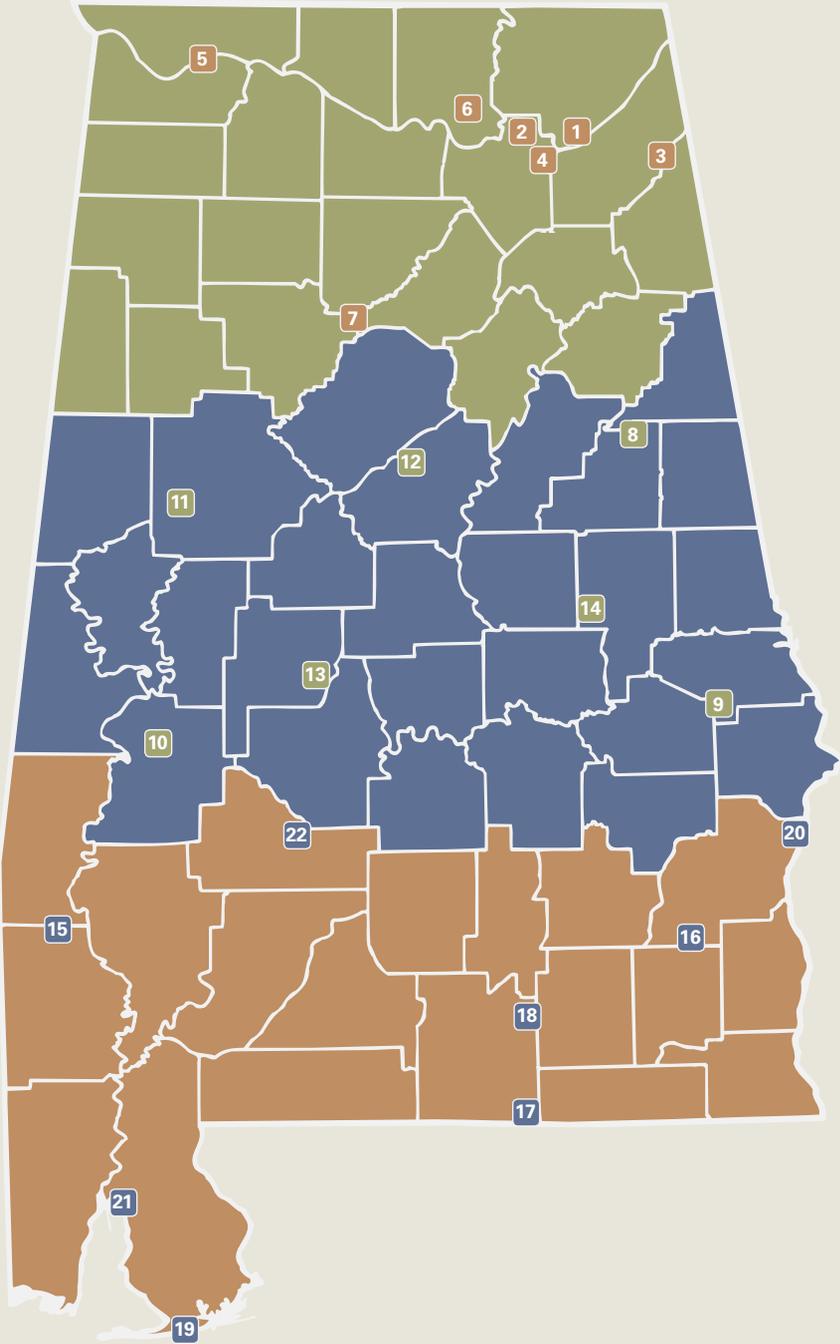
The view from Bald Rock at Cheaha State Park



# From the Mountains to the Coast: A Snapshot of the Present System

The year 2015 represents the beginning of a new era for Alabama's State Park system. This past year marked our 75th year of public service as a state park agency, and it was a great occasion for the people who love parks. Extending from the Tennessee Valley to the Gulf of Mexico, Alabama currently operates 22 state parks with a diverse array of recreational opportunities. Whether you're looking for overnight accommodations within our lodges, cabins, cottages, chalets and campgrounds, or day-use activities on our beaches, lakes, trails and picnic grounds, the state park system stands ready to serve Alabamians and visiting tourists from abroad.

As great as things may be for a state park visitor today, Alabama's successful park program didn't happen overnight. We would like to take this occasion to share with you how we got here, and contemplate where we may go over the next 75 years.



### North

- <sup>1</sup> Buck's Pocket, <sup>2</sup> Cathedral Caverns, <sup>3</sup> DeSoto, <sup>4</sup> Guntersville,
- <sup>5</sup> Joe Wheeler, <sup>6</sup> Monte Sano, <sup>7</sup> Rickwood Caverns



### Central

- <sup>8</sup> Cheaha, <sup>9</sup> Chewacla, <sup>10</sup> Chickasaw, <sup>11</sup> Lake Lurleen,
- <sup>12</sup> Oak Mountain, <sup>13</sup> Paul Grist, <sup>14</sup> Wind Creek



### South

- <sup>15</sup> Bladon Springs, <sup>16</sup> Blue Springs, <sup>17</sup> Florala, <sup>18</sup> Frank Jackson,
- <sup>19</sup> Gulf, <sup>20</sup> Lakepoint, <sup>21</sup> Meaher, <sup>22</sup> Roland Cooper

# MISSION STATEMENT:

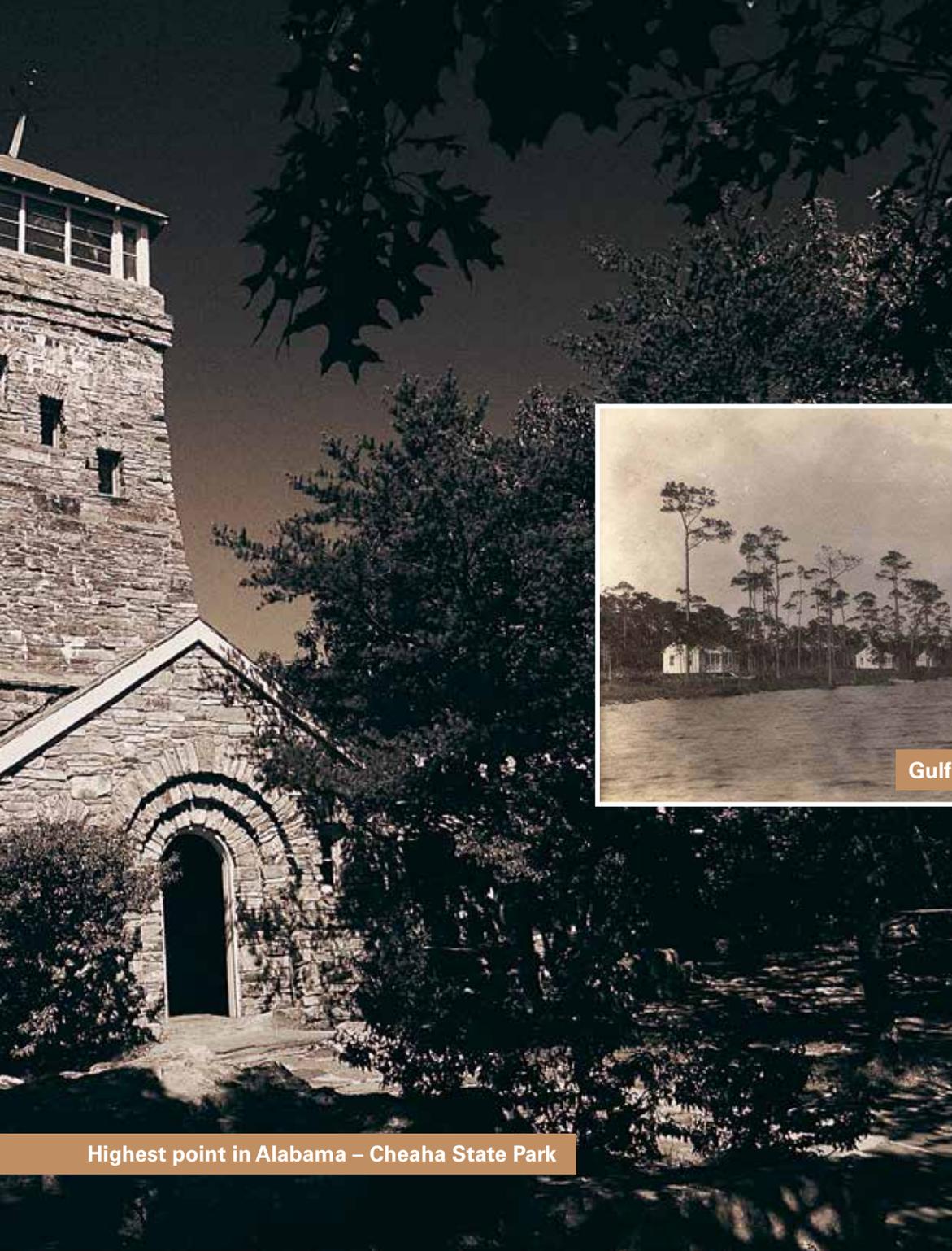
To acquire and preserve natural areas; to develop, furnish, operate, and maintain recreational facilities; and to extend the public's knowledge of the state's natural environment.

## Beginnings of the Park System

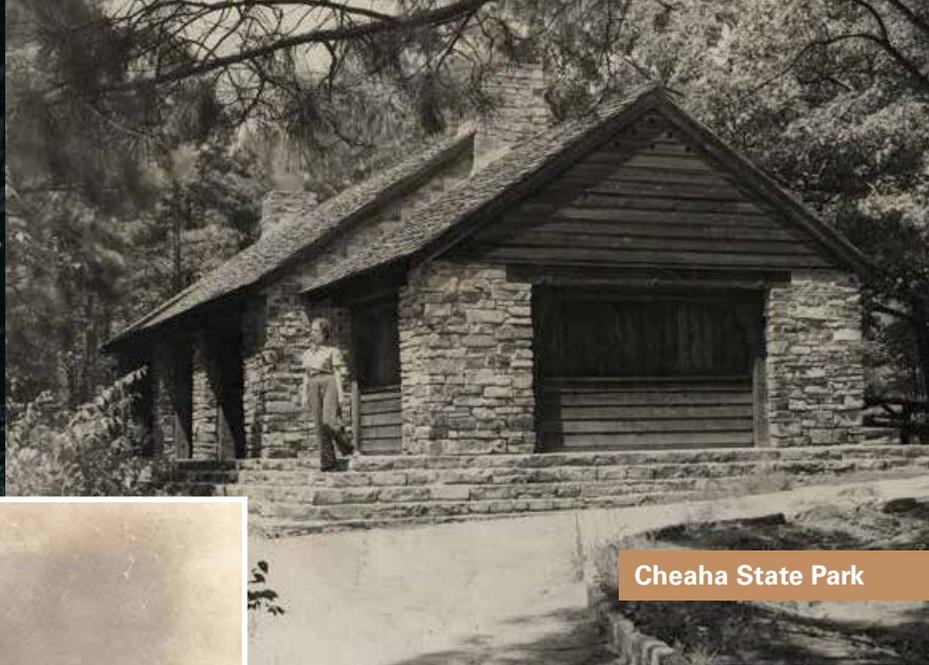
In March 1939, the state's legislature and Governor Frank Dixon created the organizational structure for the present-day Department of Conservation, which included the State Parks Division. Like so many governmental initiatives, the signing of this act had been preceded by previous actions to investigate the potential for a parks system, as well as the review of 100 potential park sites. The entire effort followed a national trend among the country's then 48 states, which acknowledged that while each state might not have a Grand Canyon or Yellowstone site worthy of National Park designation, the public wanted dedicated recreation areas nearby to experience the outdoors. Thus was born the nation's system of state parks, with each created and managed independently by their respective state governments.

For Alabama, the early years involved numerous investigations and studies, with the majority of the state's leadership coming through the Alabama Forestry Commission, which at that time was charged with supporting a parks mission. The first park was actually dedicated by Governor Bibb Graves in 1930 as a "tract of 421 acres on the banks of the Coosa River in southwest Talladega County." Several other considerations for park designations occurred during the late 1920s and early 1930s. In fact, by 1933, 11 state parks had been designated, several of which are present-day state forests managed by the Alabama Forestry Commission. However, of those 11 parks, the only one that has survived to be a present component of the existing parks system is Cheaha State Park. Cheaha has been continuously managed as a State Park since 1933.





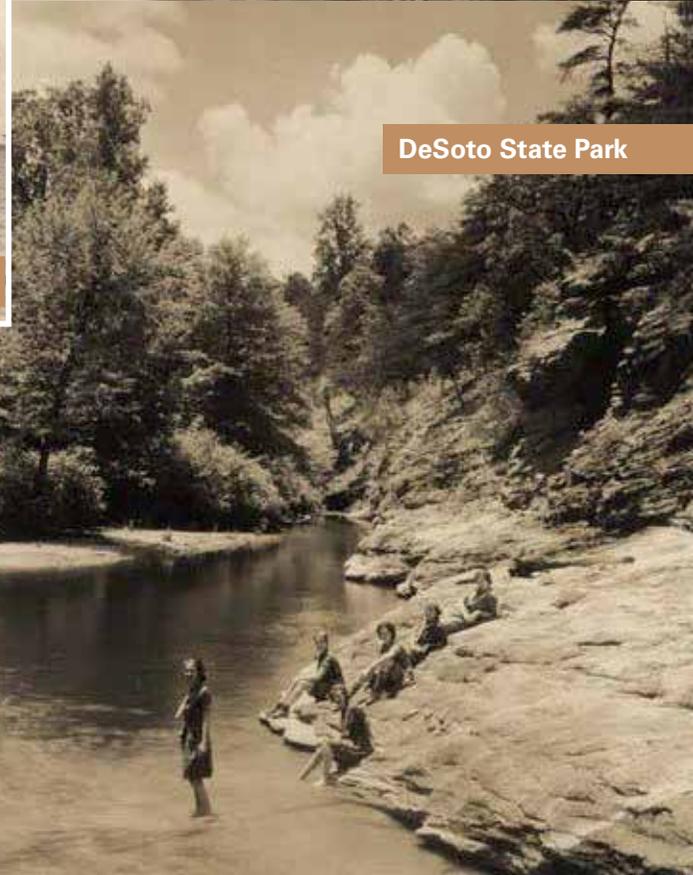
Highest point in Alabama – Cheaha State Park



Cheaha State Park



Gulf State Park



DeSoto State Park



The CCC Bridge at Chewacla State Park

## The Civilian Conservation Corps and Other Early Programs

The mid to late 1930s was also a period of significance. As the Great Depression struck our nation, Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration and the federal government responded with several work programs that helped develop our country's infrastructure. Among these was the Civilian Conservation Corps, known as the CCC. The U.S. Department of the Interior's National Park Service administered this program, and it had a marked influence on the early development of Alabama's initial state parks. These public work projects included lakes and dams, trails, roads and bridges, cabins, pavilions and shelters, as well as water and sewer systems. Native stone and timber were utilized in many of these early construction projects, and can still be observed in several north Alabama parks. These works have also been recently celebrated in three small museums dedicated at Monte Sano, DeSoto and Cheaha state parks.

The era of support by the CCC was a significant time for the Alabama State Parks Division. This period of advancement saw the development of 14 parks comprising about 22,500 acres. Notable among them were Gulf, Cheaha, DeSoto, Monte Sano, Chewacla and Oak Mountain. While this age of growth gave the parks system a great beginning, it was eclipsed by the beginning of World War II. With this change came the discontinuation of the CCC program. As historians have noted, "Many of the fine young men who made up the Civilian Conservation Corps laid down their park development tools and took up arms to defend our country." State budgets were cut and the increasing visitation associated with the CCC's recreation projects began to stall and eventually decline.

Throughout the 1940s, the parks system ebbed and flowed with national and state "currents" of the time. While some park projects languished, others advanced. In 1947, the Tennessee Valley Authority transferred 4,000 acres of land on Guntersville Reservoir to the state in support of the parks system. This site became Little Mountain State Park, known today as Lake Guntersville State Park. Land was added in Baldwin County at Romar Beach and Alabama Point, supporting

the growth of the park system's most popular park, Gulf State Park. The Tennessee Valley Authority's Joe Wheeler State Park was incorporated into the system in 1949, and eventually came under complete state ownership in 1951. The 1950s also marked a hallmark in the paving of many park roads, advancing access to the growing acreage and accommodations. This period was also notable as the annual park attendance reached the 1 million mark!

Over the next few decades, the Conservation Department's park system's operations continued on a track of steady development while also seeing the additions of several new parks. These included Meaher in Baldwin County, Lake Lurleen in Tuscaloosa County, Bladon Springs in Choctaw County, Blue Springs in Barbour County, Bridgeport in Wilcox County, Lakepoint in Barbour County, Florala and Lightwood Knot Creek (now Frank Jackson) in Covington County, Wind Creek in Tallapoosa County, Bucks Pocket in DeKalb, Jackson and Marshall counties, and Rickwood Caverns in Blount County. These advances from 1950 to the mid-1970s created the majority of the park lands we now know and love. What happened next marked a truly significant step in the development of these lands, and the recreational accommodations that are presently offered to the public.



## The Resort Park Era

The 1970s saw the creation of the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), and the state of Alabama's legislative initiatives to create bond-supported funding that allowed for a massive planning and development effort to create today's resort parks. These efforts provided for the design and construction of modern resort facilities at Joe Wheeler, Guntersville, DeSoto, Cheaha, Lakepoint and Gulf, along with expanded campgrounds and day-use facilities at Oak Mountain, Wind Creek, Roland Cooper, Lake Lurleen and Rickwood Caverns. As these projects were completed around 1974, Alabama's park facilities were heralded as being one of the most modern and progressive systems in the nation. All of these facilities remain in place, with the exception of the lodge and conference center at Gulf State Park. While the LWCF program was initially operated from the Conservation Department, it was later transferred to the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs.



Guntersville Lodge Circa 1990s

## Public Initiatives for Bond Renovation

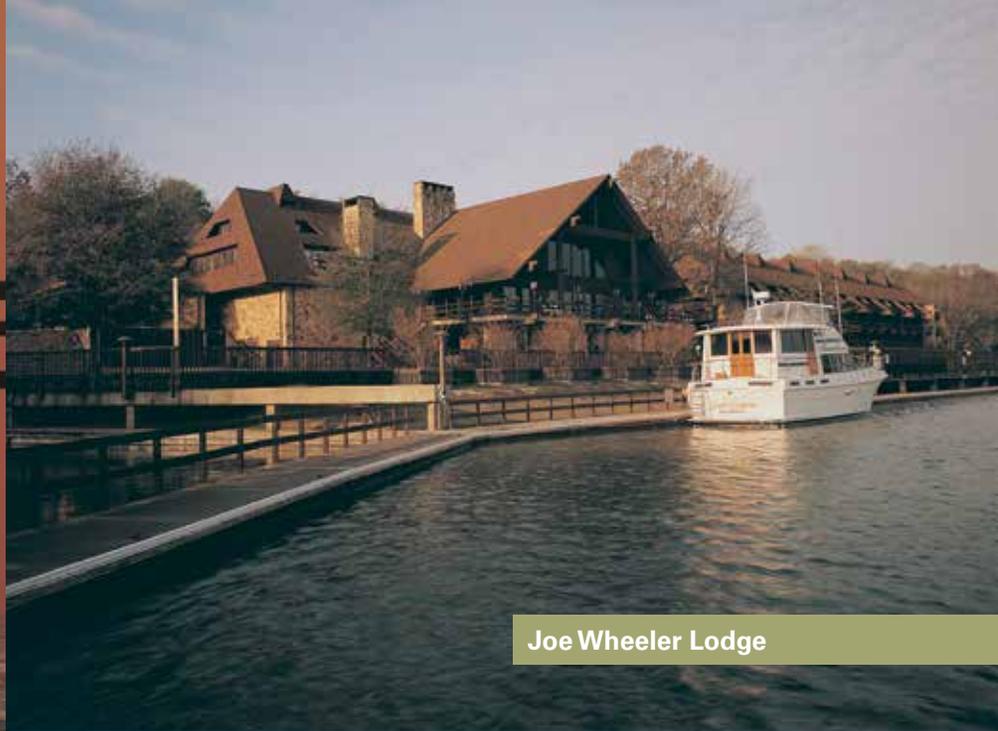
In the early 1990s, the park facilities that were developed in the Resort Park Era were beginning to show their age, and the wear and tear on public facilities is very different from those on private ones. The 20-plus years of public use following the initial construction and opening of these facilities in the early 1970s was plainly evident. By the mid-1990s, facility conditions were reaching a critical level and the comments from guests were reinforcing the need for attention. With these declines, the park system experienced declines in visitation and customer revenue. In 1998, Conservation Commissioner James D. Martin and Governor Fob James led a successful effort to develop and pass a constitutional amendment to create a \$110 million bond-supported renovation initiative for the park system. The legislation passed in that year, with the public approving the constitutional measure by a vote of 75 percent.

During the following decade, major renovations and park improvements were completed at many of the state parks. Notable among those projects was the renovation of the lodges at Lakepoint, Joe Wheeler, Guntersville, DeSoto and Cheaha, as well as the cabins and cottages at Monte Sano, DeSoto, Cheaha, Joe Wheeler, Guntersville and Gulf state parks. Improvements were also made at the Guntersville and Oak Mountain golf courses and the marina at Joe Wheeler.

Sadly, this period of improvement to the park system coincided with the large growth period in housing construction and post-hurricane redevelopment in the southeastern United States, which resulted in dramatic rises in the costs of construction. As a consequence, the pre-bond estimates for project costs fell far short of the actual costs. This resulted in a number of park renovation projects not being undertaken because of the lack of funds.



Original Gulf State Pier



Joe Wheeler Lodge



Former Gulf State Park Hotel

## Other Complications Occurring During the Beginning of the Millennium

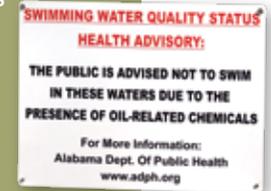
During the initial phase of the 2001 Bond Initiative, public optimism about the park system was running high. However, the public lacked an understanding of the system's revenue losses due to park facilities being closed because of renovation or from damage associated with natural disasters. It has always been a poorly-known fact that Alabama's park system relies on customer revenues to fund the majority of its annual operational expenses. In fact, in a recent poll of customers during 2013, 70 percent of respondents indicated that they thought their taxes funded the park system's operation!

The consequence of these funding challenges made the pace and scheduling of facility renovations a very delicate situation. It also resulted in the layoffs of numerous part-time park employees, and reassignment of many full-time staff. This process stretched out over a span of almost 10 years, with the last major renovation concluding with the re-opening of Lakepoint State Park's lodge in 2010.

Debris left by Hurricane Ivan aftermath at Gulf State Park

Since the beginning of the new millennium, the parks system has been impacted by the following natural disaster events:

- **2004** – Hurricane Ivan causes severe damage to Gulf State Park's lodge and conference resort facility, resulting in its closure and demolition.
- **2005** – Hurricane Dennis and Hurricane Katrina cause additional damage to Gulf State Park's shoreline and campground.
- **2010** – The BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill disrupts seasonal tourism along the gulf coast and negatively affects visitation to Gulf State Park.
- **2011** – Tornado outbreaks across north Alabama cause severe damage at Lake Guntersville and Bucks Pocket state parks.
- **2013** – A tornado hits DeSoto State Park damaging the lodge and cabins.
- **2014** – A winter storm in central Alabama causes ice damage to trees at Cheaha State Park.



Lake Guntersville State Park sustained major damage to the campground and lodge during the statewide tornado outbreak on April 27, 2011





Alabama State Parks is supported by diverse user groups

## Our Park System Today: A “User Pay” Model

As we have moved into the 21st century, Alabama can be proud of the robust and efficient park system it has created. Seventy-five years of vigilance and dedicated effort has produced a parks system with three major resort park facilities that are capable of lodging and hosting large group events within the tranquil outdoor settings at Joe Wheeler, Guntersville and Lakepoint state parks. Similar but smaller opportunities are offered at DeSoto and Cheaha state parks. Camping opportunities abound, with 20 of the 22 parks offering more than 2,500 modern campsites, cabins and related amenities.

The recreational opportunities are equally impressive. Sixteen of the 22 parks offer extensive public access to outstanding waterways that host boating, fishing, water skiing, wildlife viewing and other related opportunities. The parks are rich with trails that accommodate biking, horseback riding, hiking and backpacking, as well as running and walking. Two parks host some of the most spectacular cave features in the southeastern United States. Golf courses are offered at six of the parks. Geocaching and birding trails have become popular new activities.

We would be remiss not to mention the outstanding natural environments that are found within our parks. From the mountains to the coast, the parks system hosts unique landscapes rich with caves, streams and rivers, lakes and ponds, forests and fields, swamp and marsh, and of course, white sandy beaches. All of these locales offer visitors a tranquil natural setting that is both pleasing to the eye and the spirit. They also support a vast array of wildlife species and plants that comprise our rich natural heritage.

Over the last 20 years, the Alabama State Park system has hosted a consistent visitation rate of 4 to 5 million customer occurrences each year, demonstrating that people love their parks. This same park system has consistently been recognized as being one of the most efficient in the nation, with **80 to 90 percent of the annual funding coming from customer fees, not taxes**. These achievements did not happen by accident. They are the result of 75 years of dedicated effort on the part of our elected officials, park employees, local partners and of course, the loving patronage of our park customers. As we look to the mission of serving the public for the next 75 years, we will reflect on the hard work and dedication of those who preceded us, and take inspiration in the vision and foresight that provides us with what we have today.

### Park System Overview

- Created in 1939, presently 22 parks in 21 counties
- The 22 parks collectively occupy approximately 48,000 Acres
- Five resort parks with lodge, restaurant, and meeting facilities
- Ten parks with modern cottages and campgrounds
- Twenty-one parks with modern campgrounds
- Two parks with cave tours

### Detailed Amenities

- 2,288 modern campsites
- 223 cabins, cottages and chalets
- 343 lodge resort rooms
- 6 golf courses
- 225 miles of trails
- Thousands of acres of adjacent public waters

# Parks an asset for Alabama

Alabama is home to some wonderful national parks, and they bring both visitors and dollars to our state. Those visitors spent \$26.5 million in Alabama in 2012 and supported 381 jobs, according to a National Park Service report.

Impressive? Yes. And so are the seven national parks here, which include Horseshoe Bend, Russell Cave, Little River Canyon and the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site and others.

Alabama, though, is also home to even more state parks, which are just as picturesque and inviting. These state parks, in fact, attract millions of visitors and generate hundreds of millions of dollars for the state's economy.

What makes those numbers even more impressive is the fact state parks must generate more than 90 percent of the money, through user fees, to pay for its operations. The state provides some money for maintenance each year, but a large majority of our budget comes from our visitors and partners.

These user fees include park entrance, campsites, lodging, boat ramps and vending.

zipline and two miles of sugar-white beaches. In between, visitors can find just about anything they could want in a park: camping and picnicking, mountain trails, bird and nature watching, golf, tennis, biking, fishing and boating, and, of course, some of the best views nature has to offer.

All of us who use the parks are the partners who pay the way. Mountain bike and canoe clubs that help build and maintain trails and camping sites are also vital partners who pay the way in dollars and sweat. So, too, are our out-of-state friends who come to enjoy our warm weather.

# State parks have significant economic impact on Alabama

BY GREG LEIN  
Special to The Star

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Mountain bike and canoe clubs that help build and maintain trails and camping sites are also vital partners who pay the way in dollars and sweat. So, too, are our out-of-state friends who come to enjoy our warm weather or fresh mountain air. We welcome and are thankful for them all. They are the reason economic growth is the reason economic shot in the arm of Alabama. That economic boost translates in \$140 million in earnings for thousands of workers in all segments of the economy and \$10.9 million in state and local taxes, Addy and Ijaz report.

Greg Lein Alabama State Parks

# Parks provide economic punch



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The Alabama Tourism Department recognizes the importance of our state parks and just named 2014 "Year of the Parks." Alabama State Parks — all 48,000 acres of them — are great places to visit and enjoy, and park and tourism officials acknowledge the many, many visitors who flock to our state to enjoy our parks.

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We love our state parks partners — those who work with us in local communities, our volunteers and those who choose to make their memories in one of our parks with us. Whether those park visitors are Alabamians or from out of state, they are our partners. Without them, Alabama parks couldn't provide the amenities we have come to love. And they certainly wouldn't be the job-producing, economic resource we have come to depend on.

Greg Lein is the director of the Alabama State Parks. Email: Greg.Lein@dnr.alabama.gov. Web: www.alapark.com.

## Economic Impacts: State Parks Give Alabama \$375 Million Boost, Support 5,340 Jobs, Study Finds

Those were the headlines of the media alert following the park system's first-ever formal study of the economic benefits to the State of Alabama.

*MONTGOMERY, Ala. – Alabama's 22 state parks aren't just nice places to visit. They are also big contributors to the state's economy, a new study finds.*

*Visitors to Alabama's 22 state parks in 2011 spent an estimated \$152.4 million, according to the analysis by professors at the University of Alabama. Visitors' spending along with expenditures by the parks system had a total economic impact of \$375 million and supported 5,340 jobs, say Samuel Addy and Ahmad Ijaz of the Center for Business and Economic Research at the University of Alabama's Culverhouse College of Commerce.*

*The State Parks Division of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources commissioned the study. This year marks the 75th anniversary of Alabama's parks system. In 2012, state parks recorded more than 4.6 million visits.*

*"This study confirms what we who work in the parks system already know – that state parks are valuable tools to promote the state's economy," said Greg Lein, Alabama State Parks Director. "But the study gave us real numbers for state*

*parks' overall economic impact and the many public and private jobs that depend on them."*

*The economic impact of state parks compares favorably to that of national parks in the state. A recent report by the National Park Service said visitors to the seven national parks in Alabama spent \$26.5 million in 2012 and their spending supported 381 jobs.*

*Lein points out that state parks must generate through user fees the vast majority of the money that pays for their operations.*

*"Our slogan is 'Partners Pay the Way.' But it's more than a slogan. We really do rely heavily on our customers – campers, boaters, fishermen, bikers, golfers, etc. – to pay the bills. We want them to know their dollars count in the parks' and in the state's economy."*

*The \$375 million economic impact computed by Addy and Ijaz includes \$140 million in earnings for thousands of people in various segments of the workforce. State parks generate \$10.9 million in state and local taxes, according to the report.*

## The Importance of Having Friends: The People's Parks System-Alabama's State Parks Open for Business

Editorial by Greg Lein,  
Director of Alabama  
State Parks

*As we celebrate October 4 – National Visit a Park Day – I want to take a moment to let you in on some exciting news from Alabama State Parks. We are launching a new campaign to educate the public about the parks system and, most importantly, highlighting our partners who allow us to exist – for everyone to enjoy.*

*Back in 1939 when the first state parks were opened in Alabama, they were not created to make money. These parks were created to allow all Alabamians the opportunity to enjoy our God-given abundance of natural resources we are blessed with in Alabama. The parks system also allows us to preserve some of the most magical wonders of our state, such as Oak Mountain, Monte Sano, Cathedral Caverns, Guntersville, Wind Creek, DeSoto and many more.*

*One hundred percent of our operational funds are generated through our visitors and the remaining maintenance funds decided by the Alabama legislature. It is important that you know that Alabama State Parks are your Parks. The revenue to operate and maintain the 22 state parks is generated by user fees (i.e., gate entry, lodging, boat launch access, RV and camp sites,*

*etc.). It is largely thanks to those who enjoy visiting your parks that we have the operating budget we do each year.*

*In addition to our visitors being a critical partner to Alabama's State Parks, we also have community support from chambers of commerce, civic organizations, as well as city and county governments. These folks see the positive impact we have in their community – providing citizens in urban and rural areas alike open space to exercise and enjoy the great outdoors, while also drawing tourists to the area and contributing to the local economy.*

*And believe me, no one takes better care of the parks than those who are utilizing the parks. For example, we are fortunate in Alabama to have excellent terrain for mountain biking. Park partners at Oak Mountain and Chewacla have spent countless hours maintaining and improving the biking trails, which is not only good for them, but it is good for all park patrons who use these trails.*

*In 2010, the Birmingham Urban Mountain Peddlers (BUMP) completed the 26-mile Double Oak Trail at Oak Mountain State Park with*

*the support of Shelby County. Because of their contribution, the International Mountain Bike Association added Oak Mountain to its list of “Epic Rides,” making it one of the 52 must-ride trails in the world.*

*At Chewacla State Park in Auburn, the Central Alabama Mountain Peddlers (CAMP) has invested their own time to build and maintain trails on more than 500 acres of the park’s property. Partners like CAMP and BUMP are not only enjoying the parks now, but they are making a commitment to ensure that future generations are allowed these same opportunities.*



*Our partners are vast. We have snowbirds from the Northern United States and as far as Canada who make Gulf State Park their home-away-from-home for five to six months of the year, using some of our more than 500 RV campsites (these sites are at capacity year-round). At the same time, we have Alabamians and out-of-state guests staying at our hotels, lodges and chalets, playing rounds*

*of golf, getting married, camping, hiking, biking and so much more. Many of them are volunteering their time as well to enhance these parks during the time they visit. These are all important partners.*

*The parks have so much to offer. We host everything from triathlons to family reunions, cave tours for scout groups, fishing tournaments, concerts, golf tournaments, as well as many other events. These activities at the parks provide a significant boost to the local economy when we bring visitors into the community.*

*Just last week, I received a letter from a mother who recently had a son’s rehearsal dinner and wedding at Guntersville State Park. As she recalled to me her “dream come true” weekend, I could not help but think about the years these parks have been impacting the lives of so many Alabamians in such a profound way. In 2014, Alabama’s State Parks System will celebrate 75 years of this legacy.*

*That is the true mission of the Alabama State Parks System: to provide opportunities for Ala-*

*bamians of all interests and any means to enjoy our great outdoors. Without the public and community support the parks receive, the Alabama State Park System would not exist.*

*Partners Pay the Way. We are excited about the launch of this campaign and encourage you to visit our website to learn about special promotions and packages we will offer.*



## Nine State Parks Honored with TripAdvisor's Award of Excellence

### Joe Wheeler State Park awarded TripAdvisor Certificate of Excellence

Nine of Alabama's largest state parks, including Joe Wheeler State Park Resort, Rogersville have been awarded TripAdvisor Certificate of Excellence awards for 2014.

Joe Wheeler received more than 60 reviews on TripAdvisor.com, earning an overall rating of 4 out of 5 stars.

Other state parks that received the Certificate of Excellence are Gulf State, Cathedral Caverns, Chewacla, DeSoto, Lakepoint, Monte Sano, Oak Mountain and Lake Guntersville.

The Certificate of Excellence is an honor reserved for the top tier of attractions, hotels, parks and restaurants out of the thousands of attractions around the globe on TripAdvisor's website. According to the site, a proprietary algorithm analyzes reviews and ratings to determine winners. Award winners must maintain a rating of at least four out of five stars and be listed on

*Nine of Alabama's largest State Parks have received TripAdvisor's 2014 Certificate of Excellence Award. These awards are determined solely by the ratings and reviews of users on TripAdvisor, the world's largest travel site.*

*The 22 State Parks in Alabama offer much more than simply camping and hiking. The Parks System boasts beaches, mountains, golf courses, resort lodges, some of the best mountain biking trails in the country, and festivals and workshops throughout the year. Thousands of reviews by visitors from around the world on TripAdvisor have put the State Parks in the spotlight for visitors to the state.*

*"Our parks offer so much to visitors," says State Park Director Greg Lein. "Many visitors are surprised at the options and amenities available at our parks. The reviews on TripAdvisor highlight the level of commitment we have to our visitors to provide a memorable trip. We work hard to continually improve the parks to give our guests the best experience possible."*

*The following state parks received the TripAdvisor's Award of Excellence: Gulf State, Cathedral Caverns, Chewacla, DeSoto, Lakepoint, Monte*

*Sano, Oak Mountain, Lake Guntersville and Joe Wheeler.*

*The Certificate of Excellence is an honor reserved for the top tier of attractions, hotels, parks and restaurants out of the thousands of attractions around the globe on TripAdvisor's site. According to the site, a proprietary algorithm analyzes reviews and ratings to determine winners. Award winners must maintain a rating of at least four out of five stars and be listed on TripAdvisor for a minimum of one year.*

*"These awards are determined solely by users," says Lein. "This shows that the outstanding work of our employees and partners in all our parks is paying off and going noticed by our visitors from around the world."*

*The State Parks have received numerous updates, new attractions and improvements this year. Oak Mountain opened a water cable course to wake board without the use of a boat. Gulf State Park opened a zip line course and will be opening a new dog park this year. Cabins and lodges at parks around the state have received renovations, and new campsites have*

*been developed. All parks have more overnight accommodations that are now pet friendly at the park. Pets can stay the night for \$15 in select hotel rooms, cabins, cottages and for free at all campsites.*

*These and other additions at the parks would not be possible without volunteers. State Parks operate almost solely on user fees, and 25 percent of the labor at the parks is volunteer support. A large part of the State Park's success is due to the work of the partners who help to maintain and develop the 48,000 acres of parkland around the state.*

*"I see this as an award to our staff, volunteers, and the partners from so many communities who put in countless hours to keep our parks pristine. The parks system is a huge source of pride for people across the state of Alabama," says Lein.*

*Alabama's State Parks are celebrating their 75th anniversary this year and have hosted special events at parks around the state. These events have brought hundreds of people to the parks and helped raise awareness that partners pay the way at the state parks.*



#### Social Media and Online Reach

- Alabama State Parks manages individual Facebook pages for its 22 state parks along with a division wide page.
- The collective number of Facebook "Friends" have organically grown over 500% in last 5 years. Currently over 145,000.
- Over a 50% increase in Twitter and Instagram followers in 2014.
- Over 1,000,000 users of alapark.com each year since 2010. Approximately 100,000 monthly users.
- Monthly e-newsletters distributed to over 60,000 customers per month.





Peavine Falls at Oak Mountain State Park

## Where Do We Go From Here?

When thinking about the operations of the State Park system in Alabama, two things distinguish our program from those of similar programs in the related field of conservation and natural resources: 1) the reliance on revenue from customers; and 2) the absence of a supporting federal aid system like that supporting state game and fish programs in our nation's 50 states.

Each year, 80-90 percent of the Alabama State Park system's funding come from customer revenues. Consequently, customers paying entrance fees to parks, lodging fees within the parks cabins, chalets, cottages and campgrounds, or visiting the park's restaurants, golf courses, piers, and boat ramps generate the vast majority of the annual funding needed to manage Alabama's State Park system.

For more than 75 years, the citizens of our nation who hunt and fish have quietly participated in a federal aid system that receives an excise tax on hunting and fishing equipment. Once those funds are collected and transferred by the manufacturers of hunting and fishing equipment, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service transfers those funds back to the state game and fish agencies under a cooperative agreement to support hunting and fishing programs at the state level. Under these arrangements, for every \$1 collected by the state game and fish agency from license sales, \$1 is matched by \$3 from the federal government (money previously collected by the manufacturers of hunting and fishing equipment). This hugely successful program has been unobtrusively supporting the historic recovery

of the public's fish and game for decades, and today this program boasts an annual economic impact in Alabama of more than \$2.2 billion.

Sadly, no companion program for state park programs exists. Consequently, the manufacturers of camping equipment, binoculars, bird seed, and the related outdoor apparel are not collecting an excise tax on sales items associated with state park visitation. It is truly ironic that a nationally loved outdoor program like our nation's state park system, where the annual participants likely represent the majority of Americans, has no stable funding mechanism to support such a system. In the absence of such a system, state park programs such as Alabama's rely on small annual appropriations from the State General Fund, customer revenue, and the periodic bond initiatives that support facility renovations. Imagine such a "User Pay, User Benefit" program supporting our parks system in Alabama. One day, perhaps this circumstance will change.

Until that day arrives, we should focus more on partnering with local governments, local recreational interests, and related industries that might benefit from a proverbial "win-win" situation that helps multiple goals. One example is the ongoing public health crisis in our country related to obesity. Alabama's state parks are outstanding settings for the public to go and engage in outdoor exercise. Perhaps we can find a way to connect these dots and make Alabama the best it can be.

# Annual Operational Patterns and Use Trends

## Indicators of operational efficiency

The last 20 years of public service provided by the State Parks Division have seen a lot of instability. This era of State Parks experienced a concerted renovation effort that temporarily closed many of the system's largest facilities, and it also weathered the impacts of numerous natural disasters. Damage from hurricanes and tornadoes impacted several parks. There was also the loss of business associated with the 2010 oil well disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, which caused numerous problems to our state's coastal economies and Gulf State Park. Despite the many disruptions to the service provided over this time, the park system has remained efficient and effective.

**WORKFORCE** - The parks system's workforce varies seasonally, but during peak periods of the year it is comprised of about 775 people, of which around 24 percent are volunteers who work 20 hours or more each week. Of the 500 plus salaried staff, only about 30 percent are full-time merit system employees receiving a salary and benefits package. Since 1992, the Park System has experienced a 30 percent reduction in paid staffing.

**EQUIPMENT** - A common equipment standard used to evaluate operational patterns are automobiles. A recent review of the park system's vehicle fleet found that 80 percent of the agency's vehicles were 10 years old or older. Most park vehicles were secured as government surplus vehicles received from other state and federal agencies.

**REVENUE VERSUS EXPENDITURE COMPARISONS** - A common national efficiency standard within state park agencies is a comparison of annual guest revenue to operational costs. A review of these comparisons over a 20-year period shows Alabama's state park system's expenditures typically exceeding the revenue collected from guest services, but with the margin shrinking after the bond supported renovation period (*Figure A*).

The ability to operate with expenditures exceeding guest revenues is a result of the agency historically receiving additional state funds from cigarette and use tax revenues, which support the park system annual operations and maintenance programs. This pattern reflects a highly efficient park operations program, and when comparing our state's park system with that of our neighboring states, we can take pride in the fact that we have the most efficient program among our neighbors (*Table A*).

**FIGURE A**

**Revenue vs. Expenditure**

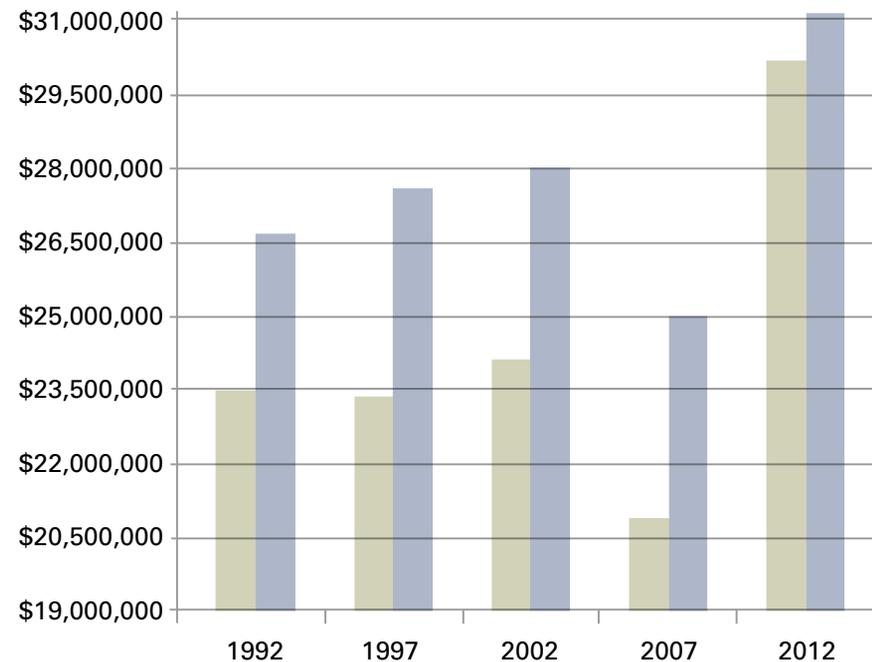


TABLE A

## How does Alabama compare to its neighbors?

State Parks 2009-2010 data; order by state area size

	TENNESSEE	MISSISSIPPI	ALABAMA	GEORGIA	FLORIDA
<b>Land Area</b> ( <i>sq.miles</i> )	42,143	48,430	<b>52,419</b>	59,425	65,755
<b>Population</b>	6,400,000	3,000,000	<b>4,800,000</b>	9,800,000	19,000,000
<b>Number of Park Acres</b>	139,112	22,915	<b>48,154</b>	82,059	264,043
<b>Number of Parks</b>	38	24	<b>22</b>	48	53
<b>Number of Visitors</b>	29,918,632	1,217,409	<b>3,838,568</b>	9,722,243	20,110,021
<b>Day Visitors</b>	28,404,662	847,317	<b>2,729,806</b>	8,419,647	17,855,772
<b>Overnight Visitors</b>	1,513,970	370,092	<b>1,108,762</b>	1,302,596	2,254,249
<i>Breakdown of Overnight Visitors</i>					
— Campers	788,158	164,655	<b>899,566</b>	807,360	2,386,566
— Cabins/Cottages	184,275	173,309	<b>135,705</b>	244,664	143,219
— Lodge Rooms	220,973	20,069	<b>65,873</b>	129,852	10,902
<b>Operational Expense (OE)</b>	\$77,900,000	\$16,600,000	<b>\$31,900,000</b>	\$49,100,000	\$80,600,000
<b>% OE covered by guest revenue</b>	<b>44.0%</b>	<b>65.7%</b>	<b>81.5%</b>	<b>65.4%</b>	<b>65.4%</b>

A closer look at the annual patterns of guest revenue and operational expenditure in 2012 illustrates other significant efficiency trends. When we categorize the 22 state parks by guest revenue and the number of visitor occurrences, we better understand how our small, medium, and large park operations reflect the state’s urban and rural population patterns (Table B).

Small park operations have fewer than 50,000 annual visitor occurrences, less than \$600,000 in annual guest revenue, and they are typically located in rural areas of the state. The two most efficient (*revenue vs. expenditure comparison*) medium-sized parks were Chewacla and Monte Sano, both of which benefit from year-round urban visitation from Auburn and Huntsville, respectively. In contrast, the most efficient park is Cathedral Caverns, which is rural but new and streamlined in its operations.

The largest park operations are a mix of urban and rural settings, but all benefit from being resort destinations with unique recreational features. Among these six large park operations, Guntersville was previously operating in the black, but was negatively impacted by the 2011 tornado disaster, and is presently under a special recovery focus intended to place this park’s operations back in the “black” category of efficiency.

**Other interesting revenue and operational trends**

- Overnight accommodations, entrance/admission fees, food and beverage sales, and golf account for the majority of the annual revenue from the 22 state parks (Table C).
- 10 parks account for 94 percent of the park system’s annual guest revenue. These parks are **Joe Wheeler, Monte Sano, Cathedral Caverns, Guntersville, DeSoto, Cheaha, Oak Mountain, Wind Creek, Lakepoint, and Gulf.**
- **These same 10 parks account for 91 percent of the park system’s annual operations costs.**
- **These same 10 parks also account for 94 percent of the park system’s annual guest attendance.**
- Gulf State Park is unique among the 22 state parks in that it accounts for about 23 percent of the total annual guest revenue, and 45 percent of the total annual guest attendance.

**TABLE B**

<b>PARK SIZE</b>	<b>SMALL</b> Less than 50,000 Visitor Occurrences; all Less than \$600,000 Revenue	<b>MEDIUM</b> 50,000 to 200,000 Visitor Occurrences; \$250,000 to 1.8 Million Revenue	<b>LARGE</b> 200,000 + Visitor Occurrences; all greater than \$1.5 Million Revenue
<b>revenue exceeds operation expenses</b>	Cathedral Caverns, Meaher	Chewacla, Monte Sano	Gulf, Joe Wheeler, Lakepoint, Oak Mountain, Wind Creek
<b>operation expenses exceeds revenue</b>	Roland Cooper, Bladon Springs, Blue Springs, Bucks Pocket, Chickasaw, Florala, Paul Grist, Frank Jackson	Cheaha, DeSoto, Lurleen, Rickwood Caverns	Lake Guntersville

**TABLE C**

**Annual Revenue Profile: Major Contributors**

<b>Guest Derived Revenue</b>	\$29.8 Million
<b>Camping</b>	\$6.6 Million
<b>Cottages/cabins/chalets</b>	\$4.7 Million
<b>Admission/tours/fees</b>	\$3.9 Million
<b>Lodge rooms</b>	\$3.2 Million
<b>Sales</b>	\$2.9 Million
<b>Golf</b>	\$2.0 Million



**DeSoto Falls at DeSoto State Park**

## Guest Recreational Use Patterns

The guest patterns for the last 20 years of public service reflect much of the same instability associated with the period of major renovations and the disruption from natural disasters. As we leave behind a period of economic recession, the renovated parks are in the best position they have been in the last 20 years of fulfilling their public service mission, while also bolstering the state's economy through the related tourism industry. Overall, guest visitation has been stable over the last 20 years, despite disruptions in service associated with renovations and natural disasters. Our most cost effective user-pay opportunities are with new day-use recreational programs. This is especially true for those oriented toward families, unique recreational programs, and recreational trails.

### Guest Trends

- Annual visitation occurrences have been stable since 1992, typically being around 4 million or more instances of visitation (*Table D*). While guest origin varies significantly among parks, a 50/50 split reflects our annual visitation by in-state and out-of-state customers across the entire park system.
- Day-use visitors typically outnumber overnight visitors 2-to-1, but day-use visitors can be difficult to count in parks that do not have a centralized entrance gate. (*Figure b*)
- Campsite and cabin guest use (*the largest sources of guest revenue*) show stable and increasing use trends over the last 20 years (*Figures C and D*).
- Lodge room rentals show the only declining user trend among the overnight facilities (*Figure E*). This trend largely reflects the disruption to lodge services during the renovation period of 2003 through 2009, the loss of Gulf State Park's lodge in 2004, and the 2011 tornado at Guntersville State Park.
- Overnight guests account for only 22 percent of annual visitation (*Table E*), but this amounts to the majority of guest revenue.

- In recent years, golf course utilization is stable at several of our courses, but declining at others. Over the past 20 years, the play in golf at our courses has declined, reflecting national trends in the sport and regional use patterns in Alabama.
- Recreational trail use has grown in recent years, especially among mountain bike riders. Patterns for hiking, trail running, and horseback riding also reflect stable or growing use trends.

### Alabama State Parks Visitor Profile

TABLE D

4.6 Million customer occurrences

**Customer origin:** ~50% from Alabama & 50% other

**22 Parks Rev/Exp ratio:** \$29.8 M/\$28.9 M

TABLE E

**FY2011-12:** 4,662,312 visitor occurrences

**Overnight guests:** 1,014,016 (22%)

**Other revenue/guests  
(e.g., pier, golf, gate counts):** 2,465,430 (53%)

**Non-revenue guests  
(e.g., boat ramps, beaches):** 1,151,321 (25%)

FIGURE B

### State Park Visitors

Day Visitor Overnight Visitor

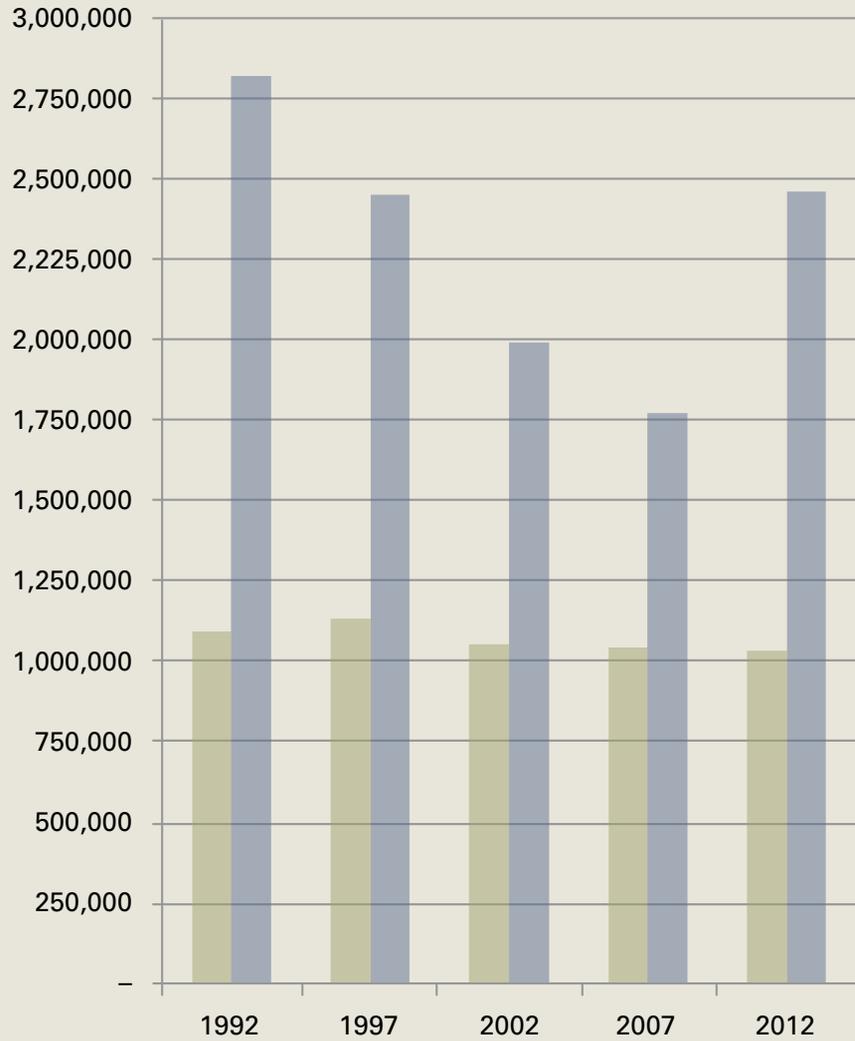


FIGURE C

### Campsite Rentals

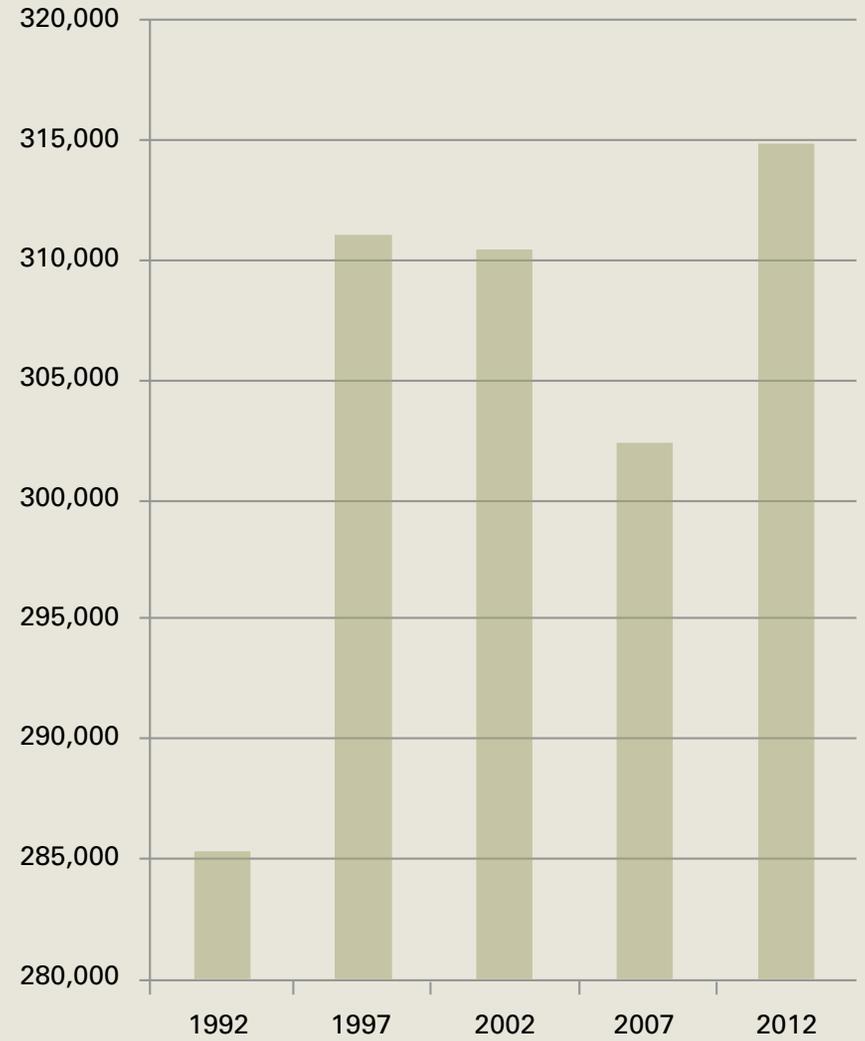


FIGURE D

### Cabin Rentals

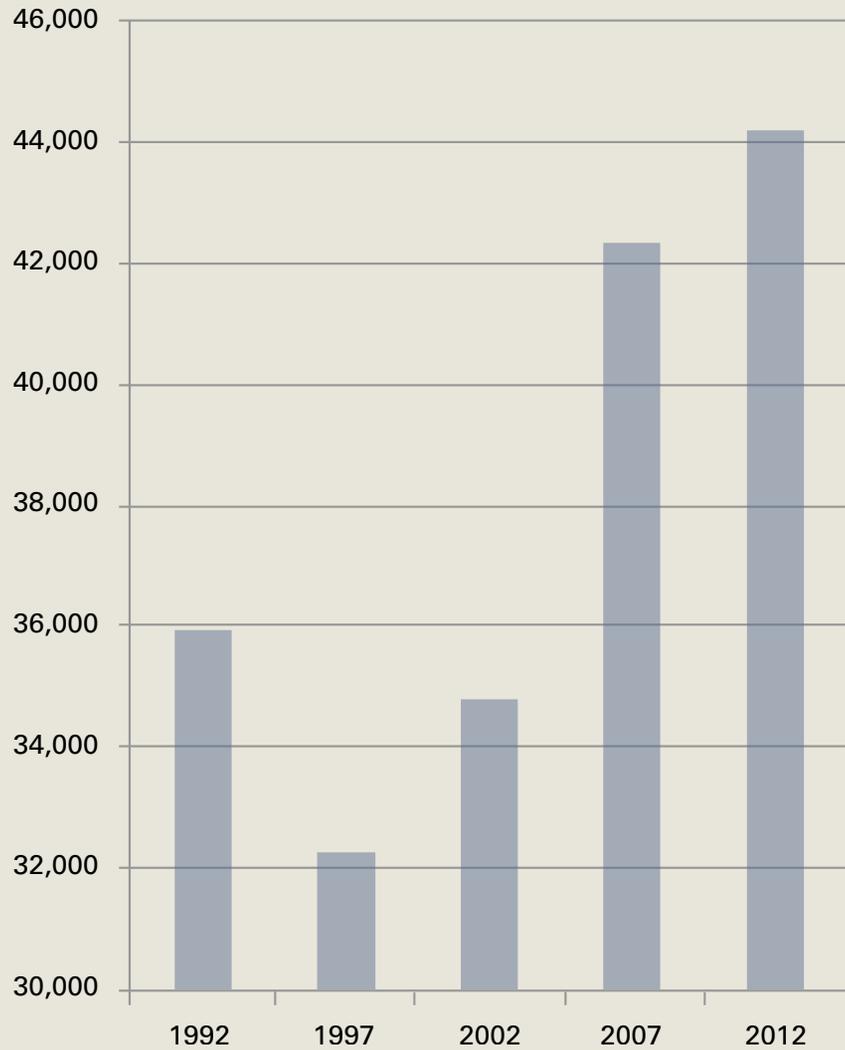
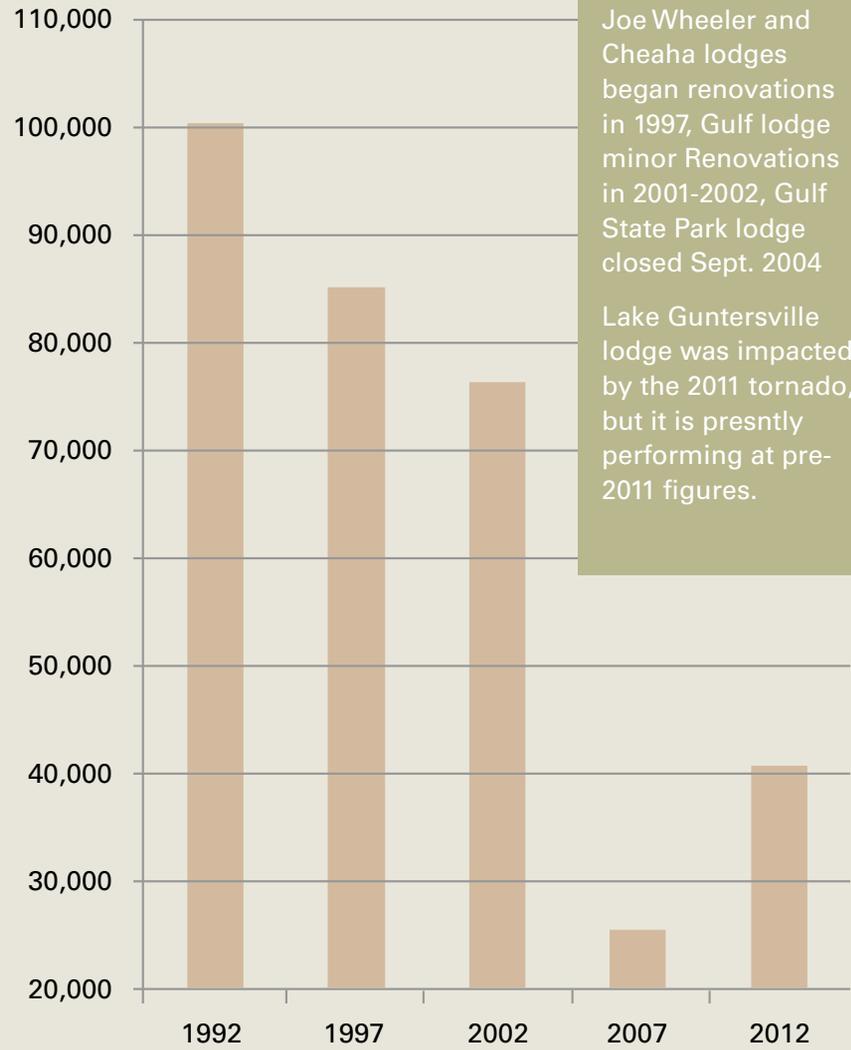


FIGURE E

### Lodge Room Rentals



**Note:**  
Joe Wheeler and Cheaha lodges began renovations in 1997, Gulf lodge minor Renovations in 2001-2002, Gulf State Park lodge closed Sept. 2004  
  
Lake Guntersville lodge was impacted by the 2011 tornado, but it is presently performing at pre-2011 figures.



Floral State Park



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