

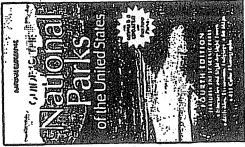
# The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

# @ISSUE

**MORE INFORMATION AND OPINIONS ON TODAY'S TOPICS:** An opinion column discusses funding problems at Georgia state parks. For more information:

- ▶ **ONLINE**—  
State Parks and Historic Sites: [www.gastateparks.org/](http://www.gastateparks.org/)  
State Parks Reeling from Budget Drought: [www.stateline.org/live/ViewPage.action?siteNodeId=136&languageId=1&contentId=96010](http://www.stateline.org/live/ViewPage.action?siteNodeId=136&languageId=1&contentId=96010)

▶ **BOOKS:**  
"National Geographic Guide to the State Parks of the United States" by National Geographic Society



# Closing state parks shortsighted move

By **GEORGE DUSENBURY**

In January, the Bush administration submitted to Congress a budget that would increase national parks funding by \$208 million, which would be among the largest increases in the history of the National Parks Service. Earlier this month, Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin submitted to City Council a budget that would increase park funding for the fourth straight year.

Despite tight budgets, Franklin and President Bush understand that decades of budget cuts have taken a tremendous toll on our local and national parks. They also understand that it is in the best interest of the federal government and the city to invest in their parks.

Against this background, the recent action to partially close several state parks is both disheartening and perplexing. Just as important, I suspect that it will not be a particularly popular decision.

A 2005 Park Pride survey conducted by the Schapiro Research Group found that 88 percent of Georgia residents support public funding for state parks. Of the 88 percent, 74 percent support additional public funding — a clear majority.

Residents support more public funding for parks because they understand implicitly what researchers have been documenting over the past decade: Parks play a vital role in making our lives better.

Simply spending time in parks reduces stress, lowers blood pressure and decreases cholesterol levels. People with access to parks are more likely to engage in physical activity, reducing the incidence of obesity, diabetes and other chronic illnesses. The trees in Georgia's parks remove tens of thousands of pounds of pollutants from the air each year, preventing asthma, heart attacks and cancer.

Parks spur economic development by attracting retirees, knowledge workers and tourists. In a 1994 study, retirees were asked to review and rank 14 factors influencing the decision to move. The first three in order were; scenic beauty, recreational opportunities and mild climate. A 1998 KPMG survey of 1,200 high-technology workers found that quality of life in a community increases the attractiveness of a job by 33 percent. A report by Texas A&M professor John Crompton on tourist attractions found that, in most states, pub-



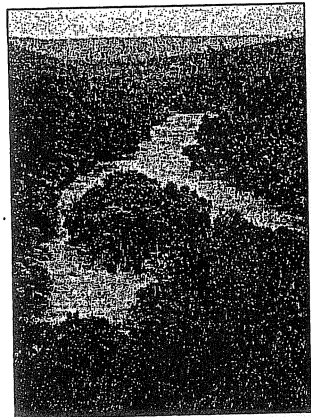
Dusenbury is executive director of the nonprofit group Park Pride.

lic parks, heritage areas and recreational opportunities account for the majority of tourist attractions.

Residents show their support for parks with their wallets and their feet. A 2001 study by the National Association of Realtors found that 50 percent of voters would be willing to pay 10 percent more for a house located near a park or protected open space. Similarly, a Texas A&M study found that property values aboutting or fronting a passive park are 20 percent higher than similar property not situated near a park.

Georgia argues that it must close the parks because visitation does not justify keeping them open. A stronger argument is that decades of neglect have so devalued these assets that they are not performing as they should. Instead of cutting funding, the state should be massively investing in its park system. That is the strategy of the federal government, the city of Atlanta and many metro Atlanta jurisdictions that are fiercely competing for residents, jobs and economic development.

Georgia residents are fortunate that past leaders had the foresight to preserve thousands of acres of land for public use. Both President Bush and Mayor Franklin have shown similar foresight. If Georgia is to continue to thrive and maintain a quality of life that attracts residents and drives economic development, today's elected officials must also be proponents for parks and greenspace.



1999 photo / File  
Sprewell Bluff Park and Wildlife Management Area in Upson County is one of five in the state closed up to four days a week due to budget cuts. A sixth narrowly avoided that fate.