



Report Highlights

Office of State Parks

Department of Culture, Recreation, and Tourism

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Why We Conducted This Audit

We evaluated the Office of State Parks' (OSP) management of Louisiana state parks and historic sites. OSP is housed within the Department of Culture, Recreation, and Tourism (CRT), which is led by the Louisiana Lieutenant Governor. We conducted this audit because state parks help facilitate the connection between the public and Louisiana's natural environment, and state parks were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and recent hurricanes. This report is third in a series of reports on CRT.

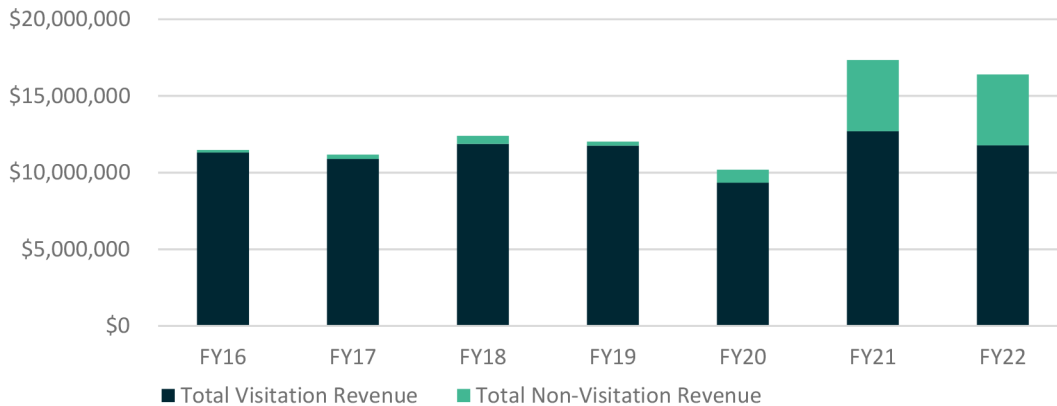
What We Found

- **Low staffing levels present challenges for administering parks, which can ultimately affect visitation levels. In response to staffing cuts, OSP found alternative methods, such as cross-training park employees and temporarily loaning staff from one park to another, for operating parks with decreased manpower.** OSP has had difficulty recruiting new employees post-COVID-19 due to a smaller pool of candidates and higher salary demands.
- **Since 2010, OSP has received reduced general fund appropriations and has been required to spend funds from the Louisiana State Parks Improvement and Repair Dedicated Fund Account on operations. While the use of funds from this dedicated fund account helps OSP rely less on state general fund dollars, a lack of overall funding has contributed to a backlog of repair and improvement needs. OSP should better track expenditures from this dedicated fund account to show how much is being spent on operations rather than on needed repairs and improvements.** According to OSP, the amount needed for improvements to keep parks and historic sites operating at expected service levels is approximately \$42 million.
- **OSP does not have a current master plan, which would provide OSP with a framework to set priorities and determine where to allocate resources. In addition, while OSP has implemented maintenance strategies that save time and money, it should implement a formal process to document repair and improvement decisions.** According to OSP officials, it is difficult to develop and implement a new master plan with its limited resources and other on-going issues, including dealing with the impact of recent hurricanes.
- **Despite lower visitation, OSP revenue increased by 42.9% from fiscal years 2016 through 2022, largely due to short-term revenues including COVID-19 relief funds. While the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in increased visitation, recent hurricanes have reduced the number of visitors, as some parks were closed or damaged.** OSP generates visitation revenues through sources like cabins, campsites, and day use admissions and non-visitation revenues such as COVID-19 relief, leases, royalties, and timber sales.

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What We Found (Cont.)

OSP Total Visitation and Non-Visitation Revenue*
Fiscal Years 2016 through 2022



*Excludes state general fund appropriations.

Source: Prepared by legislative auditor's staff using information provided by OSP.

- **In order to sustain parks and historic sites and meet the needs of visitors, OSP should evaluate fee adjustments and pricing strategies. Since fiscal year 2017, OSP increased various fees and implemented differential pricing, but further increases may be warranted.** Fees are critical to OSP's budget, which has relied more heavily on fees and self-generated revenues in recent years.
- **During fiscal years 2019 through 2022, OSP generated \$350,424 from revenue-generating agreements, including public-private partnerships to provide services that improve the visitor experience. OSP should continue to seek revenue-generating agreements as a way to increase visitation and revenue.** OSP contracted with 14 vendors during this time period to provide services, such as recreational equipment rentals and guided tours, to visitors. Beginning in fiscal year 2022, OSP signed agreements with three cruise lines to provide tours at certain historic sites. OSP officials expect significant revenues from these contracts in the coming years.
- **A more cohesive marketing strategy, including developing a marketing plan and having dedicated marketing staff, could improve OSP's efforts to increase visitation and revenue.** While OSP does not have a formal marketing plan, it does have a marketing strategy on where to spend marketing funds. However, a more cohesive marketing strategy and dedicated resources could further highlight state parks and historic preservation sites and increase patronage and revenues.