

**I asked Wisconsin State  
Park users their thoughts  
on our public lands.**

**These are the results.**

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Spring 2020  
UW-Madison

*Image: Devil's Lake State Park (Bethany Prochnow)*

***“We are truly blessed to have easy access to so many wonderful places in this state.”***

***“The scenery of expansive landscapes gives me an incredible amount of appreciation for our land and never fails to remind me of my civil duty to respect and protect our earth.”***

*Image: Rocky Arbor State Park (Bethany Prochnow)*

Growing up, I didn't interact with too many of Wisconsin's public lands. But, in high school, I discovered a gem: Devil's Lake State Park. Most days, you could find me watching the sunset from atop the bluffs in my hammock. College approached and I then began exploring others, spending time on the trails at Mirror Lake State Park and admiring the views from Roche-A-Cri State Park. Soon, I was road tripping to Copper Falls State Park and fishing at Governor Nelson State Park. My sense of adventure grew and I branched out to these other parks, sharing the great outdoor areas with my family and friends.

It wasn't until I added myself to two Facebook groups, one that revolved around Devil's Lake State Park and a second that was all about women in Wisconsin who hiked, that I started to notice that there were some areas for improvement within Wisconsin's State Parks. Social media browsing and my own personal experiences soon highlighted a need: for the voices of park users (and the parks) to be heard by park officials - both the positives and the negatives.

The opportunity arose for me to address this need during my last semester of undergraduate studies at UW-Madison, when my Rhetoric, Science, and Public Engagement course required a final project that involved the public in a scientific or research project for a topic of my choosing. Wisconsin's State Parks were the perfect, and obvious, answer for my undertaking - bingo! I combined three different research-based approaches for public engagement to eventually come up with this document. It first involved data collection from park

users via a ten-question Google Forms survey that I distributed using social media platforms online. Originally, I was just going to share it to the two Facebook groups that I was a part of, but then I realized that my goal here was to include as many voices as possible. So, I not only shared it with the two groups, but I also put it on my personal Facebook account and my professional Twitter account.

The feedback that I got back was wonderful. People shared heartfelt stories of their past experiences at the parks, which nearly made me tear up; one person wrote that "The scenery of expansive landscapes gives me an incredible amount of appreciation for our land and never fails to remind me of my civil duty to respect and protect our earth" while another summarized it by saying that, "We are truly blessed to have easy access to so many wonderful places in this state."

Just as importantly, park users pinpointed areas for improvement at Wisconsin's State Parks. Their gentle recommendations included a variety of areas: trails, accessibility, affordability, outreach, facilities, camping, overcrowding, funding, expansion, and others. I sorted each and every response (over 50 of them!) into its respective classification, separating ideas of how to better acknowledge the land from ways to improve recycling habits. I then chose from the nearly 300 excerpts from Wisconsin State Park users to ultimately compile this report with five initiatives. These consist of implementation on a mixture of levels, with two of the practices designated to be state-wide, two on a local/individual park basis, and one that encompasses both of those realms.

*Image: Blue Mound State Park (Bethany Prochnow)*

***“Park passes must be affixed to one vehicle. If I take another vehicle I must buy another pass.”***

***“I don’t mind supporting my State Parks.”***

## Initiative #1:

# Switch the annual passes from stickers to cards

*(state-wide)*

Currently, visitors to Wisconsin's State Parks are required to purchase a vehicle admission sticker. I would be one to know, as my windshield's bottom-left corner is covered in a colorful collage of circles and squares from each year's annual sticker. As easy and relatively inexpensive as these stickers are for various park units to distribute, they pose a big problem for their users: they must remain attached to the one vehicle that they were purchased with. This is not ideal for situations where people have more than one car in their family or are traveling with a different vehicle, which is oftentimes the case. In response to a question on my survey about barriers to Wisconsin's State Parks, one participant voiced that their barrier was "Not having a vehicle sticker (but having one on another car in the family/friend)." Yes, park visitors can theoretically purchase a second sticker, but it is inconvenient and at an added cost. Another respondent recognized this and, writing in response to a survey question about one way to improve Wisconsin's State Parks, said that "Park passes must be affixed to one vehicle. If I take another vehicle I must buy another pass." That same individual pointed out that "The National Park pass is a card to carry that is good in any vehicle I drive in; car, motorcycle, RV." So I propose that, alternatively, Wisconsin's State Parks should implement an annual

card - similar to the National Park Service's America the Beautiful passes - instead of providing immobile stickers. Arguments against switching to a card pass system could include both cost and possible abuse of the cards. In order to offset the price of administering cards, the DNR could increase the cost of the annual pass by a small percentage. People would be willing to pay a bit more if it meant that they would receive a durable card that could travel in their wallets with them in any of their vehicles. As one park user commented, "I don't mind supporting my State Parks." To address the issue of misuse of the cards, there would be a nearly-infallible system that would consist of the purchaser putting their signature directly on the card at the time of purchase, just as the National Park Service does with their America the Beautiful passes. Then, at each subsequent visit to a park, the visitor would simply show an ID with their matching signature at each entrance station. The fact that park users could carry the annual pass on their person and use it at any applicable state park unit would justify both increasing the cost of the annual pass by a small percentage and requiring a signature on the card itself. Simply put, Wisconsin State Park users would be more willing to invest in our public lands if their annual passes were switched from stickers to portable cards.

*Image: Natural Bridge State Park (Bethany Prochnow)*

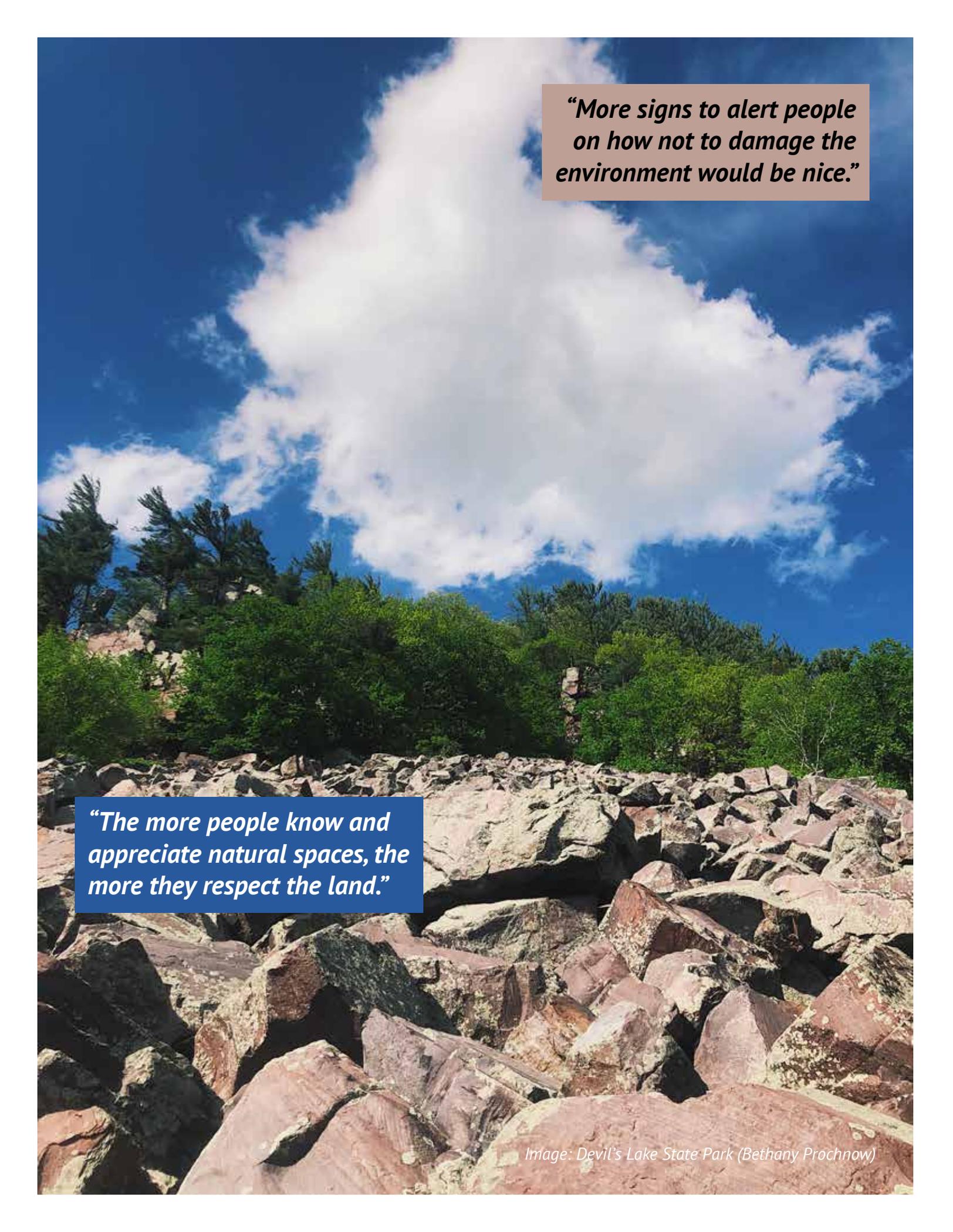
***“Free for low-income folks.”***

## Initiative #2:

# Provide free/reduced passes for those with low incomes *(state-wide)*

Currently, Wisconsin's State Parks are not easily accessible to all potential visitors. A major hurdle to people with low incomes is the price of admission. That is why providing an option for free/reduced passes for those with low incomes would help alleviate any economic obstacles that might exist. The logistics of this would include an online application that park users would fill out and submit along with their proof of income. The DNR would then approve those pertinent applications, on a rolling basis, that would provide free/reduced passes only to those who qualify. This verification would help avoid any exploitation of the passes and make sure that they were only being given to those who legitimately can not afford it. Alternatively, some already existing threshold could be used, like eligibility for free school lunches or WIC cardholders. There was much support for this kind of low-income initiative in my survey, as users disclosed that "The cost of entrance" was a barrier and that it would be an improvement if the parks were made "Free for low-income folks." Plenty of organizations around the state and nation offer this kind of option for people who are near or below the poverty line, such as many city

metro transits passes. For recreational operations, this kind of push would be on the front-line. Places such as Hennepin County in Minnesota and Sacramento County in California offer low-income passes for their county parks, so a state-wide movement like this one could be a game-changer. That means that the WI DNR would probably receive an immense amount of positive press from enacting this initiative. Providing low-income residents with the means to enjoy Wisconsin's expansive system of public lands would showcase the DNR's inclusivity; but, I also recognize that this kind of program would require funding. If you remember back to initiative #1, you might recall that I suggested the DNR should increase the cost of the annual pass by a small percentage to help offset the price of administering the cards. That price increase, in addition to going towards that expense, would help provide a small pot of money to mitigate any possible loss of revenue from this at the beginning. In the long run, though, the inclusivity of this initiative would attract more visitors and therefore boost the overall profits, which would be more than enough to continue offering free/reduced annual passes for those with low-income for years to come.



*“More signs to alert people on how not to damage the environment would be nice.”*

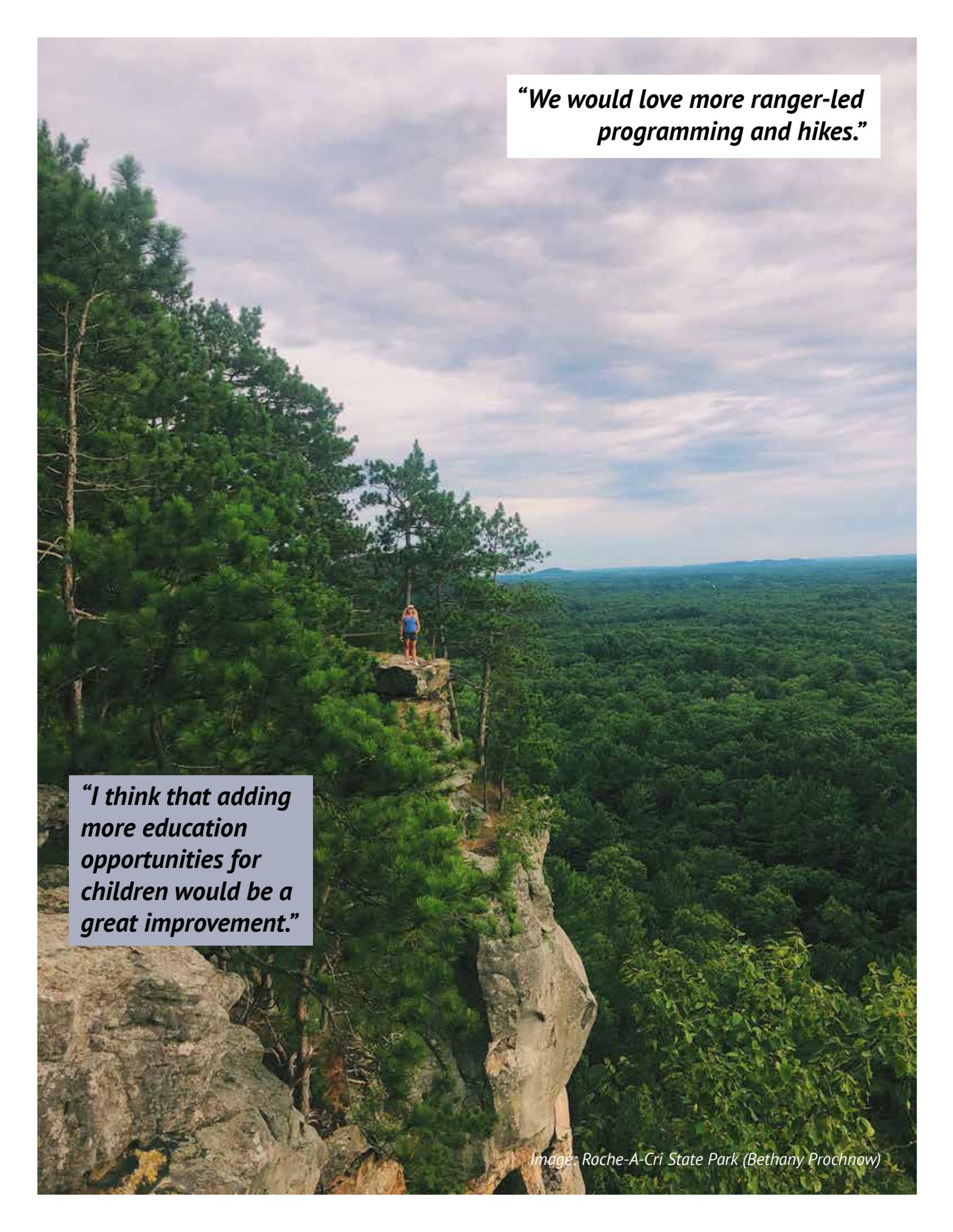
*“The more people know and appreciate natural spaces, the more they respect the land.”*

*Image: Devil's Lake State Park (Bethany Prochnow)*

Initiative #3:  
**Improve the signage  
at each unit**  
*(local/individual park basis)*

**A**s we know, Wisconsin's State Parks are home to many extraordinary ecosystems with unique plants, animals, and histories. Currently, visitors learn first-hand about these phenomena from park employees, signs, and brochures. However, those forms of communication have limitations such as park hours, resource availabilities, and visitors' own abilities. That is why a revamp of the signage at each unit would significantly help to improve the education of, respect of, and ease of use for all park users. This initiative would largely involve updating current signage and adding more information boards throughout park trails, in order to better inform and engage visitors. This suggestion comes from participants' remarks that "More signs to alert people on how not to damage the environment would be nice," "The trail maps at Devil's Lake are hard to decipher," and "I'm a huge advocate to the idea that our ecosystems would be more respected if there was a consciousness to do so, which only comes from knowing why and how to protect a given area of land. Simple but effective learning

could come from more visual plaques". The improved signage should include topics like applicable land acknowledgments, easier-to-read trail maps, and information about native species, non-native species, pollution effects, restoration practices, the units' special ecosystems, and anthropogenic impacts. By all means, these improvements would be done on an individual park basis because each specific unit has its own assets and needs that they should communicate to their visitors. In addition to the enhanced educational aspects, this initiative would help curb instances of negative actions that parks see because, as one park user, explained, "The more people know and appreciate natural spaces, the more they respect the land." A potential obstacle of this is the cost; but, educating visitors about their public lands would only increase the chances that park users visit, share, and support our state parks again in the future. This initiative to improve the signage at each park really would be an investment that would give a significant return in the coming months and years.



***“We would love more ranger-led programming and hikes.”***

***“I think that adding more education opportunities for children would be a great improvement.”***

*Image: Roche-A-Cri State Park (Bethany Prochnow)*

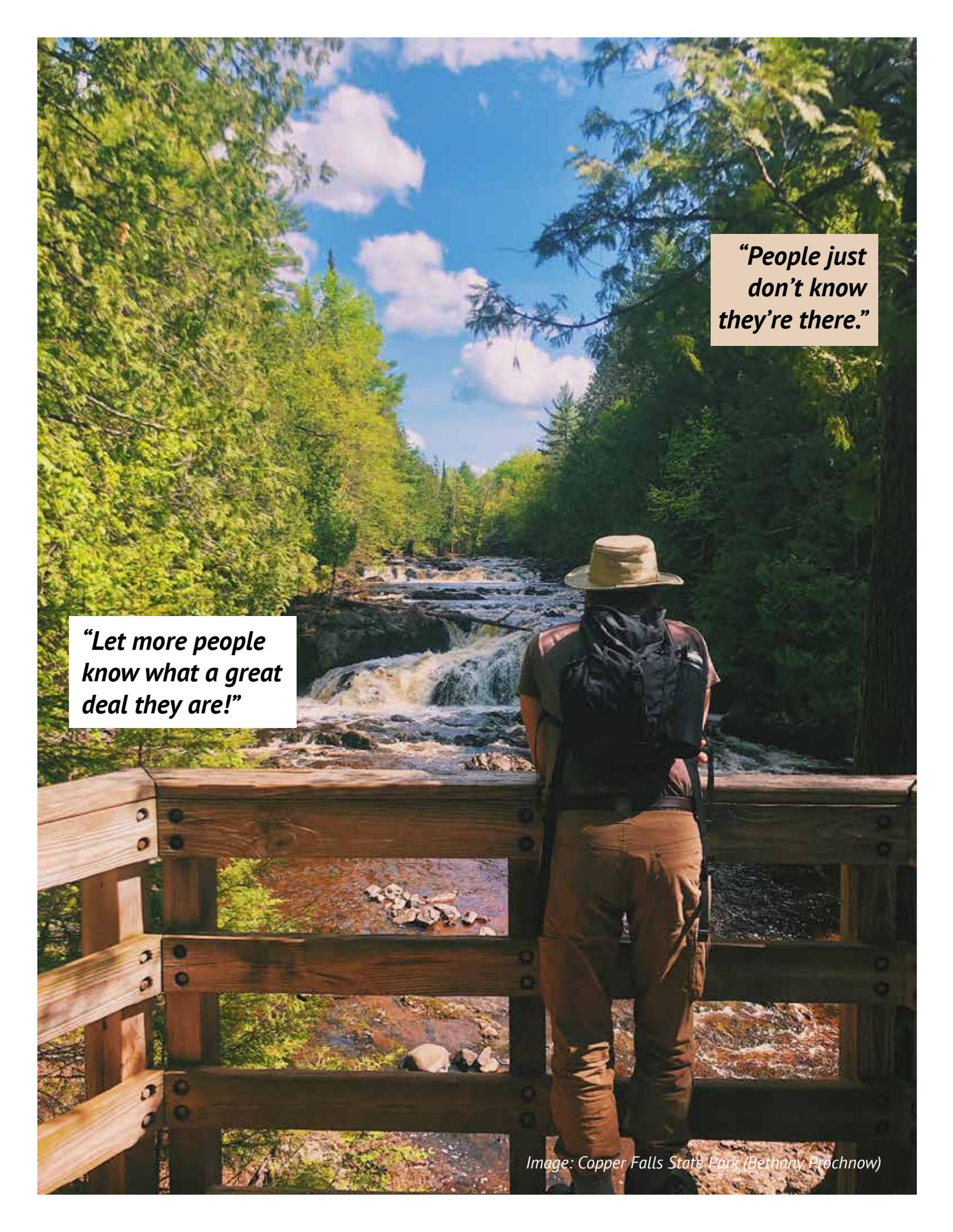
## Initiative #4:

# Create more public programming

*(local/individual park basis)*

Many of Wisconsin's State Parks currently offer a variety of programs for the public that are meant to immerse visitors in certain aspects of our public lands through hands-on activities. In addition to the previous initiative that would improve signage, this initiative would build off of that with more strategic public programming that would provide visitors with experiences to keep them returning to the parks. Put into action, this would be more ranger-led hikes, teen adventures, events for the general public, and personalizable park itineraries. A major focus should be on targeting younger generations. Developing a relevant curriculum for specific age groups would help with captivating park visitors' attention and encouraging their return. Input from users, courtesy of the survey, consisted of views like "I would love to see more programs for teens to get them involved in the parks or DNR. That might be with camps or internships, or maybe even two-week programs would be very appropriate," "We would love more ranger-led programming and hikes," and "I think that adding more education opportunities for children would be a great improvement." A great idea that one park user had is making

an 'If you liked (insert park name here), you might also like (insert similar one here) Park' guide, since visitors can oftentimes be "challenged to figure out where everything is and what would be fun especially for smaller kids. You don't want to drive an hour and go to a park that is just too big or too much for them." Similar to initiative #3, this public programming overhaul would be done on an individual park basis in accordance with resources. Certainly, funding and available personnel would be a barrier to implementing this initiative. While not all programs should have a cost to them, offering more in-depth adventures could require participants to pay a small fee. This would help compensate employees for their time and provide a bit of a fund for purchasing supplies. For park units that have a lack of available personnel, opening up opportunities for volunteers to contribute their time to help with the activities could play a crucial role. This aspect of creating more public programming needs to be viewed with a mindset similar to education; providing visitors with the correct tools can enable them to accomplish great things, and would only ensure that the future of Wisconsin State Parks continues to look positive.

A person wearing a hat and a backpack stands on a wooden bridge, looking out over a waterfall cascading through a lush green forest. The sky is blue with scattered white clouds. The scene is bright and sunny.

***“People just don’t know they’re there.”***

***“Let more people know what a great deal they are!”***

*Image: Copper Falls State Park (Bethany Prochnow)*

## Initiative #5: **Increase advertising** *(encompasses both realms)*

People who are already aware of Wisconsin's State Parks certainly take advantage of them, but there is a large population of Wisconsin residents and out-of-state visitors that do not know about our state's wonderful public lands. All of these potential park users need to be reached, which is why I propose that the DNR increase advertising for all of the state park units. This would ideally encompass both realms and be a joint effort between top administrative DNR officials and each individual park. In the survey, current and past park users identified this, calling attention to the fact that "People just don't know they're there" and admitting that "Honestly, I don't know exactly where a lot of them are." Sure, curious individuals could do some of their own digging online and find the DNR's single interactive map that lists each state park unit; but, we want to make it as easy as possible for future visitors to learn about Wisconsin's State Park. In order to do this, a state-wide campaign via print and digital ads should be done that promotes the state parks. An example of this would be the National Park Service's "Find Your Park" public engagement campaign that launched a movement that highlighted inspirational stories about the parks and how the public uses them. I can personally attest that this would be successful; in only my small, personal survey, I received so many meaningful comments. Wisconsin's State Park users were more than willing to share their adventures, with descriptions ranging from "My family has camped at Devil's Lake over the 4th of July

for more than 25 years and it holds special memories for all generations" to "It is my gym, daily meditation, and bit of paradise I look forward to at the end of each workday." In addition to promoting the parks with a state-wide campaign, an increase in advertising should include creating a social media account for each park. These accounts would be on Instagram and Facebook, at least, and would post important updates about their park operations, feature images of the park and its users, distribute notices of events, and can share any other relevant information. Obviously, a hurdle to the state-wide campaign would be the cost, whereas an obstruction to creating and maintaining social media accounts for each state park unit would be the personnel and time required. But, for the state-wide campaign, the return on investment would be worth it. Especially if the campaign is broadcast in nearby areas, such as northern Illinois and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, it would bring in an immense amount of new visitors who would pour money right back into Wisconsin's State Parks. For the issue of personnel to run the social media accounts, it could be solved by either a) having each state park administrator or ranger take charge of it b) hiring interns (potentially combining initiative #4's possibility of providing internships to younger people) or c) some combination of both, depending on each park's resources. No matter what, it is imperative that the DNR increase advertising for Wisconsin's State Parks in order to "Let more people know what a great deal they are!"

**Thank you for your  
consideration, from  
Bethany Prochnow  
and Wisconsin's  
State Parks users!**

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*Image: Governor Nelson State Park (Bethany Prochnow)*