

WHAT'S IN A NAME
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In the case of each California State Park, the official name reflects its category within the state park system. There are 280 park “units” in our state park system and many different categories for those units. PRMDIA is the California State Park Cooperating Association for five different “units” that fall under four different categories: State Park, State Natural Reserve, State Historic Unit, and State Recreation Area.

Two PRMDIA parks are categorized at state parks - **Arthur B. Ripley Desert Woodland State Park** and **Saddleback Butte State Park**. The Antelope Valley California Poppy Reserve is a State Natural Reserve or SNR. Its full official name is **Antelope Valley California Poppy Reserve State Natural Reserve**. This is quite a mouthful so it is more commonly referred to as the Antelope Valley California Poppy Reserve. Tomo-Kahni in Tehachapi is a state historic park or SHP, **Tomo-Kahni State Historic Park**. Finally, one park has two classifications: **Providence Mountains State Recreational Area** (SRA) is the home of **Mitchell Caverns State Natural Reserve** (SNR).

So what do these categories mean?

State Park

This is the most flexible category for state park units. It allows for both resource protection and recreational use. Parks in this category can contain a variety of facilities including visitor centers, campgrounds, restrooms and trails. **Saddleback Butte State Park** contains all of these features. In addition, it protects the last Joshua tree woodland in the eastern Antelope Valley from development and provides a trail and facilities for equestrians. **Arthur B. Ripley Desert Woodland State Park** (west of the Poppy Reserve) features interpretive information, trails and protection for an outstanding desert woodland of California Junipers and Joshua trees. Both Saddleback Butte SP and Ripley Desert Woodland SP have restrooms and picnic areas. (More information: www.prmdia.org/saddleback or www.prmdia.org/ripley)

State Natural Reserves

The purpose of SNRs is to preserve land with unique plants and animals, geological features, or scenic qualities to a “condition of undisturbed integrity.” This type of park typically provides fewer recreational activities so that the natural ecosystem remains as undisturbed as possible. SNRs may have few amenities such as campgrounds or extensive open space accessible to the public. The **Antelope Valley Poppy Reserve State Natural Reserve** provides trails, a picnic area, restrooms and drinking water. Visitors are asked to stay on trails to preserve the ecosystem. Unlike many SNRs, the Poppy Reserve does have a visitor center, the “Jane Pinheiro Interpretive Center,” open yearly from March 1 through Mother’s Day in May. (More information: www.prmdia.org/poppyreserve.)

Mitchell Caverns State Natural Reserve is in the eastern Mojave Desert inside of Providence Mountain State Recreation Area. The natural caverns feature intricate formations including stalagmites, stalactites, helictites, draperies and cave coral. To protect these unique natural features, entrance to the caverns is by guided tour only. The site also includes a visitor center which was once the home of Ida and Jack Mitchell who operated a resort at the caverns from 1934 – 1954 and offered guided cavern tours to the public. (Tour Information: www.prmdia.org/mitchellcaverns)

State Historical Units

The purpose of state historical units is to “preserve places, structures and artifacts of historical, archaeological and scientific importance.” Parks in this category include historic parks and historical monuments and museums. Some historical parks provide extensive interpretive programs exploring cultural history including the story of the First Californians, Spanish and Mexican eras and gold rush history. **Tomo-Kahni State Historic Park** in Tehachapi, protects the area that was once the winter home of the Kawaiisu or Nuwa people. It is near Tehachapi. The location was likely chosen for its moderate temperature and plentiful resources. The Kawaiisu are noted for their finely woven baskets of intricate and colorful design. Many Kawaiisu still live in the Tehachapi area. To protect the cultural features of the park, public access is provided only by making a reservation for a guided tour. (Tour information: www.prmdia.org/tomokahni)

State Recreation Areas

The primary purpose of SRAs is to provide outdoor recreational opportunities that address community needs that are both local and statewide. These parks may also be close to cities or highways and can accommodate large numbers of people participating in outdoor activities. SRAs offer a variety of recreational opportunities including hiking, boating and swimming. **Providence Mountains State Recreation Area** protects a pristine expanse of desert and mountains surrounding Mitchell Caverns. A campground has recently reopened and three different interpretive trails are available to visitors. Wildlife includes migratory birds such as mountain and western bluebirds, desert tortoises, bobcats, badgers and big horn sheep. In years with adequate rainfall, native wildflowers bloom. All natural features and wildlife are protected. (More information: www.prmdia.org/mitchellcaverns)

Other categories for State Park Units include State Seashores, State Cultural Reserves, State Wilderness, State Marine Areas and State Vehicular Areas.

Who Decides?

Classifying California parks under the correct category includes a detailed process. First an inventory of natural and historic features is made and possible recreational activities identified. Then an evaluation is conducted to determine the purpose of the park and how it will best serve both the local community and the people of California. Recommendations are then made to the State Park Recreation Commission. Finally, a public review process is conducted by the Recreation Commission that allows for public input. Once the category is determined, the park name that reflects this category is created and included on maps, websites, signs and brochures.

Many thanks to the California State Park Foundation for providing much of this information. Sources: <https://www.calparks.org/blog/whats-name-hidden-meaning-behind-californias-state-park-classifications>
https://www.parks.ca.gov/pages/21299/files/planning_handbook_april_2010.pdf

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