



SELLING

South

Gov. Dennis Daugaard promotes his state's natural resources and public lands to encourage economic development and a sustainable future

By Danielle Taylor

Dakota

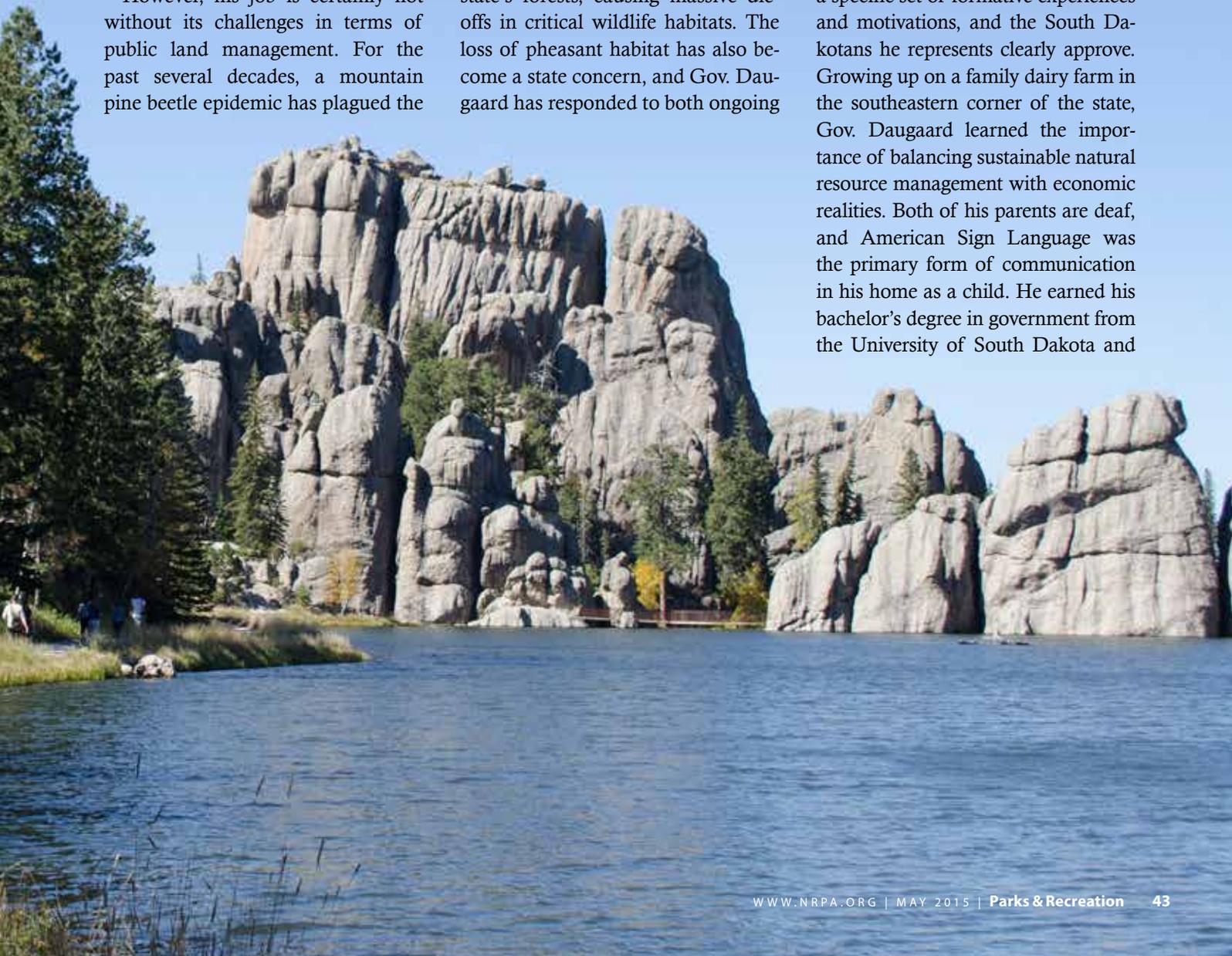
He's been dubbed "South Dakota's No. 1 Salesman," and the description definitely fits. Since winning the 2010 gubernatorial election with running mate Lt. Gov. Matt Michels and becoming governor of the Mount Rushmore State in 2011, Dennis Daugaard has worked tirelessly to advocate for the people of South Dakota as well as its spectacular natural attractions. With federally managed icons like Badlands National Park, Black Hills National Forest, Mount Rushmore National Memorial and Wind Cave National Park, as well as state-managed gems like Custer State Park and Good Earth State Park at Blood Run, Gov. Daugaard has plenty of remarkable resources at hand.

However, his job is certainly not without its challenges in terms of public land management. For the past several decades, a mountain pine beetle epidemic has plagued the

state's forests, causing massive die-offs in critical wildlife habitats. The loss of pheasant habitat has also become a state concern, and Gov. Daugaard has responded to both ongoing

crises with decisive, effective solutions. Furthermore, with several significant federal properties in his state, he and his employees work hard to function seamlessly with the national government, a relationship that drew widespread attention during the 2013 federal shutdown.

Fortunately, the governor brings unique insight to his position due to a specific set of formative experiences and motivations, and the South Dakotans he represents clearly approve. Growing up on a family dairy farm in the southeastern corner of the state, Gov. Daugaard learned the importance of balancing sustainable natural resource management with economic realities. Both of his parents are deaf, and American Sign Language was the primary form of communication in his home as a child. He earned his bachelor's degree in government from the University of South Dakota and



his Juris Doctor degree from Northwestern University, working his way through both schools as a dish washer, waiter, assembly-line welder, water tower sandblaster and painter, city bus driver and security guard. Following law school, he worked as an attorney in Chicago for three years before moving home to marry his high school sweetheart, and his career included several years as a banker and nonprofit director before he turned toward public service.

Gov. Daugaard first ran for public office in 1997 and was elected as a state senator, and the voters re-elected him by wide margins in 1998 and 2000. In 2002, he was elected as lieutenant governor alongside Gov. Mike Rounds and then re-elected in 2006. Accompanied by Lt. Gov. Michels, Gov. Daugaard won the 2010 election with 61.5 percent of the vote. When they ran again last year, voters kept the pair in office with 70.5 percent voting in their favor, the largest margin in South Dakota history.

As a result of his experiences, Gov. Daugaard is extremely cognizant of and responsive to employee concerns at all levels as well as equity issues in public facilities, and he's also highly aware of how preserving and protecting South Dakota's natural resources is vital to the economic prosperity of the state. This writer was privileged to meet with Gov. Daugaard last September during his family visit to Custer State Park for the park's wildly popular annual Buffalo Roundup. Here, he shares his thoughts on managing South Dakota's public lands, recent legislation to support parks and recreation throughout the state, and his thoughts on continuing his involvement with state public lands after his term ends in 2019.

Parks & Recreation magazine: As governor, your main objective has been

to promote business and economic development in South Dakota, and you've recognized the potential of your state's spectacular public lands to help make this happen. How have you seen the investments you've made in these areas generate positive returns for your state?

Gov. Dennis Daugaard: Our biggest return is seeing people using the outdoors as a place to get together, relax and share their experiences with each other. In South Dakota, we are blessed to have so many areas of natural, historical and cultural significance. Each year sees the popularity of our state parks increase above the last. Camping is at an all-time high.

In 2014, we hosted more than 290,000 camper units within our state parks when just 10 years ago we saw fewer than 220,000. We invest in these areas because these facilities and services are extremely important not only to South Dakotans, but to our guests as well. Our state parks and recreation areas contribute more than \$440,000 to South Dakota's economy each year. But what is equally important is that these outdoor recreational opportunities contribute to the quality of life for everyone.

We have also made significant investments in recent years to provide access to quality hunting opportunities. We have accomplished this through leasing programs, such as our Walk-In Area program. Both camping and hunting scenarios provide residents and visitors with an opportunity to enjoy the abundant wildlife resources of South Dakota.

P&R: Custer State Park is a particular jewel of state-managed public land, and it's widely considered one of the top state parks in the nation. Tell me about the funding that the legislature recently approved (SB 50) to upgrade the park and other

specific projects contained within that plan.

Gov. Daugaard: Custer State Park will begin making \$11 million worth of improvements at the resorts later this year. They will be replacing and upgrading existing cabins to meet today's travelers' expectations, preserving the historic rock work and façade at the Game Lodge, replacing the Legion Lake Store and upgrading other infrastructure.

P&R: I understand you're pretty involved in the new visitor center happening here at Custer State Park. Tell me about that and what your role has been in bringing that about.

Gov. Daugaard: The folks in our Game, Fish and Parks Department (GFP) had this vision for an improved visitor center experience. Our visitor center here at the park is a very beautiful building, but it dates back decades and it's very small. Not very many people can be in it at one time, and we really have no venue to play any videos or show them what is in the park, to vicariously give them a taste that might whet their appetite to see it in person. That at its essence is the goal of the new visitor center — we'll have more exhibit space, but the crown jewel will be the theater where we can show them all the attributes that the park has, and maybe some things around our park that will hopefully, cause them to stay longer.

We're pretty careful about debt in South Dakota, and we wanted to fund the visitor center without a lot of debt that the taxpayers would have to incur, and we didn't want the visitor expenses to have to go up, so we did two things. We funded some of the visitor center with dollars that we had in our general fund, and then we also have a foundation associated with our park system that has raised private dollars. We took out some

Gov. Dugaard saddles up for a ceremonial wagon ride from the territorial capital of Yankton to the state capital of Pierre, part of last year's statewide celebration of South Dakota's 125th statehood anniversary.



long-term bonds so we can start construction, but the charitable commitments will repay those bonds, not taxpayer dollars.

P&R: With Mount Rushmore and the Badlands being two of the top tourism attractions in South Dakota, it was critical for the state economy to keep iconic sites like these open, if at all possible, during the 2013 federal shutdown. Tell me about your plan with GFP to keep these public lands open.

Gov. Dugaard: We wanted to engage in a couple of different ways. First, the Wind Cave National Park had a campground that had a number of reservations. People who stay there visit the state park system and other tourism destinations in South Dakota, so when [Wind Cave employees] started to tell people “We’re going to have to cancel your reservations at Wind Cave,” we said, “Let us run Wind Cave — we won’t look for any financial support from the federal government. We’ll just keep it open and run it using state money.”

We also offered to keep Mount Rushmore open. The parking structure there is really the only fee that must be paid — when one arrives at Mount Rushmore, you pay to park.

That money doesn’t go to the National Park Service; it goes to repay the debt that was incurred for the park structure, so it’s a separate, self-funding entity that could continue. We said, “We’ll provide, with state funds, the state security personnel to allow people to visit.” Obviously, we wouldn’t be able to run the nighttime lighting ceremony, but we *could* pay for the lights to turn on. The visitor/gift shop and restaurant are concessionaire-run, and the concessionaire doesn’t look for federal dollars. We tried to make an arrangement, but the federal government said, “No, if you’re going to maintain the park as open, it must be fully open in every aspect, so you must pay the federal government the amount of money we need to carry all of the expenses that we would pay to our employees.” So we worked out an arrangement to do that instead.

As it turned out, that arrangement came into play just a few days before the shutdown ended, but it did come into play. Mount Rushmore was reopened, and we found a number of private donors to step up. I think we had two weeks’ worth of funding. As it turned out, we only needed a couple of days, so we refunded to everybody what they had ponied up. It

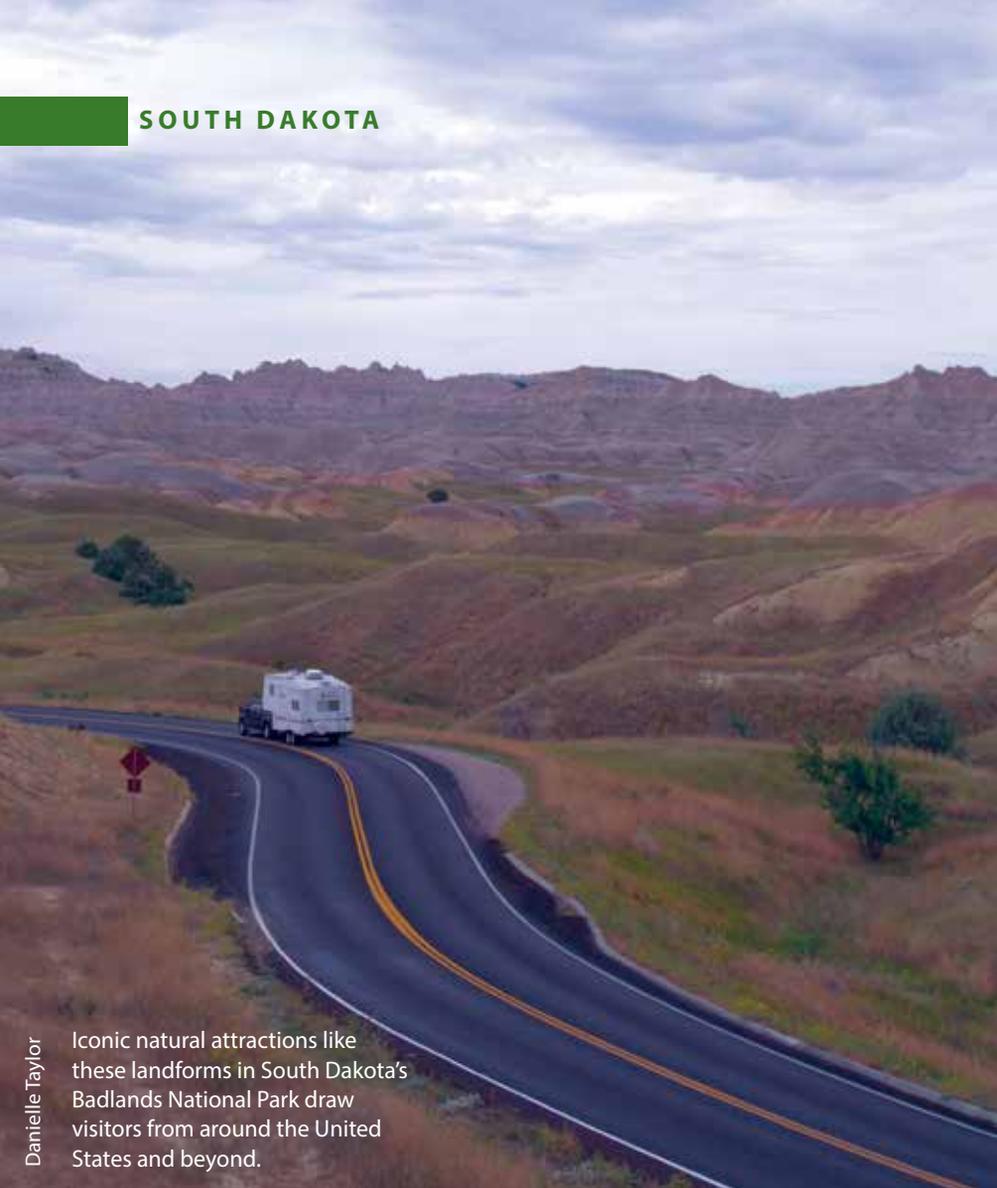
was a good win-win. The businesses in the area knew the main attraction in the Black Hills would be open and attracting people, and all the other attractions that those Mount Rushmore visitors also go to see would still get those visitors coming to their doors.

P&R: You recently signed HB 1030 into law, which was enacted to increase safety for bicyclists on roadways throughout the state. Tell me about your involvement with this law and any other legislation you have approved that supports active recreation in South Dakota.

Gov. Dugaard: This legislative session, my administration brought House Bill 1030 forward to provide additional protections to bicyclists in our state. This bill requires motor vehicles to allow three feet of separation when they pass a bicycle.

In 2013, we passed funding for three Outdoor Heritage projects in South Dakota. The first project was to provide funding for the acquisition and development of a new state park called Good Earth State Park at Blood Run. This park is located just outside of Sioux Falls in Lincoln County, which is one of the most rapidly expanding counties in the nation.

We also passed funding that will



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Iconic natural attractions like these landforms in South Dakota's Badlands National Park draw visitors from around the United States and beyond.

assess the environmental considerations of a proposed trail that will connect the George S. Mickelson Trail with Mount Rushmore National Memorial. Funding for these important projects also included substantial partnerships and private donations.

P&R: Developing Good Earth State Park at Blood Run to honor its historical Native American significance has also been a pet project of yours. Tell me a little about your involvement there as well.

Gov. Dugaard: [Iowa] Gov. [Terry] Branstad and I toured the site together — it was first preserved on the Iowa side, then South Dakota found some properties across the river and had a pretty aggressive acquisition ef-

fort that spanned a number of years and resulted in us now having several hundred acres. I expect in the not-too-distant future Iowa will be announcing some land acquisitions. One of our long-term goals is to have a bridge so that people on the Iowa side can come over free to South Dakota [and vice versa]. We'll share that great landmass that straddles the river. We've definitely acquired a lot of property for Good Earth and still have hopes of more.

P&R: South Dakota has dealt with several conservation issues during your term as governor, including a widespread infestation of mountain pine beetles. What measures have you taken to respond to this crisis, why do you think it's import-

ant and what has been the result of these actions?

Gov. Dugaard: Hundreds of thousands of trees have been treated for mountain pine beetle infestation since we launched the Black Hills Forest Initiative in August 2011. Our treatment techniques have included removing infested trees for use in sawmills, as well as the cut, chunk and peel, and cut and chip disposal methods.

The number of acres infested with mountain pine beetle has dropped from 33,000 in 2013 to 16,000 in 2014. To sustain these efforts, the legislature appropriated \$750,000 this legislative session.

P&R: South Dakota has also experienced a loss of habitat for pheasant, an economically significant gamebird in the state. Tell me about the Pheasant Habitat Summit and South Dakota Conservation Fund you commissioned to respond to this situation.

Gov. Dugaard: Due to substantial pheasant number declines and public concern, a Pheasant Habitat Summit was organized to garner ideas to address habitat issues in December 2013. One of the outcomes of the summit was the establishment of the Pheasant Habitat Work Group. This work group formulated eight recommendations to increase habitat in South Dakota, the driving factor behind pheasant production. One of the recommendations was to establish dedicated funding for habitat and conservation.

Through a mix of public and private contributions, the Conservation Fund appropriations will go toward habitat projects on private land to improve and maintain habitat beneficial to all wildlife while improving other environmental resources, such as water quality. These funds will be used to complement existing programs,

further elevate conservation on the ground and fill needs not addressed by existing programs.

Another recommendation was to facilitate greater collaboration among conservation partners, including a website that contains all available programs for landowners. Habitat is the key for all wildlife, and the development of a habitat central website is an important tool that will provide landowners and producers options and information to implement habitat programs that fit within their operations while benefiting wildlife.

In 2014, the pheasant population rebounded, with a 76 percent increase over 2013. Still, preserving and enhancing habitat is important for long-term population strength.

P&R: As the son of deaf parents, you're acutely aware of the need to make public facilities inclusive and accessible for people with varying ability levels. How has this perspective shaped any policy you have supported in terms of equity in public spaces for South Dakotans?

Gov. Daugaard: It is extremely important that our outdoor places and facilities be available and welcoming to all individuals and families. All recreational facility development takes into account the need to serve the widest range of participation possible. We continuously seek input on how we can make things better and more accessible.

Fishing docks, campsites, cabins, playgrounds, trails, resorts and comfort stations are just a few examples of facilities that undergo constant revisions of standards to better serve visitors of all abilities.

Here are some specific examples provided by GFP:

- ADA-accessible campground comfort stations, bathrooms, lodges, camping cabins and campsites. The

majority of state parks also offer a wheelchair-friendly safety surfacing around playground structures, swing sets and play areas.

- Many state parks offer wheelchair-accessible fishing piers, with accessible parking that provides easy access for fishing. The area parks adjacent to the great fishing along the Missouri River also provide wheelchair-accessible fish-cleaning stations.
- Most of state parks and lake access areas offer wheelchair-accessible boat docks with transition plates.
- Ron's Rooster Hunt is an annual pheasant hunt held near Pierre for sportsmen and women with physical disabilities — 2015 will mark the 10th year this event will occur. Participants range in age from teens to seniors, with 20 hunters being the maximum number of participants. Most years, this hunt is near or at full capacity. There is no cost for the hunt, but participants should come with a shotgun, shells and a current South Dakota small-game license. GFP supplies the equipment (trailers, rangers, mules) that is used to shuttle the hunters.
- The Oahe Downstream Recreation Area north of Fort Pierre offers two specialty hunting opportunities. These hunts are held in cooperation with GFP and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and are designed for those hunters who require a wheelchair for their mobility. These hunts provide an opportunity for up to 12 total deer hunters each fall and up to five turkey hunters each spring (www.parksandrecreation.org/2014/November/Back-in-the-Game).

GFP also maintains a number of wheelchair-accessible trail systems such as the half-mile loop of Cottonwood Path at Oahe Downstream Recreation Area.

A new educational habitat area, the Oahe Downstream Prairie Butterfly Garden, also offers access for varying ability levels. From young classroom-aged children to the elderly, the garden offers a sensory opportunity of sight, touch, sound and smell of the wonderful flowers in bloom and the buzz of all the pollinators the garden attracts. Each spring, our local elementary classes help plant the annual plants found in parts of the garden. Together we are hoping to grow more for monarch butterflies and other pollinators.

One of the newest areas for all ages and abilities is the new Oahe Downstream Shooting Complex just five miles north of Fort Pierre off of SD Hwy. 1806. The area offers 20 ADA shooting benches found in five different ranges for 25 through 300 yards. The area also provides a separate shotgun/trap area for those shotgun enthusiasts with accessible parking and shooting areas.

P&R: Once you're out of office, do you have any thoughts or plans on how you might continue to support public lands and people working in parks and recreation across South Dakota?

Gov. Daugaard: I'm close to the directors of the South Dakota Parks and Wildlife Foundation, Dick and Sue Brown. Dick's father and my father lived on adjacent farms, so we've known each other for years and both graduated from the same high school. I wouldn't mind being involved in the foundation and their efforts to enhance the opportunities we have in parks and wildlife in South Dakota. I hope we can do that. 

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