

*Chapter Chair Chat September 2023*

## **Leave it to Beavers**

*By Carole Mintzer, Chapter Chair*

Off highway vehicles (OHVs) have been in the news lately.

As you can imagine, I'm not a fan. Most of them are gas-powered abominations that contribute to pollution and climate change. They're noisy and destructive and the people who drive them seem to feel entitled to tear up whatever terrain they're riding on. Maybe it's fun, even thrilling, trying to avoid death and injury while raising dust and sand on dunes, threatening endangered birds, or destroying wildlife habitat. I guess it's what some people call fun. I call it selfish.

In July, San Luis Obispo Superior Court Judge Tana Coates decided the California Coastal Commission made a mistake when they decided in 2021 to ban OHVs at Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area (ODSVRA). The ban was set to take effect next year, but "Friends of Oceano Dunes" (a name that sounds like they want to protect the dunes, but really, they just want to keep riding their dune buggies and tearing up the landscape) filed suit and got a ruling in their favor. You can read the details in the article "Justice Delayed at the Dunes." The Coastal Commission will appeal the ruling. We believe the judge got it wrong and the decision will be overturned on appeal.

What's really sad is the lack of vision of what ODSVRA could be without the dune buggies. I visited there during the pandemic in 2020, when the park was closed to OHVs. What an incredibly beautiful beach! But I won't go there now – it's too dangerous and noisy and dusty. I imagine without the OHVs, plenty of people would pay good money to stay near the beach, eat in nearby restaurants, and buy souvenirs. It just takes vision and a will to make it happen.

OHV riders have also made the news for damaging a beaver dam in the Salinas River in Atascadero. Yes, there really are beavers in SLO County, and they build dams and create habitat for fish and other wildlife. It's illegal to disturb wildlife and to drive a vehicle in the Salinas riverbed, but that doesn't stop the entitled OHVs from driving into the dams because if the dam is gone the river will dry out a bit and it'll be oh so much easier to navigate in their OHV. Selfish... Worse, law enforcement is taking a hands-off approach to the illegal activity. They claim they don't have sufficient resources to monitor the river, and even when they are called, if it's a first offense, they just issue a warning and everyone goes on their way.

We've sent a letter to the Atascadero Chief of Police asking him to consider running something like a sobriety checkpoint at times when the OHVs are most likely to be driving in the riverbed. Some well-publicized tickets with hefty fines could go a long way toward stopping this illegal activity.



OHV tracks and damage in Morro Dunes Ecological Reserve. Photos by Carole Mintzer

One more example of the recklessness of OHV operators didn't make the news, yet shows their cluelessness. I live near the Morro Dunes Ecological Reserve, a protected area where motorized vehicles are not allowed. Moreover, it would be difficult to drive one there because the trails are narrow or trenchlike in places. But in 2021, that didn't stop some highly motivated knucklehead from driving an OHV into the middle of the reserve. I know this because the tire tracks and broken shrubbery were everywhere. It was sad to see, but fortunately, something that has not been repeated, at least not that I know of. Maybe getting in and out on the trails was just difficult enough to make it a one-time expedition. But what made this person think it was a good idea in the first place?

I have no easy answer for how to stop OHVs from damaging our environment and polluting our air. We just have to be persistent in challenging them in the courts and in the court of public opinion.

Until next time, enjoy quiet hikes, walks on the beach, and fully intact beaver dams,

Carole