

Remembering the Dunes Task Force of 1980

There's a reason why the Oceano Dunes are still there to be saved

By Michael Bondello

I kept thinking of everyone that contributed to our Oceano Dunes victory while watching the March 18 marathon meeting of the California Coastal Commission.

Their unanimous decision to remove OHVs from the Oceano Dunes by 2024 successfully concluded our forty-year struggle to achieve this goal. We should all be grateful for their decision to preserve this fragile and invaluable dune ecosystem for our own and future generations.

I also thought of all the local environmental groups that rallied their members to the defense of these dunes and their inhabitants.

The Santa Lucia Chapter of the Sierra Club deserves special recognition here. For it was their decision to organize the Dunes Task Force of 1980 to begin the long struggle that eventually achieved this goal. So, I naturally thought of them, too.

On a cold dark night in early 1980, we gathered at the home of Kathleen and Gaylord Jones on the edge of the Nipomo Mesa. This was my first time attending a Dunes Task Force meeting having been dragooned in by Bill Denneen and it followed on the horrible news that the Oso Flaco Lake area was seriously being considered as an OHV staging area, the projected south entrance into the dunes system. The mood in the meeting was grim.

Kathleen was very worried about the future of her favorite area of Coreopsis Hill. I had been down there just before this meeting and saw that her hill was "protected" by a small picket type fence, that did little to prevent incursions from OHVs as evidenced by their tracks leading over the fence and up onto the flower covered slope. I had also seen that "tunnels" through the vegetation had been formed by OHVs along side the path to the beach. Finally, I saw that OHV degradation of dune



vegetation to the northwest resulted in the continuous movement of sand, which was steadily filling in the northwestern end of Oso Flaco Lake. These people had reason to be grim.

At this time, I had completed my first semester as a biology instructor at Allan Hancock College. It was a very busy time, with meetings, classes, and repairing a terribly depleted infrastructure at the main campus. I was also completing a series of experiments for the Bureau of Land Management determining the effects of OHV sounds on desert vertebrates. In addition, over the past several years, I attended many of the BLM meetings involved in developing the California Desert Plan, so I knew most of the researchers, and was familiar with the geological and biological effects of OHVs on desert ecosystems. Thus, when Bill invited me to the meeting, I really could not say no.



Kathleen Goddard-Jones

In this subdued atmosphere Kathleen asked, “What can we do?” Murmurs followed. Increase awareness, build bigger barriers, it ‘s a fait accompli. Being the new guy, I desperately wanted someone to say something about resistance. Finally, I blurted out “We can fight!” Kathleen’s eyes opened wide and glowed. Bill cocked his head and looked at me. So, I kept on. “I’ve been fighting these guys in the desert for five years.

Believe me, we have the evidence to stop them.” And Kathleen took it from there. She said she would contact Pete Dangermond Jr., the new Director of State Parks and invite him to tour the dunes with her. The excitement grew. Dr. David Chipping and Randy McCoy’s photos of the erosion resulting from a single OHV passing over a dune were brought up. Others chimed in...Who should we contact? What should we present? When should we do it? Who should be on the tour? And it grew from there.

In the coming weeks, John Ashbaugh, Nancy Mann, and I conceived of a public presentation of local experts, The First Annual Day of the Dunes, to be held at the South County Regional Center, on the same weekend as Kathleen's dunes tour. And believe it or not, it all came together, after a huge investment of time and effort on all parts.

Kathleen's tour was supervised by Don Patton, OHV manager for the park. I remember him looking incredibly sharp in his uniform on that day. Norm Hammond, the Dunites expert, accompanied Kathleen, along with Parks Director Pete Dangermond Jr., and Howard Wilshire, the lone environmentalist on the state OHV Commission. The tour could not have been better at both extolling the virtues of the natural resources of the park and pointing out the threats posed by unrestricted OHV access.

The First Annual Day of the Dunes was hosted by John Ashbaugh. Speaker presentations continued throughout the day. Current Club members David Chipping and myself spoke, as well as:

Kathleen Jones on Wildflowers of Coreopsis Hill (a Gaylord Jones slide show)

Norm Hammond on the History of the Dunites

Howard Wilshire on the Geological effects of OHVs on arid lands

Eben McMillan on the Natural History of the Dunes

Charles Dills on the Archaeology of the Dunes

These talks were attended by the public, who clearly appreciated the quality of the presentations and followed them with numerous rounds of applause. We had clearly struck a note of community support!

Pete Dangermond, Jr., was impressed by both the tour and these presentations and the degree of community support. Shortly thereafter, he ordered the plans for an Oso Flaco Lake OHV staging area shelved and instead ordered that new fencing be constructed to restrict OHV access to Oso Flaco Lake and to begin revegetation efforts to stabilize the spread of the dunes into the lake.

That's the story, as recalled by a 72-year-old member of the Dunes Task Force. I have recalled this to the best of my ability and guarantee that at least some aspects of this tale are true. The important thing is that what they led to our victory today. So here is a list of some of the more significant people that I can remember from over 40 years ago. The preserved Oceano Dunes stand as a testament to their struggle:

Kathleen Goddard Jones

Gaylord Jones

Bill Denneen

Malcolm McLeod

Dirk Walters

Bonnie Walters

David Chipping

Randy McCoy

Norm Hammond

Eben McMillan

Charles Dills

Pete Dangermond, Jr., Parks Director

John Ashbaugh
Nancy Mann

Don Patton, OHV Manager
Howard Wilshire, OHV Commissioner
Mick Bondello