

Shine a Light

SLO night hikes in natural reserves await environmental assessment



The tension between public access and natural resource protection is a daily struggle the length of California and throughout the country, in local and state ordinances and federal laws.

In many ways, the decision by the City of San Luis Obispo to open one of its natural open space preserves to nighttime hiking and biking in an extended three-year pilot program in the Cerro San Luis Natural Reserve embodies that struggle.

When the project was first proposed in 2017, former SLO mayor and future councilmember Jan Marx wrote in the *Santa Lucian*: “The prohibition on nighttime hiking has been in place since the inception of the City open space program and is fundamental to its protection. Nighttime hiking would have negative environmental impacts on wildlife and the habitat, as stated in the staff report. Has there been an [Environmental Impact Report]?”

There had not. By November 2020, the pilot program had concluded but staff still had not prepared the required wildlife survey and report that would have allowed the Council to give “further guidance based on the levels of use during the pilot program and evaluation of the data collected.”

At the March 16 city council meeting, Councilwoman Marx noted that the project had started off on the wrong foot by not first conducting a wildlife survey to be used as a baseline for comparison to the effects of the pilot project.

“I am disappointed to learn that the pilot project did not prepare a baseline wildlife survey before allowing the night activities,” commented SLO resident Dean Arrighi. “Potential adverse wildlife impacts was a major concern for this program from the very beginning. Without this information, there is no way to objectively know if the pilot program caused any adverse impacts on the local animal population.”

The Council concluded that it will make a final decision on the program after an environmental assessment of the program is completed.

The Sierra Club has forwarded to the City of San Luis Obispo’s Natural Resources Manager a study entitled [“The influence of human disturbance on wildlife nocturnality.”](#) published in the

June 15, 2018, issue of *Science*. The study notes that “As the human population grows, there are fewer places for animals to live out their lives independently of our influence. Given our mostly diurnal tendencies, one domain that remains less affected by humans is the night.” The study concluded, after “conducting a meta-analysis of 76 studies of 62 species from six continents,” that “human activities of all kinds, including nonlethal pastimes such as hiking, seem to drive animals to make use of hours when we are not around.”

We have also noted the conclusion of the National Institutes of Health (“Lighting can be very disorienting for animals that are trying to move at night. So wildlife corridors can be compromised by even a single light and so prevent animals from moving across the landscapes”), and the Australian government’s comprehensive policy guidelines on light pollution and wildlife, including “National Light Pollution Guideline 90: Prevent mobile light sources shining into nocturnal foraging and roost habitat. The light from mobile sources such as mobile lighting towers, head torches or vehicle headlights should be prevented from aiming into nocturnal foraging or roost areas, as this can cause immediate disturbance.” Short-wavelength blue light from LEDs, widely used in flashlights and headlamps, has especially negative ecological impacts on both flora and fauna.

We trust this information, and the links and citations we have provided to multiple similar studies from the growing body of research on the nocturnal disturbance of wildlife, will inform the City’s environmental review.