

Storm Over Oceano



Karl Kempton

By Gianna Patchen, Chapter Intern

It's easy to mistake the waterfront of Oceano Dunes for a highway as the red and white lights of cars flicker down the shore. The Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area (ODSVRA) is the last remaining beach in California to permit vehicles. There is a reason why only one such place remains: vehicles have proven they don't belong in fragile coastal habitat. Yet, this beach is still a subject of statewide debate after 40 years. The conflict is nearing a turning point as the evidence stacks up against the rationalizations offered for the ODSVRA.

The hazards that come with vehicles on beaches impact a wide array of beach users, from people to plovers. The federally endangered California least tern and threatened Western snowy plover are just two of the most at risk species living where ODSVRA allows vehicles. Not only does this pose the direct threat of vehicle strikes, it contributes to habitat degradation, harming the wildlife that require intact habitat to survive. This habitat degradation also means the loss of native plants which are essential for helping keep sand anchored. This change in the ecosystem results in less stable dunes, which means more erosion and dust emissions.

For the people of the nearby towns of Oceano and Guadalupe, vehicles on the beach makes pedestrian usage more difficult and dangerous. Local communities who want pedestrian access are deterred by the heavy vehicle traffic. Additionally, the exacerbation of dust emissions and sand movement by off-road vehicles contributes to toxic air quality for the nearby towns. Vehicles also increase erosion of the dunes, which are these communities' only defense against sea level rise. The predominantly Latinx towns of Oceano and Guadalupe bear the brunt of these environmental and public health impacts. The failure to address the disproportionately negative impacts of ODSVRA on these communities is both a crisis of public health and environmental justice.

State Parks has been postponing their updated Public Works Plan (PWP) for far too long. Their draft of the PWP has missed four deadlines, including a promised December 2020 delivery to the California Coastal Commission. The perpetual postponement of the PWP allows State Parks to

continue activity as is, without an official decision by the Coastal Commission. When the PWP draft is finally brought to the Commission, they will decide if they want to accept, reject, or require amendments. Their decision could mean that State Parks has to change how they're managing the ODSVRA. Delaying their presentation of the PWP draft means that State Parks can delay facing potential management mandates by the Coastal Commission.

Delaying the PWP is not the only way State Parks has been cutting corners. It has performed unpermitted wildlife management actions and alterations of the landscape at the dunes. This includes unpermitted regrading of the beach and harassment of the federally threatened Western snowy plovers who dared to nest outside of their designated area. Both the PWP and the recently released draft of the Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) for the dunes have raised many red flags because they are not consistent with the requirements of State Parks' Coastal Development Permit, the County's Local Coastal Plan, California Coastal Act, and the Coastal Zone Management Act. A reckoning for these clear violations and disregard for the negative impacts of ODSVRA may be getting close as the Coastal Commission shows signs that it is nearing the end of its patience.



No, We're Not Trying to Close Down the Dunes

Off-roaders are pressing the message of "access for all" and "keep the Dunes open." In their worldview, which they have pressed into the public mind with some success, "access for all" means vehicles on the beach and dunes and we, and the Coastal Commission, want to close the park to all public access.

But there is no "access for all" with vehicles on the beach -- passive users who don't want to recreate in traffic are excluded, including residents of disadvantaged adjacent communities. State Parks could enable better beach access for people with limited mobility, as has been done in many other places, to eliminate the current need for them to drive onto the property.

No one wants to close the park to public access. Even during the covid vehicle closure, the park was open, just not for vehicles.

- Cynthia Replogle, Coordinator, Dunes Alliance

TAKE ACTION

It's time to stop waiting and hoping for State Parks to finally do the right thing. Put the [March 18 California Coastal Commission meeting](#) (tentative) on your calendar and join us in demanding accountability by State Parks at the Oceano Dunes. The Coastal Commission needs to implement the critical amendments to the ODSVRA's Coastal Development Permit and the requirement for a plan for the elimination of off-road vehicles from the dunes – both of which the Commission has held in abeyance since July 2019.