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Lizard eyed for shielding

Group asks that reptile be studied for endangered list

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A lizard that can run on sand and swim beneath it should be protected in an area popular with off-highway vehicle riders, according a petition filed Monday by an environmental group.

The Dumont Dunes Off-Highway Vehicle Area, about 30 miles north of Baker, is a 10,500-acre sandy playground for about 140,000 off-road enthusiasts a year.

But it's also home to the Mojave fringe-toed lizard, which lives in sandy soil particularly dunes dry lake beds and river washes.

"The Amargosa river population is especially threatened because of the pounding it's taking from off-road vehicles," said Daniel Patterson, desert ecologist for the Center for Biological Diversity.

The center filed a formal petition to list the lizard as threatened or endangered with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Under the federal Endangered Species Act, the service has 90 days to determine if the petition has enough information to trigger a full year-long review of the species.

If the more extensive review were to be done, it would determine whether the lizard should to be listed as threatened or endangered.

The petition seeks protection only for the population in that immediate area, including an area that stretches west into Death Valley National Park and to Coyote Holes just to the east.

The lizard, whose scientific name is *Uma scoparia*, ranges throughout the desert areas of San Bernardino, Riverside, Los Angeles and Inyo counties.

Patterson said the lizard is not doing especially well in those other areas, but the petition was drafted to focus on the population segment that's most clearly at risk, which is allowed under the Endangered Species Act.

The area to the west, in Death Valley National Park called Ibex Dunes, is off-limits to off-roaders but people do sometimes enter the area illegally.

"It's been a struggle to keep people out of there," said Alan Van Valkenburg, a park ranger at Ibex Dunes. "Mostly they do pretty good, but every so often someone gets in."

The lizard has no formal protection but is identified as "sensitive" by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, which operates the Dumont Dunes Off-Highway Vehicle Area.

"The lizard does have a broad, broad range," said Doran Sanchez, spokesman for the BLM's desert district office in Moreno Valley. "We'll have to wait and see what the (Fish and Wildlife) service says about the distinct population segment."

A separate species, the threatened Coachella Valley fringe-toed lizard, was the subject of one of the first habitat-conservation plans

designed to protect the animal but allow some development in the areas east of Palm Springs in Riverside County .

If the Mojave lizard were listed as endangered, it's not clear what management changes would have to be made.

The off-roading community is still bristling over the closure of 49,300 acres at the Algodones Dunes in Imperial County to protect the threatened Pierson's milkvetch, a plant native to the dunes.

The 40 mile-long stretch of dunes is wildly popular, drawing hundreds of thousands of off-road enthusiasts.

Any proposal that could lead to limits at Dumont Dunes, which is a wide-open play area, is certain to anger off-roaders.