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Off-roaders, respect the open desert

The Desert Sun Editorial Board

If you found a shiny new dune buggy under the tree this Christmas, be careful where you take it.

There was a time when many thought of the desert as a perfect playground for off-road vehicles. But deserts are among the most dynamic ecosystems on the planet, second only to tropical forests in their diversity of species.

This is the main reason for the Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan, which protects 27 species of plants and animals.

They need to be protected.

Signs get the word out

Billboards went up about a year ago along Interstate 10 and Highway 86 South to remind riders that off-road vehicles are not allowed on the open desert.

The Riverside County Sheriff's Department Off-Highway Vehicle Enforcement team, known as ROVE, has about 100 deputies who have been trained on all-terrain vehicle courses to enforce the regulations. A first offense can net a \$100 fine. Subsequent fines go up to \$500.

Members of the the Coachella Valley Association of Governments Off-highway Vehicle Task Force believe the billboards have been effective, said analyst Jacob Alvarez.

"They get the word out and help reduce the amount of riding that's going on out there," he said.

Of course, they're not 100 percent effective.

Damage to a prehistoric area

A report released recently by the Desert Protective Council says off-roaders have caused serious damage to the Desert Cahuilla Prehistoric Area.

Two years ago, the Desert Protective Council helped set aside 4,000 acres of sensitive land between the Salton Sea and Anza-Borrego State Park. It urged the California Department of Parks and Recreation to close the area to all vehicular traffic until a management plan could be created, said Terry Weiner, conservation coordinator for the Desert Protective Council.

Although the department maintained it had adequate staff and policies to protect the land, the report shows photos of doughnuts and other damage caused by off-roaders.

"This is a unique area," she said.

It has fascinating geologic formations, such as desert pavement, a natural construction of interlocking rocks. Desert pavement also is found in Joshua Tree National Park and on Mars.

"One motorcycle ride can destroy it," Weiner said.

The area also includes parts of Ancient Lake Cahuilla with relics of Indian culture. It contains a fossil record going back 7 million years, petrified wood and the remains of mammoths.

"The tragedy of this out-of-control off-roading, which has destroyed plants, animals, cultural sites and other irreplaceable resources, was predictable and preventable," said Ileene Anderson, biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity.

Increase in patrols is planned

California Parks and Recreation Department spokesman Roy Stearns said the department is studying where the damage was done.

"We are investigating the pictures and damage to determine what damage is on state parks land, because we have no authority over the State Lands Commission land or the private property," he said. "The damage we find on our land we will address and we shall work to do what we can to restore the sites and to prevent more damage."

Stearns said the department will work to increase ranger and volunteer patrols.

Bringing off-roaders and conservationists together

According Responsible Trails America, there is a nationwide trend of reckless off-road drivers trespassing on private property and damaging sensitive habitats. Several states have formed coalitions of responsible riders, conservationists and law enforcement to address the problem. That's called for here.

There's nothing wrong with off-roading. In fact, it's a heck of a lot of fun. Most riders are responsible.

Economic opportunities

There are areas north and east of Coachella where it's legal to go off-roading. Opening up legal opportunities for off-roading should encourage enthusiasts to stay off off sensitive areas.

This kind of recreational activity is not small potatoes. According to the U.S. Forest Service, the number of off-road vehicles has increased 230 percent in the last 15 years, from 3 million in 1993 to 10 million today.

People who can afford those big toys can be a boon for the Coachella Valley economy. The Desert Cahuilla Prehistoric Area could also be developed into a popular and profitable eco-tourism attraction.

According to Weiner, the desert has many more acres where it's legal to go off-roading than where it's forbidden.

"You add them up and it's larger than many eastern states," she said.

There are 60,000 miles of dirt roads in Southern California where non-street legal vehicles can go.

Enjoy those, off-roaders. But stay off the open desert.

Additional Facts

Video

See a video of damage done to the Desert Cahuilla Project by off-road vehicles:



Where it's legal to go off-roading in Southern California

The larger legal off-road areas include:

- **Johnson Valley Off-Road Vehicle Area, north of the Morongo Basin.** Operated by the federal Bureau of Land Management, this is the largest area in Southern California at 189,000 acres.
- **Octotillo Wells State Vehicular Recreation area, near Borrego Springs.** 82,000 acres.
- **The Algodones Dunes, a Bureau of Land Management operation in Imperial County.** Also known as the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area. 69,000 acres.
- **Superstition Mountain, northwest of El Centro.** 13,000 acres.
- **Plaster City in the Yuha Valley, west of El Centro.** 41,000 acres.
- **Hungry Valley, east of Interstate 215 near Devore.** 19,000 acres.

More information: www.ohv.parks.ca.gov for state-run parks, www.blm.gov/ca/st/en/prog/recreation/ohv.html for areas operated by the federal Bureau of Land Management, www.fs.fed.us/r5/sanbernardino/recreation/ohv/ for areas in the San Bernardino National Forest and www.fs.fed.us/r5/angeles/recreation/ohv.shtml for areas in the Angeles National Forest.
