

State Parks sued over issuing multiyear permit for annual endurance race at dunes

*By April Charlton
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The Center for Biological Diversity has sued the state Department of Parks and Recreation for issuing a multiyear permit for the annual off-road endurance race held in the Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area.

The lawsuit was filed Wednesday and alleges that State Parks failed to conduct any meaningful analysis of the race's effects on California's delicate coastal system, according to a Center for Biological Diversity spokesman.

Calls to State Parks officials were not returned.

The permit for the race, which was just held for the fourth year in a row at the dunes last month, was issued through 2011, and State Parks didn't prepare an environmental impact report as required under the California Environmental Quality Act, the spokesman said.

"Five years of motorized races will devastate the fragile ecosystem at Oceano Dunes," said Andrew Orahoske, Center for Biological Diversity conservation advocate. "The mission of the Parks Department is to protect California's rich, natural heritage while providing recreational opportunities that are consistent with that protection."

Orahoske added that because the Western snowy plover, which lives and breeds at the dunes, is a threatened species, State Parks had an obligation to study the effects of the race on the birds prior to issuing the permit.

"The agency is not above the law," said Orahoske.

The lawsuit seeks a court order that invalidates the multiyear permit, requires State Parks to conduct the proper environmental review prior to allowing future off-road events at the dunes and prevent improperly permitted races from occurring there without environmental review.

This is the second time this year that the Center for Biological Diversity has sued State Parks over permitting off-road races in ecologically sensitive areas without first studying the effects on the environment.

Earlier this year, the center sued State Parks for approving a permit for a motorized race through the Desert Cahuilla parcel at the Anza-Borrego State Park, California's largest state park.

State Parks agreed to withdraw the permit and the event was canceled.



A close-up view of the tiger salamander. California tiger salamanders are stocky, blunt-nosed amphibians that live underground. Vernal pools, or ponds that rise during rains, serve as vital habitat for breeding salamanders. //Ed Souza/Staff file