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Off-roaders crowd California's Imperial Dunes, but no big trouble

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GLAMIS, Calif. - Off-road enthusiasts crowded into California's largest sand dunes area on Friday but officials reported there had been no repeat of the mayhem of past Thanksgiving weekends.

The throng at Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area was expected to peak at up to 200,000. The annual Thanksgiving ritual more than doubles the population of Imperial County, but in the recent past the mix of fast driving and wild parties has been a recipe for "Mad Max" style chaos.

Things were much quieter this year and officials credited a continuing crackdown with restoring a family environment in the dunes, 160 miles east of San Diego and just a few miles west of the Arizona state line.

"It's busy. There are a lot of people, but by 11 p.m. (Thursday) it was dead quiet," said Greg Gorman of the LaVerne-based American Sand Association, which represents off-roaders.

"That's all you see: kids, quads and minibikes," he said. "It's been wonderful."

By Friday, eight people had been arrested, including three at sobriety checkpoints and authorities had issued 261 citations, mostly for safety-related issues. About 31 minor injuries were reported, said Stephen Razo of the Bureau of Land Management, which oversees the dunes.

Gone were the wild mobs that once pelted rangers with cans and bottles and strong-arm robberies in broad daylight. A low point was Thanksgiving 2001, when authorities made 70 arrests - including five men involved in a fatal shootout - and issued more than 1,500 citations.

After that, authorities beefed up security, cracked down on drugs, drunken driving, nudity and other behavior problems. Even minor infractions land people in jail.

Things may have become safer for people, but environmentalists say the threat to endangered wildlife from illegal off-roading has not gone away.

Environmentalists say the huge crowds mean protecting wildlife sometimes takes a back seat to keeping the peace. The Center for Biological Diversity deployed its own team of about a dozen monitors to

keep watch.

"There's still just too many off-roaders that have a blatant disregard for environmental protection," the center's Daniel Patterson said from the dunes. "There needs to be more peer pressure from off-roaders to stay out of these closed habitat areas."

The federal Bureau of Land Management agreed to ban vehicles from an area 3 1/2 times the size of Manhattan to protect a rare plant, the Peirson's milkvetch. Traffic was barred in 1972 from a separate section that was later designated a 26,000-acre protected wilderness.

While 68,000 acres, including the most popular off-roading areas, remain open to vehicles, including the most popular off-riding areas, dune riders chafe at the closures and insist they're being kept out for no good reason.

Patterson said the Center for Biological Diversity is in preliminary discussions with the American Sand Association to explore a possible settlement that could leave off-roaders with room to ride and protect enough habitat to ensure the survival of threatened and endangered wildlife.