

State Parks Feel Pinch of Region's Growth
By ROB DAVIS Voice Staff Writer

The sun is slipping low over Anza-Borrego Desert State Park when David Hogan's truck squeaks to a stop. The evening light is a crisp orange, turning distant hills into shadowy ghosts.

Behind him, water drains to the Pacific Ocean. In front, the Salton Sea. A hulking mountain named Whale Peak hovers in the distance, draped with a blanket of juniper and pinyon trees.

In a canyon a few hundred feet below, tan power poles are visible. They follow the snaking basin, as it curls through cholla cactus, rustling cottonwoods and cool sage-smelling breezes.

The wires trace the path of a new, larger power line that San Diego Gas & Electric Co. plans to build through Anza-Borrego, California's largest state park. The Sunrise Powerlink, as it is called, would provide enough electricity to power 650,000 homes.

SDG&E says the project, estimated to cost \$1 billion to \$1.5 billion, is needed to maintain the region's energy supply and tap into renewable energy sources in Imperial County. It calls for the construction of steel towers with an average height of 130 feet. While the Powerlink has been greeted warmly by many politicians and local chambers of commerce, environmentalists such as Hogan, the director of the Center for Biological Diversity's Urban Wildlands Program, question whether it is needed.

Other San Diego County state parks are facing similar development pressures. The Department of Homeland Security has plans to build a 3.5-mile section of border fence through Border Field State Park. The Irvine-based Foothill/Eastern Transportation Corridor Agency has proposed a six-lane, \$875 million toll road through San Onofre State Beach.

Advocates say the three projects reflect a statewide trend. State parks are increasingly becoming receptacles for construction projects, says Sarah Feldman, Southern California director for the California State Parks Foundation, an advocacy group participating in a suit against the toll road.

The foundation has identified 115 threats to state parks throughout California. Some are small: A stable built on park land. Others are large: A casino proposed on private land inside a Humboldt County park boundary. But Feldman says no county has more controversial fights than San Diego.

More than a dozen environmentalists and planners interviewed for this story could not identify any time in San Diego's recent history when state parks faced such development pressures. It is a result, some say, of population growth. While more land has been turned into housing subdivisions, habitat conservation plans have also designated more land as dedicated open space -- off limits to development.

"We're getting to the point where the only undeveloped land is preserved land," says Andrew Poat, vice president of public policy at the San Diego Regional Economic Development Corp. "If your only choice is to take out housing, to take out jobs or to take out parkland, it's a totally different question than before, when you paid whoever had open space."

Decades of development are redefining California's promise, Poat says. The state once had enough land for everyone. But that has changed, he says, pointing to the proposal to move the region's international airport to Marine Corps Air Station Miramar -- one of the last flat, open stretches of land close to San Diego's downtown.

"To me, it reflects a simple fact," Poat says. "We're running out of land."

Standing along a dusty path in 650,000-acre Anza-Borrego, Hogan describes the latest wave of infrastructure projects -- the power line in particular -- as the industrialization of someplace natural, as the introduction of the "concrete jungle" into a preserve.

He walks down to a stream, where traces of an American Indian village -- likely Kumeyaay -- linger in the dirt. Above him, the existing power line cuts a miles-long gray streak across the darkening sky.

"This transmission line is made even worse by the fact that it's going to carve through the heart of a place that's so special," Hogan says. "And not just special, but a place we already thought was protected."

Original Protection

Forty years ago, the nation's budding interstate highway program was churning out paved freeways at a rapid pace.

The nation's parks were seen as better choices -- easier choices -- for roads. Eminent domain wasn't needed. Homes weren't disrupted.

When a group in Tennessee protested a highway planned through a Memphis park, the fight went to the U.S. Supreme Court. The result came in 1971. The federal government could not build a project across public land if a reasonable alternative existed. Justice Thurgood Marshall wrote in his opinion that protecting parks should be given "paramount importance."

Environmentalists say parks are again being used as the path of least political resistance. In two of the San Diego cases, the federal government has helped clear the way.

The Department of Homeland Security got a boost in 2005, when Congress issued a blanket waiver of any law that might obstruct border-fence construction. No longer did the federal agency have to study or mitigate the environmental impacts of building the border fence around the Tijuana Estuary.

The Orange County toll road agency got a boost from Congress in 2001. Former U.S. Rep. Ron Packard, R-Carlsbad, included a provision in a defense spending bill that exempted the Foothill/Eastern Transportation Corridor Agency from the requirements upheld in that 1971 Supreme Court case. The agency no longer had to demonstrate reasonable alternatives existed to building through the popular state park.

The fence would complete the walling-off of a 14-mile stretch separating San Diego and Tijuana, which began construction in 1994, but that has been held up by environmental concerns. Nearly 2 million cubic yards of dirt will be lopped off the surrounding hills to fill in the notorious crossing known as Smuggler's Gulch. Environmentalists say high-tech security and more Border Patrol agents could instead staunch the flow of immigrants through the state park.

The toll road would connect Interstate 5 with State Route 241, splitting the inland portion of San Onofre State Beach. The Foothill/Eastern Transportation Corridor Agency calls the road environmentally sensitive and says it is designed to avoid critical habitat. But opponents -- including Attorney General Bill Lockyer -- say better alternatives exist.

Widening Interstate 5 would help relieve traffic pressures in northern San Diego County, says Todd Cardiff, an attorney representing the Surfrider Foundation in a suit against the transportation agency. The agency has estimated widening the interstate would require demolishing 835 homes; Cardiff claims the agency purposely overestimated the figure.

But some in the business community question whether environmentalists too often try to obstruct projects in an attempt to quash growth.

Craig Benedetto, a spokesman for several San Diego-based developers, says some opponents of projects such as the Sunrise Powerlink invoke environmental concerns in an attempt to stop growth. The region will continue to grow, Benedetto says. And supporting infrastructure will be needed.

"You need enough electricity to accommodate these homes," he says. "You're also going to need roads and sewers. You can't just say no to those and say they're bad for the environment. To suggest that a power line is going to be the end of the environment in Anza-Borrego is far-fetched."

Scott Alevy, vice president of public policy at the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce, draws an analogy between fights about the Sunrise Powerlink and the Hoover Dam. Some think the dam is ugly, that it did irreparable harm to the surrounding environment, he says. But it has provided a consistent source of water and power for Southern California. Just as the Sunrise Powerlink will help secure the region's energy supply, he says.

"I don't think the Sunrise Powerlink is perfect," Alevy says. "But when I see what it will offer to us and our children, then sometimes you have to make some sacrifices."

Reverberations

The debate about sacrifices echoes across the country. Similar controversies between development and the environment are fought from coast to coast.

Up north: Should we drill for oil in the lonely tundra of Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge?

Down south: Should we build a 2,300-home subdivision on the rolling grasses of a Virginia Civil War battlefield?

In between: Should we explore for energy in Yellowstone National Park?

One common thread runs through every debate, every controversy: How do we balance humankind's growth with the ecological needs and values of the world around us?

With the United States' population increasing -- and energy demands growing -- those debates will become more common, says Edward McMahon, senior research fellow at the Urban Land Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based real estate trade group.

The United Nations projects 100 million more Americans living in the country by 2050. The San Diego Association of Governments says one million more will live in San Diego by 2030. With the population zooming up, how will we strike the balance?

It's a heavy question.

"It's controversial," says Janet Fairbanks, a senior regional planner at SANDAG. "And some people understand the need for balance, and other people are really radical on the left and really radical on the right."

The answer is sometimes characterized as a clash between economic development and the environment, McMahon says. He calls that a false dichotomy. So do some economists, who have worked to develop equations that attach dollar values to quality of life and parkland.

"One thing that makes San Diego attractive -- it has an incredible legacy of public parks and access to the water," McMahon says. "The more that's diminished, the less attractive San Diego becomes. It is not so simple to say that if you oppose a power line then you're opposed to economic development."

Proponents often say highway projects such as the San Onofre road will improve residents' quality of life, says Thomas Power, a resource economist at the University of Montana. But few cities have built their way out of congestion, he says. McMahon echoes that, pointing to the proposed widening of an Atlanta highway to 23 lanes.

"People can live almost anywhere, so communities have to pay attention to what they have that's special," Power says. "Natural areas -- parkland, open space, unique natural features -- are a really important part of that."

Evolving Landscape

During a nine-year stint at Torrey Pines State Reserve, Mike Wells says he watched development slowly encroach.

When he arrived in 1993, the land to the coastal reserve's east was unbroken, undeveloped. But to the northeast, Carmel Valley grew up. To the south, Carmel Mountain followed. Wildlife corridors, which allow animals to move from one protected island to the next, were choked off.

Though the corridors were later restored, Wells, now superintendent of the park system's Colorado Desert District, which includes Anza-Borrego, says that type of development has typified his 31-year park career. Parks have become exceptional areas, he says.

He runs through a list of projects either currently or once considered through Anza-Borrego. The Sunrise Powerlink. Water lines. A maglev train to Imperial County.

"It's just endless," he says.

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