

SHRINKING BUTTERFLY HABITAT

Sand Mountain Blue Needs Protection

In the desert east of Fallon, Nevada, in dunes which are receiving increased use by off-road vehicles, lives a small blue butterfly, the Sand Mountain blue. In January, the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) and two other groups filed a lawsuit in federal court against the Department of Interior (DOI) for failing to consider protection of this endemic species, which lives only in the Sand Mountain Dunes on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands.

This action followed up from a 2004 scientific petition to DOI Secretary Gail Norton to list the Sand Mountain blue butterfly (*Euphilotes pallescens arenamontana*) as a threatened or endangered species under the Endangered Species Act, and to designate critical habitat for its conservation and recovery.

Inaction on the petition for over a year (the law requires action within 90 days) motivated the litigants to seek an order forcing the Secretary to issue a "finding" on the petition. Daniel Patterson, speaking for CBD said, "A 'positive finding' is warranted as the petition presents significant information, and would start a species status review and likely proposed Endangered Species Act listing."

Endemic species more prone to extinction

The butterfly is dependent on approximately 1,000 acres of Kearney buckwheat shrub habitat at the Sand Mountain Dunes, which is intensively impacted by off-road vehicles. Given their restricted geographic ranges, endemic species are more prone to extinction than widespread species.

"BLM has responded shamefully to an environmental emergency, ignoring its own data that shows habitat for this species is being decimated by recreational excesses. And the Fish and Wildlife Service, the agency that is supposed to act in such circumstances, is itself AWOL," says Karen Schambach of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility.

Sand Mountain Recreation Area (SMRA) consists of 4,795 acres of BLM public lands open to unrestricted off-road vehicle (ORV) use. Sand Mountain's small size, lack of strong protection measures, and relative closeness to cities in Nevada and California make it a magnet for off-roaders. Native Nations nearby consider the dunes sacred and have long voiced concern about ORV damage.

Habitat for the Sand Mountain blue has suffered extensive destruction and modification from off-road vehicles. From 1993 to 2003 the BLM reported a 25 percent increase in visitor use at the recreation area, and ORV use is still going up fast. This



Sand Mountain Blue Butterfly

increase has contributed to a dramatic increase in the number of off-road impacts through the Sand Mountain Blue habitat.

Buckwheat destroyed by recreational impacts

The Kearney buckwheat was once pervasive in the vicinity of the dunes, but in the past five years most plants have been destroyed by ORVs. The key to preserving the Sand Mountain blue butterfly is to ensure the continued existence of its host plant, Kearney buckwheat, in large enough numbers to maintain a viable population of the butterfly.

Editors Note: Habitat protection for an endemic butterfly species is not an unprecedented action. In Los Angeles, the endangered El Segundo blue butterfly lives on the sand dunes behind the beaches west of Los Angeles International Airport. The entire area is fenced in, with visitors permitted only on foot with a guide for short periods of time. Like the Sand Mountain blue, the El Segundo blue requires a distinct species of buckwheat found only within sight of the ocean.

BLM did recently take some small steps to reduce off-road impacts, but still has kept an excessive route network spider-webbed across the shrinking butterfly habitat. Compliance and enforcement has been spotty at best. ♠

Daniel R. Patterson is Ecologist & Deserts Program Director with the Center for Biological Diversity. biologicaldiversity.org, (760) 366.2232 x306, dpatterson@biologicaldiversity.org