

Thrill of California dunes comes at a price

The dangers and deaths linked to all-terrain vehicles don't deter thousands of fans who jam this desert area over long winter weekends

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There are no speed limits, no age limits and no roads across the sands of the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area in California.

Formed by ancient Colorado River delta sediments fanned out across the desert floor, the area is also known as Glamis, after the nearby town. The 200 square miles of wind-sculpted ridges, bowls and flatlands undulate from the Chocolate Mountains south to the Mexican border.

They are among the most popular--and most deadly--places in the nation for riding off-road vehicles, particularly on holiday weekends in winter. Seven people have died so far this riding season, which runs from October through April. It is the highest toll at this point in the season in the memory of coroner's officials here.

More than 30,000 people show up on an average three-day weekend, according to the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. Over the Thanksgiving holiday, about 200,000 people arrived--more than the regular population of surrounding Imperial County.

Riding the dunes is universally described as rib-bruising, exhilarating and terrifying. On a busy weekend, a bewildering array of vehicles--collectively called "toys" by riders--crowds the sandy slopes: souped-up golf carts, dune buggies, four-wheeled "quads" and sand rails, which look like a cross between a go-kart and a Formula One racer.

"It's scary. ... It's adrenaline-soak time," said Eric Tomlinson, 28, of San Diego, gunning his Banshee four-wheeler and swirling out of sight over the lip of a slope at Osborne's Overlook.

"People die at Glamis," said Alan Wilson, 38, of Surprise, Ariz., who said he witnessed one of the five deaths that happened over Thanksgiving.

Among them was a 5-year-old boy: His father hit a steep "razorback" ridge in their truck and rolled four times, throwing the unbelted youngster headfirst around the cab. His parents were charged with felony child endangerment.

Despite the risks, Wilson said he would continue to come and ride, mainly because

off-roading is a family vacation for him and his teenage children.

He and others said law enforcement has tightened in recent years, with strict policies on helmets and warning flags.

'Incredibly dangerous'

Off-roading advocates and some law-enforcement officials say there is risk inherent in any sport. But safety advocates argue that manufacturers of all-terrain vehicles are increasing the risks by selling large, powerful machines for use by children who cannot handle them.

"ATVs are not toys. They are incredibly fun, and they are incredibly dangerous," said Sue Rabe, a founding member of Concerned Families for ATV Safety, a national network of people who have lost children in off-roading accidents. "My son asked for an ATV every year for Christmas."

Eventually, the family bought one. Three years ago, Kyle, her 10-year-old, was "tootling along" in his ATV with a close friend when he hit a bump going downhill on a rutted dirt track in Oregon. His four-wheeler flipped and landed on him, killing him instantly, two weeks before his 11th birthday.

"I had no idea how dangerous these things could be," Rabe said.

An average of 130 children die annually on all-terrain vehicles, and more than 47,000 are injured seriously, according to the federal Consumer Product Safety Commission. Those numbers don't include dune buggies, off-road trucks or dirt bikes.

The Consumer Federation of America, a national advocacy group, is pushing for federal rules that would ban the sale of heavier, adult-size ATVs for use by children under 16.

Bob Mason of the American Sand Association, an advocacy group for riders, opposes the idea. "I don't need the federal government telling me what to do in that area. You just need to be aware of your kids' capabilities."

Mason argues that a large part of the

problem stems from the closure of half the dunes by court order to protect imperiled plants and animals.

"The numbers of people have gone up, and ... you have loss of usable area that has compacted people into a tighter area," he said. The sand association has fought for wider off-roading access at the Algodones Dunes and removal of federal protection for the Pierson's milk vetch, a tiny plant classified as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

Environmentalists, safety advocates and some local residents vehemently disagree.

"They might have a point if they were being squeezed into small areas, but they're not. They still have more than 100 square miles," said Daniel Patterson, an ecologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, which sued in 2000 to have the dunes managed better.

"People die and endangered species die at this place," Patterson said. "It is directly related to the Department of Interior's and BLM's failure to properly manage the dunes."

Inevitable problems

Bureau of Land Management officials say they have fought to curtail lawlessness at the dunes and that there are fatalities every year. But Gary Taylor, an agency staffer in charge of environmental compliance at the dunes, said that with the number of people who come here to ride, some problems are inevitable.

"Every time you jam 200,000 people into an instant city, you're going to have deaths," he said.