

The New York Times

TUESDAY, JANUARY 2, 2002

A Holiday of Mayhem in 'the Most Illegal Place in the World'

By Nick Madigan

GLAMIS, Calif., Jan. 1 — As midnight approached on New Year's Eve, things began to get seriously out of hand. With dozens of crackling bonfires and zipping fireworks as backdrop, a pickup went up in flames, a mob cheering its destruction, and a young woman was run over by a careering dune buggy.

From a road overlooking the scene in the remote Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area, 150 miles east of San Diego, officers from eight federal and state agencies — brought together this past weekend as a task force to quell the increasingly frequent disturbances here — restrained themselves from going in, fearful that they would be pelted with stones and beer cans, as they have been before.

"It's a real mess down there," a Forest Service ranger said. "We don't want to send any officers down there because we can't be sure they'd be safe."

In a swirling sea of sand, flying dune buggies and deafening noise, an estimated 90,000 adherents of off-road recreation today finished blasting their way through a long weekend of racing and partying in the sand hills of southeastern California.

Since the late 1950's, off-road enthusiasts have enjoyed riding the 150,000-acre Imperial dunes. But in recent years, long holiday weekends have drawn an increasingly rowdy bunch of hangers-on, some from nearby towns with little other entertainment. Over the Thanksgiving Day weekend, a 66-year-old man was shot to death, and two people died in accidents. The crowd that weekend was estimated at 100,000 to 200,000.

In response, the Bureau of Land Management asked eight federal and state agencies to form a group to calm the situation.

"We've put this in the frame of a forest fire or a natural disaster," said Roger Scott,

a spokesman for the National Park Service, an agency that contributed to the 141-member force last weekend.

The officers did their best against overwhelming numbers, keeping out the obvious troublemakers and drunks. Several undercover agents made arrests in the thick of the mayhem, a square-mile valley at the foot of Competition Hill known as the pit.

"This is the most illegal place in the world, man," Clay Buttle, 21, an agricultural worker from Arizona, said as he watched the sand drags, a regular midafternoon event on holiday weekends in which wildly mismatched vehicles streak over the bumpy terrain, sometimes perilously close to the throngs who are urging them on. "All kinds of stuff goes on here — drinking, women, drugs."

In the space of 10 minutes, two pickups flipped, one after almost backing into a group of people who scattered in all directions. A 17-year-old was slightly hurt when she was thrown from the truck. As officers led away the driver, a crowd gathered around the upended truck.

"If we hadn't gotten there, they'd have torched it," said Reid Hopkins, a ranger with the Bureau of Land Management, which controls the area, as well as the North Algodones Dunes Wilderness to the north, where no vehicles are permitted.

Under the watchful eyes of 20 law officers, some riding buggies painted in police colors and with flashing lights atop, the crowd flipped both trucks back onto their wheels.

Over the weekend, officers issued 350 citations and made 35 arrests, mostly for under-age drinking and driving while intoxicated. About 125 people were injured, 5 critically, including a 16-year-old who hit a bush with her all-terrain vehicle and was pitched head-first into the ground. "This is the first time there's been so much law enforcement here," Lee Banning, 27,

an alfalfa farmer from Phoenix and the owner of a \$20,000 buggy, said. "It's gotten to the point where they have to open their eyes and realize there's a problem here."

Glamis, a small dust-covered town east of the dunes, is known as the Sand Toy Capital of the World — at least on the T-shirts for sale at the Glamis Beach Store. Fans of the sport, which involves riding and racing across dunes in all manner of vehicles, including buggies, motorcycles and pickups, bemoan its growing reputation as an activity for out-of-control youths bent on mayhem.

"The true off-road enthusiast is not like this," Debi Carter, 45, a school-bus driver from Poway, near San Diego, said as surveyed the New Year's Eve scene at Competition Hill. "It's a total weekend warrior thing. The handful screw it up for the masses."

Ms. Carter, who has been traveling here for 18 years and taught both her young children to ride on sand, said she and fellow members of an all-terrain-vehicle club from Orange County pitched in on a huge dune cleanup on the third weekend of January every year.

"We're passionate about our sport," she said, "and we don't like people to screw it up for us."

Mr. Scott of the park service said "The lifestyle of the people who come here has to do with a kind of Western mentality, that this is their last freedom. A lot of them are independent people who don't necessarily like to respond to law enforcement or to rules."

Many participants here say their enjoyment of the enormous dunes and the speed and agility of their machines is being ruined by careless neophytes, as well as by environmental advocates, who would like to see the area closed to vehicles.

"We're not out here to destroy the environment," said Mark Hopkins, 34, president of the Orange County A.T.V. Association. "We're out here to enjoy it. There's no other place like this in the world."