

RECREATIONAL IMPACTS ON COASTAL HABITATS: VENTURA COUNTY FAIRGROUNDS, CALIFORNIA¹

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Abstract

The doubling of California's population since 1960 has presented new challenges to the California Coastal Act's mandates to maximize public coastal access and protect coastal resources. The increasing potential conflict between California's dual mandates is illustrated by the recent installation of a 328 car parking facility along the shore and adjacent to the Ventura River Estuary, San Buenaventura, California. As population increases within the Coastal Zone additional considerations to protect sensitive coastal resources must be incorporated into coastal access and recreation programs. The philosophy and management principles developed as part of the national Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers Acts could provide a model for shaping new policies and practices for managing the ocean wilderness along the California Coast.

Introduction

From its inception California's Coastal Zone Management Program has been characterized by two dominant mandates: (1) to preserve and protect, and where feasible, restore coastal resources, and (2) to preserve, protect and where possible, secure public access to these resources. Until recently, these two mandates have generally been viewed as complementary (Scott 1975; Squire and Scott 1984).

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The California Coastal Commission's dual mandate was reflected in the ballot arguments made in support of the original Coastal Zone Conservation Act (Proposition 20) proposed and passed by California voters in 1972. Arguments in the initiative ballot asserted that "Fish are poisoned by sewage and industrial waste dumped into the ocean. Duck and other wildlife habitat are buried under streets and vacation homes for the wealthy." While "[t]wo-thirds of California's estuaries and many of our beaches have been destroyed." At the same time, it was pointed out that "[t]he public has been denied access to hundreds of miles of beaches and publicly owned tidelands by freeways, private clubs, residential and industrial developments." (State of California 1972)

The California Coastal Act of 1976, enacted by the California Legislature to supercede Proposition 20, carries the same dual mandate to maximize public access and protect coastal resources. These mandates are embodied in the development policies of Chapter 3 of the California Coastal Act.

Section 30210 of the California Coastal Act sets forth the basic public access policy:

In carrying out the requirement of Section 4 of Article X of the California Constitution, **maximum** access, which shall be conspicuously posted, and recreational opportunity shall be provided for all the people **consistent** with public safety needs, and the need to protect public rights, rights of private property owners, and natural resource areas from overuse. [emphasis added] (State of California 1976)

Other policies (e.g., Sections 30211-30214) stipulate that new development not interfere with the public's existing access to the sea where it has been acquired through use or legislative authorization, and that public access from the nearest public roadway to the shoreline and along the coast be provided in connection with new development. Additionally, the California Coastal Act gives priority to public parking areas and visitor serving facilities which encourage public accessibility and use of the coast. These policies are also qualified by provisions which require the protection of fragile coastal resources, as well as the

protection of public safety, military security, coastal agriculture, and the privacy of adjacent property (State of California 1976).

Section 30230 of the California Coastal Act sets forth the basic marine resource protection policy:

Marine resources shall be maintained, enhanced, and where feasible, restored. Special protection shall be given to areas and species of special biological or economic significance. Use of the marine environment shall be carried out in a manner that will sustain the biological productivity of coastal waters and that will maintain healthy populations of all species of marine organisms adequate for long-term commercial, recreational, scientific and educational purposes. (State of California 1976)

Further, specific policies (e.g., Sections 30230-30233, 30235, and 30253) provide strict standards for the filling of coastal waters, wetlands, estuaries, and lakes, the alteration of streams, and the siting of new development in or adjacent to environmentally sensitive habitat areas (State of California 1976).

The California legislature explicitly recognized the potential conflicts between individual policy objectives, and provided general guidance, in addition to the caveats contained in separate policies, for the resolution of these conflicts. Section 30007.5 of the California Coastal Act provides, in part, that:

[I]n carrying out the provisions of this division such conflicts be resolved in a manner which on balance is the most protective of significant coastal resources. (State of California 1976)

The rapid increase in the population of California since the initial formulation of these coastal access and resource protection policies has intensified the potential conflict between maximizing coastal access and protecting and restoring fragile coastal resources, particularly coastal dunes, estuaries, and intertidal habitats such as tidepools and nearshore waters.

In 1960, California's population stood at 15,863,000. By the beginning of the next decade it had increased to 20,039,000, with an average annual growth rate of 2.7%. During the following decade this figure had jumped to 23,780,000, with an average growth rate of 1.8%. Today, California's population stands at 30,000,000, with a projected leveling off at 40,000,000 by the year 2010. Of the State's total population, approximately 85% live within less than 30 miles of the coast, where the fastest rates of growth historically have occurred. Approximately half of the State's population is concentrated in the five southern coastal counties from Point Conception to the Mexican Border (State of California 1960, 1990). The potential impacts on coastal resources associated with the explosive increase in California's population is exacerbated by an increase in the leisure time available for outdoor recreation activities, as well as an increase in the rate of out-of-state tourism. While there are a variety of regulatory and environmental assessment programs which govern the development of coastal access opportunities, these have not always been adequate to accurately assess impacts, identify mitigations, and assure effective implementation of protective measures.

The recent installation of a public parking facility adjacent to the ocean front and Ventura River Estuary in southern California illustrates the potential adverse impacts from inadequately planned access facilities, particularly in highly urbanized areas.

Ventura River Estuary & Associated Habitats

The Ventura River Estuary and associated habitats are situated immediately west of the Ventura County Fairgrounds, within the City of San Buenaventura (with a population of 92,000), and about a 60 miles west of the City of Los Angeles. The area encompasses approximately 152 acres, and includes a number of publicly owned parcels, including the Emma Wood State Beach Ventura River Group Camp (67 acres), the City of San Buenaventura Seaside Wilderness Park (20 acres), and the 31st Agricultural District Association's Ventura County Fairgrounds/Seaside Park (65 acres).

The area surrounding the mouth of the Ventura River also includes approximately 1 1/2 miles of ocean frontage which is under public ownership.

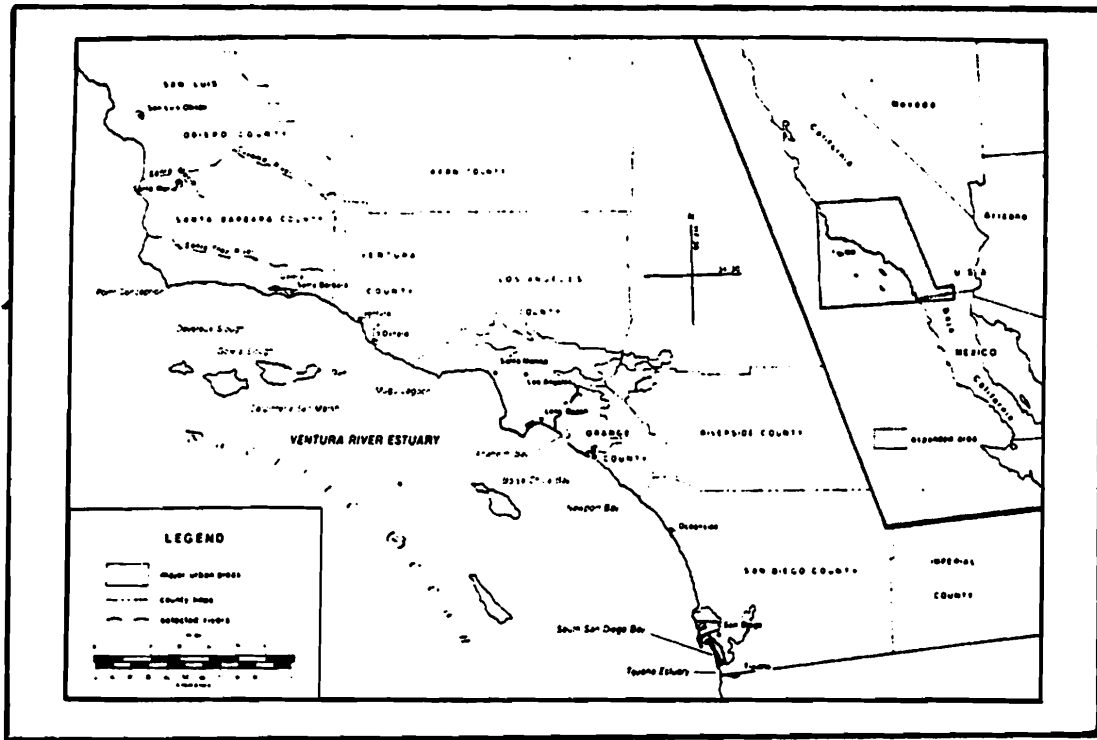


Figure 1. Area Location Map. Ventura River Estuary and Ventura County Fairgrounds, southern California.

Because of the conjunction of several distinct physical features (river, ocean, dunes, intertidal and subtidal cobble field, and flood plain) the area contains a diverse complex of habitats within a small geographic area including, estuarine, riverine, palustrine, and marine wetlands, a small remnant stand of primary dunes, and upland terrestrial plant communities (Ferren et al 1990). The complex of habitats and species richness is particularly noteworthy at this site because of its proximity to a highly urbanized area.

The Ventura River Estuary supports a number of sensitive species, both resident and migratory. The estuary is one of 15 sites remaining in southern California which supports the Tidewater goby (*Eucyclogobius newberryi*), a species which has been nominated for classification as a Federally listed rare and

endangered species (Moyle 1989; Swift 1989). It also provides rearing habitat for a number of rare and endangered birds such as the Brown Pelican (*Pelican occidentalis*) and the Least tern (*Sterna antillarum browni*) (California Department of Fish and Game 1989).



Figure 2. Aerial view of Ventura River Estuary (left) and Ventura County Fairgrounds (right) in 1989 immediately prior to construction of the Fairgrounds parking lot. City of San Buenaventura is in the upper right corner.

In addition to animal species, the area also supports over 164 species of native vascular plants and 100 species of marine algae. Of special interest is the 1 1/2 miles of rocky intertidal habitat fronting the area. Rocky intertidal habitat is relatively rare in southern California, and provides the most important substrate upon which plants and other benthic organisms attach (California Department of Navigation and Ocean Development 1977; California State Lands Commission 1989; Dawson 1959; Stevenson et al 1959). The rocky intertidal habitat at the Ventura River/Fairgrounds site contains approximately 37% of the total hard substrate along the coast of Ventura County. The area

fronting the Ventura River mouth also supports a significant population of Littleneck (*Protothaca staminea*) as well as other species of edible clams, and a representative assemblage of other intertidal marine invertebrates.

Prior to the installation of a 328 car ocean fronting parking facility on the Ventura County Fairgrounds, access to the ocean front and adjacent environmentally sensitive habitats was restricted because of the lack of nearby parking.

The Ventura County Fairgrounds is used for a variety of events, including concerts, satellite wagering, horse shows, auto racing, and flea markets, as well as the site for the annual Ventura County Fair. These uses are concentrated within the center of the Fairgrounds, and generally do not generate pedestrian traffic beyond the bounds of the Fairgrounds. The Fairgrounds, however, has historically been an important access point to nearby surfing spots, including Surfers Point at the south end of Figueroa Street and the Ventura River Mouth. Until development of the 328 car parking lot, the Ventura County Fairgrounds was serviced by several paved parking lots, with a capacity of 1,800 cars. These lots are located on the eastern and northern portion of the property, and do not provide ready access to the adjacent ocean frontage or the adjacent Ventura River Estuary. Additionally, there were several unimproved areas, with a capacity of 1,200 cars, which were used for parking by Fairgrounds patrons during special events (31st Agricultural District Association 1985).

The City of San Buenaventura's Ventura Seaside Wilderness park (which includes the lower Ventura River Estuary) provides opportunities for passive recreational activities, including bird watching, hiking, and photography; it is accessible by foot only, with the nearest car parking available in two small informal parking areas located approximately 1/8 to 1/4 mile to the north and east respectively, and from the adjacent Emma Wood State Beach facilities.

The Emma Wood State Beach Ventura River Group Campground (which includes the upper Ventura River Estuary) consists of a 124 person group camp and 35 car day use area. The park provides opportunities for active and passive recreation, with the

focus of activities within a developed area in the northwest portion of the park. Vehicular entrance to the park is controlled through a kiosk.

Ventura County Fairgrounds Parking Facility

In 1989 a 328 car parking lot was completed along the ocean front of the Ventura County Fairgrounds, between the Ventura River Estuary and the recently completed City of San Buenaventura's Surfers Point Park. The lot is situated on previously filled wetlands associated with the Ventura River Estuary and immediately adjacent to a small remnant primary sand dune complex. At the time the lot was completed, a California Department of Parks and Recreation bicycle trail was reconstructed between the lot and the sand dune complex. While the lot was originally proposed to serve the parking needs of Fairgrounds patrons, the lot was opened for general public use in August of 1989.

The development of the lot was the result of a complex planning and permitting process which was initiated with the California Coastal Commission's certification of the City of San Buenaventura's Local Coastal Program (LCP) in 1984. The LCP called for the preparation of a master plan for the Ventura County Fairgrounds and also contained a number of policies regulating the use and development of the Ventura County Fairgrounds. The most germane to this discussion provided for improving public access to the beach, establishing a 50 foot ocean front corridor in which buildings could not be built, establishing a setback from the ocean front corridor and Ventura River levee, and continued use of the Fairgrounds as a visitor serving facility (City of San Buenaventura 1984).

The actual design for the parking facility began with the preparation of a Ventura County Fair/Seaside Park Master Development Plan in 1985. The basic goal of the Master Plan was to allow the Fairgrounds to maximize use of the Fairgrounds on a year-round basis, rather than emphasize the continued growth of the annual Ventura County Fair. Towards this end the Master Plan called for the development of a perimeter road and additional parking facilities to accommodate the attendance at the

annual Ventura County Fair (estimated at 50,000 peak daily attendance) as well as other Fairgrounds events.

The Master Plan also included the following site plan policies:

Development of Seaside Park must respect the natural habitat of the Ventura River mouth marine and riverine environment.

The quality of the interface of the Fairgrounds and the ocean should be improved. (31st Agricultural District Association 1985)

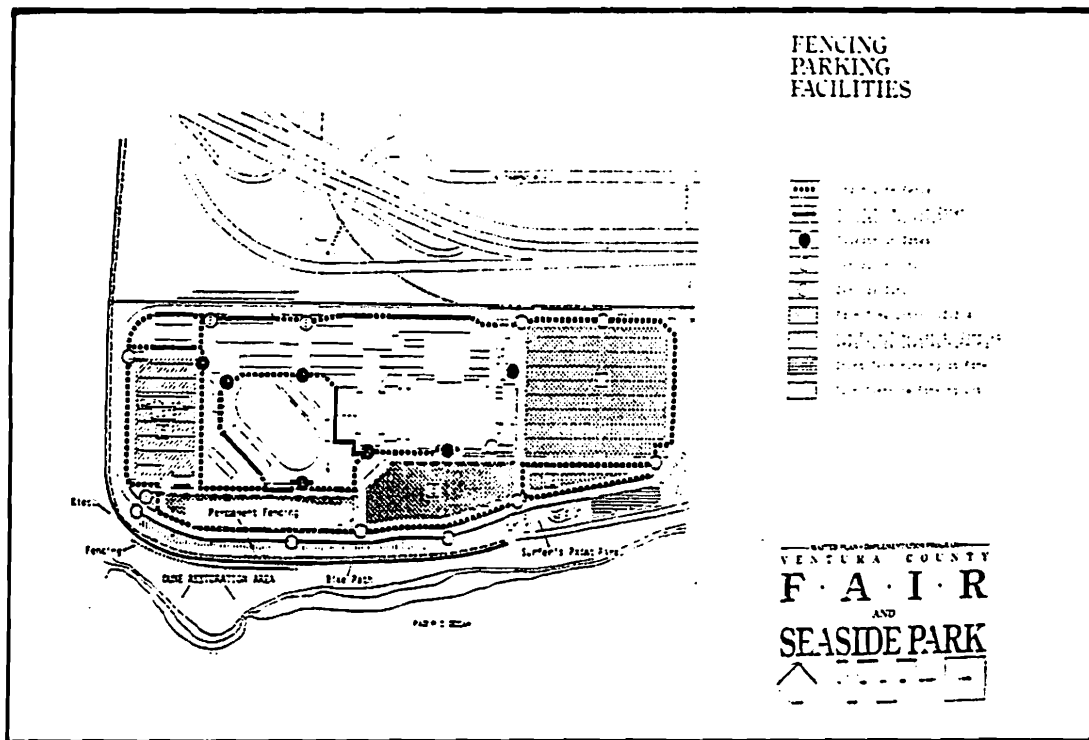


Figure 3. Ventura County Fairgrounds Master Plan Parking Plan.

Following completion of the Master Plan in 1985, an Environmental Impact Report/Statement (EIR/EIS) was prepared to assess the potential impacts of the proposed facilities (City of San Buenaventura 1986). The EIR/EIS provided a generalized description of the habitats adjoining the Ventura County Fairgrounds to the immediate west and south, and listed indicator

species for the estuary, intertidal habitats, and coastal strand. The description, however, was not based on field surveys of the site. As a result, the EIR/EIS did not provide a comprehensive list of the plants and animals found in the area, an assessment of their relative abundance, or an analysis of the uses made of the various habitats by these species (e.g., seasonal or year-round, breeding, feeding, roosting, etc.). Nor did the EIR/EIS provide an assessment of the current level of human use of the site, or the carrying capacity of the adjoining habitats. The EIR/EIS concluded:

The proposed project will incrementally increase the number of people visiting the fairgrounds area. Some of these fairground visitors will visit the river mouth area and may cause indirect impacts to wildlife, such as behavioral interference, noise and habitat alteration. . . . The additional visitors that the proposed expansion would bring to the area are ***not expected to cause a significant impact*** primarily because the river mouth is isolated from the fairgrounds by the elevated levee. As a result, the proposed project is not expected to significantly impact the sensitive bird and fish species associated with the lagoon/estuary. [emphasis added] (City of San Buenaventura 1986)

While the original EIR/EIS was prepared as a general assessment of the entire Master Plan proposal, the City decided to use the EIR/EIS as the environmental assessment to satisfy the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) requirements for construction of the perimeter roadway and 328 car ocean front parking lot. As a result, no additional project specific environmental information or analysis was performed under CEQA or NEPA (City of San Buenaventura 1988).

After completion of the CEQA and NEPA review of the Master Plan, the Master Plan was submitted to the California Coastal Commission for incorporation into the City's LCP. In reviewing the proposed Master Plan the Commission focused on the issues of protecting public access and recreational opportunities, and minimizing the alteration of coastal landforms by shoreline protective devices (California Coastal Commission 1986).

The Coastal Commission approved an amendment to the City's LCP with suggested modifications which, among other things, stipulated that: adequate ground level parking be provided along the Fairgrounds ocean front for the purposes of providing public access to the beach at all times; no structures other than those incidental to general public recreational purposes and public access to and along the shore be permitted within 250 feet of the ocean front; and shoreline development not be dependent upon the construction of shoreline protective devices, including seawalls and revetments.

However, neither the staff report nor the public hearing discussion addressed the issue of the increased impacts generated by opening up an environmentally sensitive area which had previously been closed to vehicular access. There were no specific findings made regarding the requirement of Coastal Act Policy 30210 to provide public access to and along the shoreline consistent with the protection of fragile coastal resources, only a conclusionary statement asserting consistency.

Development of the perimeter road and the 328 space parking lot was made possible through a variety of state funding sources including a \$250,000 grant from the California Coastal Conservancy. By the time the project reached the Coastal Conservancy for funding it had received the approval of the City of San Buenaventura and the California Coastal Commission, and had been found consistent with the CEQA, NEPA, and the California Coastal Act. The Coastal Conservancy's review did not provide any additional environmental investigation or analysis, but only a brief discussion of the project's consistency with the basic purposes of the Coastal Conservancy's grant program.

In approving the funding request, the Coastal Conservancy noted that a "175 parking lot will be open to the public" and "will provide vehicular beach access to an area which before had been accessible only by foot, after crossing a chained barricade." As noted above, the area had been accessible by foot from the Emma Wood State Beach Ventura River Group Camp, and from two informal public parking areas, neither of which were barricaded, located approximately 1/8 to 1/4 of a mile to the north and east respectively. The Coastal Conservancy concluded that "Restoration of the Seaside Park will be an innovative project

'sensitively integrating man-made features into the natural coastal environment' consistent with Section 31305 by replenishing and revegetating the sand dunes." (California Coastal Conservancy 1987)

Recreational Impacts on Coastal Resources

Despite its proximity to the urbanized portion of the City of San Buenaventura, the Ventura River Estuary and adjacent beach areas have been relatively isolated because of the lack of parking facilities adjacent to the beach or estuary. As a result the area has been subjected to a relatively low level of human pedestrian disturbance, limited to those who chose to walk the several hundred yards from the nearest parking facilities. This unintentional management of use had effectively served to protect the habitats and related plant and animal life of the Ventura River Estuary and adjacent beach front.

The construction of a 328 car parking lot extending from Surfers Point Park west to the Ventura River Estuary has dramatically changed the level and pattern of human use at the mouth of the Ventura River. This use was not accurately predicted nor assessed during any of the planning or permitting stages of the project. As a result, substantial adverse impacts to environmentally sensitive habitats have occurred since the opening of the lot in August 1989.

The beach fronting the Ventura County Fairgrounds had previously been frequented by at most several dozen individuals at a time; today, one year after the opening of the parking facility and perimeter road, several hundred individuals are frequently found in the beach area. Additionally, individuals utilizing the parking are not restricted to the immediate beach frontage, but are also able to walk over the Ventura River levee and across the sand bar (a Least tern rearing area) at the mouth of the river. Recreational use of the area is also no longer limited to surfing and passive pedestrian activities, but now includes the use of recreational equipment such as wind-surfers, jet-skis, and small vessels. Off-road vehicles use also is an increasingly common occurrence.

The most dramatic impact has been the destruction of the small dune habitat immediately adjacent to the west end of the parking facilities. Within two months after the opening of the parking lot the dune vegetation was almost entirely eliminated by visitors traversing between the parking lot and the beach area. Until temporary fencing was installed, the area was also used for large group activities (e.g., surfing contests) with temporary structures, including tents and booths, set up on the dunes and beach.



Figure 4. Surfing contest spectators utilizing remnant primary dunes fronting the Ventura County Fairgrounds after opening of the 328 car parking facility (August 1989).

The cobble tidepools fronting the Ventura County Fairgrounds have experienced a substantial increase in use. The cobble tidepools support a significant population of Littleneck as well as other edible species of clams and have traditionally been a popular site for a small number of clamers. In the past this group has been limited to several dozen during minus tides; today the area frequently experiences several hundred clamers, many of whom are attracted to the intertidal area as a result of observing

regular clamers. Additionally, the number of individuals exploring the tidepools and collecting tidepool organisms for home aquaria during low tide has also increased.

Recreational use in the nearshore waters has also changed dramatically. The area around the mouth of the Ventura River has historically been a popular surfing spot due to the large breakers and its relative isolation. With the installation of the Fairgrounds 328 car parking lot, the area has also become popular with jet-skiers and wind-surfers who compete with the traditional board surfers and swimmers for space and waves. Jet skiers have also been observed harassing the dolphins which frequent the near shore waters.



Figure 5. Digging for clams in cobble tidepools fronting the Ventura County Fairgrounds after opening of the 328 car parking lot (August 1989).

The parking lot was built on between 4 to 6 feet of fill and extends to the the Ventura River levee which borders the east end of the Ventura River Estuary. As a result, the estuary is both visually and physically accessible to the patrons of the new parking lot.

The increase in the number of people and their pets have increased the disturbance to wildlife and their habitats. Pet dogs have frequently been observed in the estuary chasing waterfowl, or disturbing birds in pursuit of objects thrown by their owners. The ease with which the estuary is accessible to drive-in visitors has also invited the release of domestic waterfowl into the estuary which can carry parasites and diseases detrimental to native species.

Managing Coastal Access

While the Ventura County Fairgrounds parking lot impacts were not anticipated (either through project design or mitigation measures) during the project planning, environmental review, or permitting stages, they became apparent after the opening of the facility. A Coastal Conservancy grant requirement to develop a dune restoration plan prompted the City of San Buenaventura and the 31st Agricultural District Association to establish a Dune Restoration Committee to provide guidance in developing a dune restoration plan for the area. It was quickly recognized that re-establishing dune habitat would require addressing the basic issue of managing the increased recreational use of the area. As a result, the Committee prepared a comprehensive conceptual management plan which was adopted by the City, the 31st Agricultural District Association, and the other participating public agencies and private organizations.

The "Ventura County Fairgrounds Shoreline Resource Management Plan" recommends a number of actions to reduce the impacts generated by the installation and operation of the 328 car parking lot as a general public recreational facility. The following measures were identified for each habitat area:

Dunes: (1) erect barriers and designated access points from the parking lot through the dune area to the shoreline; (2) remove exotic plant species and revegetate with native dune plant species; (3) install interpretive signs.

Cobble Tidepools/Off-Shore: (1) establish a Marine Reserve over the intertidal and nearshore waters; (2)

adopt a special use ordinance to control motorized water vehicles; (3) install interpretive signs.

Ventura River Estuary: (1) regulate the use of the parking lot through fees and barriers; (2) install plants or other barriers to discourage pedestrian traffic in the estuary; (3) install interpretive signs (31st Agricultural District Association and City of San Buenaventura 1990).

California's Coastal Wilderness

Because of the intense level of development and human activity associated with the California Coast, particularly in central and southern California, the ocean frontage and nearshore waters are generally not thought of as a wilderness. However, much of the Coastal Zone in California, which extends three miles off-shore, has many of the essential features of a wilderness area as defined in the 1964 Wilderness Act:

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is . . . an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. An area of wilderness is . . . an area . . . retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions . . . (U.S. Congress 1964)

Using this criteria, the California Coastal Zone contains the largest wilderness area in the United States, extending the length of the state (1,072 miles) and out to sea three miles. Unlike Federally recognized wilderness areas which are managed primarily for their ability to provide a outdoor experience which emphasizes natural resource values, the dual mandates of the California Coastal Act of 1976 places an emphasis on maximizing access to and along the shoreline and nearshore waters.

In theory the policies of the California Coastal Act also require the preservation of the natural resources of the Coastal Zone, and

specifically provide for balancing competing uses in a manner which is the most protective of coastal resources. In practice, as the Ventura County Fairgrounds experience attests, the preservation of fragile coastal resources has not always received the same consideration as the provision of access and recreational opportunities. The reasons for this imbalance are many, but the most basic are: (1) the lack of a political constituency for the protection of coastal resources comparable to the political interest in the protection of access and recreational opportunities; (2) the paucity of site specific information regarding natural resources along the California coast (e.g., until recently, most estuarine research was conducted on east coast wetlands with different physical and biological characteristics indiscriminately applied to west coast wetlands); and (3) the failure of political leaders and professional coastal managers to adequately recognize the significance of the rapid population changes in California since the policies of the Coastal Zone Conservation Act of 1972 and the Coastal Act of 1976 were originally conceived and formulated.

These conflicts will continue to intensify as California's population continues to grow. The California Coastal Commission's dual mandate to maximize coastal access and recreational opportunities and protect coastal resources must be reexamined in light of the profound implications of California's burgeoning population. First, the Commission should determine if the current Coastal Act policies adequately reflect the growing potential conflicts between the public's right to access the coast and the obvious need to protect those resources, and provide effective guidance in resolving these conflicts. Second, consideration should be given to developing a regulatory and management program which explicitly recognizes the varying sensitivities of the coast, rather than viewing the entire coast as suitable for maximum access. This would involve a detailed inventory and analysis of the ocean frontage and nearshore water habitats, and identification of criteria for establishing appropriate levels and types of recreational use. Third, a strong public education program should be developed which stresses the unique nature of the ecological systems characteristic of the interface between terrestrial and marine environments.

Management of the wilderness aspects of the California Coastal Zone presents a special challenge, but also special opportunities to develop public appreciation of the coast's unique natural resources. The quality of the access, as much as the amount of access to which the public has a right, should be explicitly recognized in any management program.

Many of the basic issues raised by any proposal to manage access to natural resources were debated on a national level during the consideration of the Wilderness Act of 1964 (U.S. Senate 1961; U.S. House of Representative 1961, 1962, and 1964). Similar issues were debated in connection with the passage of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968 (U.S. Senate 1967; U.S. House of Representatives 1968). These issues include: providing for a range of recreational experiences (including those emphasizing an understanding of natural systems), limiting the types of recreational activities and developments (both public and private) permissible in selected areas, and assuring equal access for the physically handicapped. These issues were seriously addressed and basic policies established in the course of the passage of both the Wilderness Act and the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (U.S. Congress 1964, 1968). Both of these national programs could provide a model for recognizing and protecting the wilderness qualities of California's Coastal Zone.

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