

3.0 AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

3.4 Recreation

Among the Coachella Valley's most valuable assets are its unique and impressive scenic and ecological resources, which attract thousands of visitors each year. Much of the valley's recreational appeal is due to a combination of distinctive topography, temperate climate, desert wildlife and vegetation, and proximity to vast public parks and recreation lands. Following is a description of recreational opportunities on BLM lands in the CDCA planning area.

Trails. BLM maintains a developed trail system in the San Andreas Oasis portion of the Dos Palmas Preserve/ACEC, which is utilized by hikers, bird watchers, and other outdoor enthusiasts. The Big Morongo Canyon Preserve/ACEC also includes a developed trail system, which is frequented by hikers and bird watchers. Equestrian use is permitted on designated trails, including Canyon Trail, which is accessed from the southern portion of the ACEC, along Indian Avenue at the base of the Little San Bernardino Mountains.

BLM maintains a developed trailhead for the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail at Cottonwood Canyon. Hiking and equestrian use is permitted on the trail, which extends from Mexico to Canada and passes through BLM's Whitewater Canyon ACEC and San Gorgonio Wilderness Additions.

BLM, in cooperation with California Department of Fish and Game, also maintains the trailhead to the Art Smith Trail, which is located near the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument Visitor Center on Highway 74, south of the City of Palm Desert. The trailhead provides access to Carrizo and Dead Indian Canyons and serves as an important connector to an extensive trails network that traverses the Santa Rosa Mountains. Trails in this network are open to hikers, mountain bikers, and equestrians, except for several narrow and steep trails in the Murray Hill area (Palm Springs) that are closed to mountain bike use to avoid conflicts with horses. Trails in Carrizo Canyon Ecological Reserve are temporarily closed to all use on a seasonal basis from January 1 to September 30 by California Department of Fish and Game.

Within essential Peninsular Ranges bighorn sheep habitat, there are 153 miles of primary trails; other unnamed trails exist but have not been identified. Since 1998, trail users have been requested to voluntarily refrain from using certain trails in bighorn sheep habitat from January 1 to June 30 to minimize disturbance to bighorn sheep during the lambing season, with additional trails being included in 2001. These are: (1) Art Smith Trail, (2) Bear Creek Canyon Trail, (3) Bear Creek Oasis Trail, (4) Dunn Road, (5) Cathedral Canyon Trail, (6) Clara Burgess Trail, (7) Boo Hoff Trail, (8) Morrow Trail, (9) Guadalupe Trail, and (10) North Lykken Trail, totaling 33 miles in length. A portion of Dunn Road on private lands is currently posted as "no trespassing," hence closed to use. Trail users are also requested to voluntarily refrain from using the Bear Creek Oasis Trail, Guadalupe Trail, and a portion of the Art Smith Trail from July 1 through

September 30 to facilitate bighorn sheep access to water sources. The voluntary trail avoidance programs are temporary pending a decision regarding the trails management element of the Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan. Management BLM-managed trails in the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument will continue under the CDCA Plan (1980) as amended, pending completion of the Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan. The BLM initiated formal consultation on the CDCA Plan (1980) as amended, with the USFWS on January 31, 2001. A biological assessment of the impacts of that plan and twelve interim measures intended to mitigate for impacts to Peninsular Ranges bighorn sheep was included in the consultation.

BLM staff conducted a trail user survey from January through June 2001, and from January through April 2002 to evaluate trail use patterns on eight trails in the Santa Rosa Mountains: (1) Art Smith Trail, (2) Bear Creek Canyon Trail, (3) Lower Dunn Road, (4) Upper Dunn Road, (5) Cathedral Canyon Trail, (6) Clara Burgess Trail, (7) Boo Hoff Trail, and (8) Morrow Trail. A total of 4,421 trail users were identified during this time period. Hikers accounted for 87%, mountain bikers for 11%, and equestrians for 2% of all trail users. Of the eight trails monitored, the Art Smith Trail received the most overall usage (87%). The Art Smith Trail also received the most use by hikers (59% of all observed hiking use on the eight trails); however, the Lower Dunn Road received the most use from mountain bikers (60% of all observed mountain biking use on the eight trails), and the Boo Hoff Trail received the most use from equestrians (63% of all observed equestrian use on the eight trails).

Camping. Primitive camping is permitted on all BLM land, except where expressly prohibited. Campers may occupy a single site for a maximum of 14 days, and then must move to a new location. Vehicle camping is permitted along open routes, but no more than 300 feet from the roadway, except in ACECs where the limit is 100 feet. No special permission or permits are required. BLM does not maintain any developed campsites within the Coachella Valley CDCA planning area. Current camping activity in the planning area is very low and incidental, except around Drop 31 where use occurs mostly on weekends and holidays. The following areas in the CDCA planning area are closed to camping: (1) Dos Palmas Preserve/ACEC, (2) Big Morongo Canyon Preserve/ACEC, and (3) Coachella Valley Thousand Palms Preserve (including the Willow Hole-Edom Hill ACEC).

Hunting. All hunting activity is regulated by the California Department of Fish and Game. Hunters must possess a valid hunting license and obey all laws and regulations pertaining to the use of firearms in California. Hunting is generally allowed on the BLM-managed public lands, except in developed recreation sites (43 CFR 8365.2-5). No hunting closures are proposed through this Coachella Valley CDCA Plan Amendment.

In collaboration with the State, Federal and local jurisdictions, hunting closures on BLM-managed lands may be proposed through the Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Area Plan process for public safety and protection of listed species.

Closure authority shall not be exercised without prior consultation with the State of California Department of Fish and Game (43 CFR 24.4 (i)(4)).

Rockhounding. Part 8365 of Title 43 CFR (Code of Federal Regulations) provides for the collecting of “reasonable” quantities of rocks, minerals, semiprecious gemstones, and invertebrate and plant fossils of non-scientific purpose for personal use. However, regulations do not permit collecting on “developed recreation sites and areas,” or where otherwise prohibited or posted. Informal discussions with local gem and mineral clubs indicate that the Coachella Valley is not known to contain significant gem and/or mineral resources. Therefore, rockhounding activity in the Valley is considered very low.

Off-Highway Vehicle Use. Off-highway vehicle (OHV) use is a popular recreational pastime in Southern California deserts. Four-wheel drive and OHV racing clubs utilize certain desert areas for group excursions, scrambles, competitions, and other organized events, though no competitive vehicular events on public lands in the Coachella Valley Planning Area have been authorized in many years. Individuals generally use back country routes for more casual exploration. Within the planning area, one of the most popular desert OHV sites is Drop 31 located north of the Salton Sea.

BLM-managed lands available for OHV use are designated as either “limited” or “open.” In “limited” areas, vehicles are required, at a minimum, to remain on existing routes of travel; cross-country travel is prohibited. In “open” areas, vehicle travel is permitted anywhere if the vehicle is operated responsibly in accordance with regulations and subject to permission of private land owners if applicable. OHV and other vehicle use is prohibited in all wilderness areas, except to accommodate specific authorized activities as provided for by law.

There are four locations on BLM-managed lands in the Coachella Valley which have historically received off-highway vehicle use, some for as long as 40 years. The four areas cover approximately 3600 acres and have become informally established by use rather than by design or designation. Descriptions of each of the four areas follow.

(1) A 777-acre area at Windy Point adjacent to Highway 111 is currently under a temporary closure to exclude OHV use from occupied habitat for Coachella Valley fringe-toed lizards and Coachella Valley milkvetch (both are species listed under the Endangered Species Act). About 100 to 150 people used the Windy Point area on busy weekends during the cooler times of the year prior to the temporary closure. Peak weekends have been as high as 300 to 400 visits. An OHV rental business is located on adjoining private lands; these lands have a small acreage suitable for OHV use.

Use in the area has been established for over 40 years. A large portion of the use of this area comes from San Bernardino, Orange, and Los Angeles Counties. With the temporary closure, use has been substantially reduced, but up to about eight people per week may enter the closed area, passing signs or barriers. Enforcement emphasis on Windy Point continues with 98 federal citations, 4 state law citations, and one written warning issued through May 13, 2002. However, given the population base (millions) in

the Los Angeles and Orange County areas in combination with the long history of use, enforcement is not expected to yield full compliance for some time.

(2) A 833-acre OHV area consisting of two separate parcels in the Indio Hills generally receives 10 to 20 visits per week, mostly by local residents. The parcels are located adjacent to areas designated as part of the Coachella Valley Fringe-Toed Lizard Preserve, but topography largely confines the use to wash bottoms, ridges and a bowl area which are physically separated from Preserve lands. Much of the existing use occurs on an adjacent private parcels and the public land parcel north of the Edom Hill landfill.

(3) A 643-acre parcel in the Iron Door area receives heavy off-highway vehicle use. Adjacent private land parcels receive similar use. The area receives vehicle recreation by up to 150 people per week, mostly for off-highway vehicle play due to the sandy soils.

(4) A 1,371-acre area at Drop 31 along the Coachella Canal is used as an off-highway vehicle use and camping area, particularly on weekends and holidays when temperatures are relatively cool (October to May). Because the area is adjacent to the Orocopia Mountains Wilderness, there is some risk of vehicle intrusion into wilderness, but compliance along the wilderness boundary has generally been good. The land pattern in the area is checkerboard with intermingled private land ownership. The private lands receive similar recreation use. Use levels of 250 to 500 users are typical on busy holiday weekends. Use levels in the region around the Orocopia and Mecca Hills Wildernesses can reach as high as 2,000 to 3,000 people on busy weekends. Users include people traveling from other parts of southern California with expensive camping and touring equipment, as well as local people who use the area for low cost, family camping and picnicking. Drop 31 offers route exploring and touring as well as some hill climbs and sand experiences.

Regional OHV Opportunities. In addition to the OHV areas listed above, the following sites offer OHV recreation opportunities within 100 miles of the Coachella Valley:

1. Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area, 22,000 acres. BLM-managed OHV Open Area, 25 miles east of Brawley.
2. Plaster City/Superstition Mountains, 54,000 acres. BLM-managed OHV Open Area, 15 miles northwest of El Centro .
3. Ocotillo Wells/Arroyo Salado State Vehicle Recreation Area, 64,800 acres. Managed by California Department of Parks and Recreation, 60 miles south of Indio.
4. Johnson Valley, 140,000 acres. BLM-managed OHV Open Area, 50 miles north of Palm Springs.
5. Glen Helen OHV Park, 300 acres. Managed by San Bernardino County Parks, 60 miles west of Palm Springs.

Proposed OHV Recreation Areas.

The BLM is coordinating with Riverside County and the OHV Recreation Division of the California Department of Parks and Recreation to identify and propose new sites in the Coachella Valley and Western Riverside County for OHV parks or play areas. Public lands and conservation areas are limited to the extent that they can provide sites appropriate for intensive OHV use. The BLM's role would be to cooperate with State and local governments to develop grants, studies, acquisitions, and/or land exchange proposals which could facilitate creation of additional OHV recreation opportunities in western Riverside County.