



Santa Susana Mountain Park Association

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Rethinking the Impacts of Recreation

By Michael J. Vandeman

Editor's Note: Though we've listed lots of hikes in this issue, we're also running this article because the point of environmentalism is to save nature for the wildlife living there, not for humans who visit.

Like most of us, I grew up believing that "passive" recreation, and the mere presence of humans, are harmless to wildlife. And, of course, I never worried about making campfires or drinking water in the backcountry. But times change! Now we know that dead branches have an important function in the ecosystem. And we know about giardia. Similarly, recent research on the effects of recreation has forced us to re-examine some longstanding habits and ways of thinking.

It has been customary for people to assume that when we are not directly harming wildlife, we are not harming them. Besides being a convenient rationalization, this assumption is understandable: we assume that others, even members of other species, are like us. We don't feel very threatened by the presence of other species; we are, after all, the top predator. We also live surrounded by plenty; most of us can't imagine what it is like to go hungry for even one day. Wildlife, however, does usually feel very threatened by our presence, and many organisms exist on a very tight (food/energy) budget. Also, they often have much greater visual and auditory acuity than we do, and hence can be disturbed by sensations that we wouldn't even notice. Amphibians, for example, are extremely sensitive to vibrations.

Technology has made it much easier for people to reach wildlife habitat, including areas where access used to be difficult, such as cliff faces, caves, under water, and inhospitable climates. Roads, trails, ORVs, mountain bikes, high-tech camping gear, freeze-dried foods, and even waterproof maps are some of the tools that allow people to travel far into wilderness in great comfort. That and increasing population have squeezed and frightened wildlife out of its preferred habitat, both temporarily and permanently, depriving it of needed foods, shelter, and choice of mates. Roads are particularly pernicious, because they not only give humans easy access to wilderness, but they fragment habitat, since many cover-adapted species are afraid to cross them.

Upcoming SSMPA Board & General Membership Meetings

5/15/2000 • "Native Reptiles and the Hiker." Jarron Lucas of the Southwestern Herpetologists Society will bring live snakes and lizards, and present a slide show on common local reptiles.

June-August 2000 • No General Membership meetings are scheduled for the summer months.

General Membership Program Meetings occur on the 3rd Monday of every month (except summer months), start at 7:30 p.m. and usually conclude by 9:00 p.m., and take place at the Rockpointe Recreation Center, 22300 Devonshire, Chatsworth (south side of street), one block before entry to Chatsworth Park South. Refreshments are served at the program meeting.

Board of Director meetings occur, unless otherwise notified, on the 1st Monday of the month (including the summer months); start at 7:30 p.m. and usually conclude by 9:00 p.m.; and take place at the Chatsworth Park South Visitor's Center, near the southwest corner of the last parking lot in Chatsworth Park South (end of Devonshire). ☼

Here are some of the damaging effects that the mere presence of a human can have on wildlife: When an animal is guarding a nest, it can be scared away ("flushed") for some time, at least while a human is present. Besides using up energy that may not be plentiful, eggs and young are left exposed to dangerous temperatures (hot or cold) and predators. The movement of the parent, or sometimes the odor of the human, can direct predators to the nest, causing the death of some of the young. Sometimes the parent in its rush steps on an egg or knocks it or its young out of the nest, leading to certain death for the offspring.

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Rethinking the Impacts of Recreation

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Some parents may even abandon the nest or kill and eat the young, if they are frightened or startled enough. Young can get left behind when a parent flushes suddenly, get lost, and die of starvation or be eaten by a predator.

The stress of disturbance can increase energy needs, elevate heart rate (possibly leading to death), force the animal to temporarily or permanently abandon a feeding area, force it to become nocturnal, force it to spend a great amount of time watching for humans, interfere with reproduction, and in general decrease its productivity. Migratory birds, for example, have a limited amount of time to stock up on food before their trip. They often spend long periods flying over ocean, and can die if they don't have adequate nutritional reserves.

Because the Earth is losing some 100 species a day, worldwide, it is very important that we quickly become better informed, and stop mindlessly continuing "business as usual" in our approaches to wildlife and recreation. Here are some relevant excerpts from Knight and Gutzwiller [see the reference at the end of this article]: "the notion that recreation has no environmental impacts is no longer tenable. Recreationists often degrade the land, water, and wildlife resources that support their activities by simplifying plant communities, increasing animal mortality, displacing and disturbing wildlife, and distributing refuse" (p.3); "Birds can lose eggs and young when predators attack nests after parents are startled into flight" (p.133); "People have an impact on wildlife habitat and all that depends on it, no matter what the activity" (p.157).

"Perhaps the major way that people have influenced wildlife populations is through encroachment into wildlife areas" (p.160); "a single visit to nest sites by people can cause nest abandonment" (p.161); "Some goslings got lost in the dense vegetation when parents headed for the pool, or parents swam off leaving goslings behind that could not follow" (p.162).

"Off-road vehicles can collapse burrows of desert mammals and reptiles" (p.176); "Compaction increases the mechanical resistance of the soil to root penetration and can reduce the emergence of seedlings" (p.184); "Soil compaction reduces the size of pore spaces, altering the soil fauna" (p.189); "Indirect effects may also occur from development of trail networks and picnic areas, which not only remove habitat, but increase habitat edge ... [opening] these areas for colonization by exotic ... species" (p.210).

"It is expected that outdoor recreational activity will continue to increase, while the amount of wild land where wildlife may seek refuge from disturbance will decrease" (p.327); "Recreationists are, ironically, destroying the very thing they love: the blooming buzzing confusion of nature.... The recreation industry deserves to be listed on the same page with interests that are cutting the last of the old-growth forests, washing fertile topsoils into the sea, and pouring billions of

tons of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere" (p.340); "wilderness managers, charged with incarcerating wilderness, are more concerned with the advancement of their careers through achieving quantifiable goals (number of park visitors, total revenues) and developing park and forest amenities (roads, 'scenic' turnouts, restrooms, paved trails, maps, campgrounds) than with perpetuating the land community of which they are a part" (p.344).

How can we continue enjoying the nature we love, and still protect it so that it will still be there for future generations? Ideally, we should be working to reduce all human access to wildlife habitat. But at the very least, we should eliminate mechanical access (with the exception of small compromises for wheelchairs). Rather than restrict who can visit an area, or when they can go there, I think that the most humane way to reduce our impacts is to restrict the technologies that are allowed there. For example, if vehicles are banned in wildlife habitat (including animals used as vehicles), we can all still enjoy it, but because we have to go on foot, not as many people will go there, they won't go as far, and they won't go as fast. Of course, we also won't have the impacts of the vehicles themselves ("V" grooves caused by mountain bikes, holes and narrow grooves caused by burros' hooves, etc.). But I doubt that the enjoyment of nature will be less. In fact, I think it will be maximized!

I don't think that the simple, direct enjoyment of nature with our bodies and senses has become obsolete. This morning I walked out to my back yard to look at my "garden," and the warmth of the sun and the beauty of the plants and animals was overwhelming! I don't think that any technology could possibly make my enjoyment of that moment any greater. Nor has any "wilderness" I have visited provided any greater "peak experience." More is not necessarily better. ☼

Reference: Knight, Richard L. and Kevin J. Gutzwiller, eds. *Wildlife and Recreationists*. Covelo, California: Island Press, © 1995.

Biographical Note: Michael J. Vandeman is a computer programmer with advanced degrees in mathematics and psychometrics, the measurement of human behavior. He is also an environmentalist working to make wildlife habitat off-limits to humans (to create "pure wildlife habitat"). He has spent the last 8 years fighting automobile dependence and road construction. Michael lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.

- Michael Vandeman has two home pages on the net, one called *Wildlife Need Habitat Off-Limits To Humans* at <http://home.pacbell.net/mjvande> which contains links to numerous environmental resources.
- Michael's other home page at <http://www.imaja.com/change/environment/mvarticles>, which spotlights his environmental letters and articles, is part of Greg Jalbert's web site that sports an *Environment* page, a web magazine called *Asphalt Strawberry*, and many links to environmental art, poetry and prose.

May & June 2000 Hikes

This page lists hikes offered by other organizations. Hikes in the left-hand column are given by the Sierra Club or the Rancho Simi Trail Blazers. The Rim of the Valley Hikes are sponsored by the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy and the Mountains Recreation & Conservation Authority.

Note: For most hikes, hikers should wear sunscreen, sturdy shoes/boots, socks, light-colored clothing, a hat & bring water. Also, serious rain cancels.

Sierra Club Hikes

Mission Peak Moonlight Hike, Wednesdays, May 17 & June 14, 2000, 7:00 pm: Moderate 5-mile round-trip, 1200' gain, hike to see SFV city lights. On 118 fwy, exit Balboa, go north 2 mi. to Sesnon, west 1 mile to Neon Way, right to end of street (trailhead). Call Casey Bialas at 661-251-4619 or Henry Schultz at 661-284-5613 for more info. ☼

Chesebro/Shepard Flats, Thursday, May 25, 2000, 8:30 am: Moderate 9-mile hike in Agoura Hills oak woodlands. On 101 fwy west, exit Chesebro, turn right on Palo Comado Cyn Rd, right on Chesebro Rd, 3/4 mi. to parking lot on right, turn right to 2nd lot. Call Ron Rosien at 310-474-0349 or Ramona Dunn at 818-783-8318 for info. ☼

Mt. Baden Powell (9399' Elevation), Sunday, June 25, 2000, 8:00 am: Popular, moderate 8-mile round-trip, 2899' gain, hike to see panoramic views of Devil's Punchbowl, Antelope Valley & southern Sierras, plus 2000-yr-old Limber Pines. Meet at rideshare - Hwy. 14, exit Sand Canyon, Vons parking lot by Soledad Canyon. Rideshare/caravan to trailhead. Call Ray Lorme at 661-296-0246 for info. ☼

Trail Blazers Hikes

Thursday Evening Hikes, May 18 and 25, 2000, 6:00 pm: Moderate 5-mile round-trip hike. On 118 Fwy, exit at Yosemite, go north on Yosemite, turn right on Flanagan. Trailhead is at end of Flanagan Drive. ☼

Sunday Evening Hike, May 28, 2000, 5:00 pm: Strenuous 5-mile round-trip hike. Meet at Rocky Peak trailhead, at the end of Rocky Peak Road off Santa Susana Pass. ☼ Call 805-584-4400 for more info on Trail Blazers hikes.

Rim of the Valley Hikes

Happy Camp & Beyond, Saturday, May 20, 9:15 am - 3:45 pm: 8-mile round-trip hike, up over 2,000' (1300' gain/loss). See panoramic views to the west, even to Channel Islands! Wear boots; bring lunch, binoculars and 2-3 quarts water. Take 118 or 101/23 to New Los Angeles Ave. west, turn north on Moorpark Ave., go 2.6 miles past railroad crossing, where road turns left (at Happy Camp Rd.) turn right on Broadway, meet at parking lot at end of Broadway. Call Roseann at (805) 529-4828 for more info. ☼

Wildflowers Hike, Sunday, June 4, 2:30-5:00 pm: Easy 3-mile round-trip, 100' gain/loss, naturalist-led hike. Meet at Sage Ranch entrance (take Valley Circle to Woolsey Canyon, west to Boeing, right 200' on Black Canyon, park inside gate). Call Tom at (805) 492-2184 for more info. ☼

Nature at Night, Friday, June 16, 7:00-9:00 pm: 2-mile evening hike in Towsley Canyon. On I-5 freeway, exit at Calgrove, drive west under fwy, turn south on the Old Road, turn on first driveway to right, look for Towsley Canyon Park sign, park in back lot, meet at kiosk. ☼

Two Canyons Hike, Saturday, June 17, 8:00 am-3:00 pm: 4-mile naturalist-led hike starts at Rice Canyon at 8:00 am, moves to Wilson Canyon by 1:00 pm. Join group at either time. Rice Canyon: Take I-5 to Calgrove exit, go west under fwy, 1 mile south on Old Road past church, park on frontage road near Sta Clarita Woodlands: Rice Canyon entrance sign. Wilson Canyon: Take 210 fwy to Roxford exit, go north on Olive View Drive past hospital, turn left into Park entrance road 200 yards east of Bledsoe before Fenton, park at trailhead at northwest terminus of entry road. ☼



SANTA SUSANA MOUNTAIN PARK ASSOCIATION

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If the expiration date on the label is marked in blue, payment of your membership dues is due this month.

If the expiration date is marked in green, payment of your dues will be due next month.

Many thanks to the folks at the Topanga Canyon/Roscoe Office Depot, for the donation of printing services, i.e., the duplication of our newsletter. We very much appreciate it!

May 15, 2000, 7:30 PM Program Meeting: Rockpointe Recreation Center.

June 5, 2000, 7:30 PM Board of Director's Meeting: Chatsworth Park Visitor's Center.

No Program Meetings June - August 2000. All SSMPA members are welcome to both General Membership Program Meetings and Board of Director's Meetings.

Stage Coach Trail Hikes

Sundays, May 28 and June 25, 2000. Interpretative hike into history in our Santa Susana Pass State Historic Park. Meet at 9:00 am for the 4-mile (700 ft. gain) loop up the Stage Coach Trail. Bring water and a snack in a back or hip pack. Lugsole shoes or sturdy, closed shoes, and a hat are advised. From Topanga Canyon Boulevard, turn west on Devonshire and drive into Chatsworth Park South to the second parking lot by the Recreation Building. Call Lee Baum (818) 341-1850 for more information. Stagecoach Trail hikes are offered by the Santa Susana Mountain Task Force (SSMTF) of the Sierra Club and publicized by the SSMPA and the Foundation for the Preservation of the Santa Susana Mountains (FPSSM). ☼

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