

QWR Policy Report No. 2026-1

***A Policy Review of Recreation, Public Access, Adaptive Management,
and the Implementation of the California Coastal Act and Federal
Coastal Zone Management Act***



***Prepared for
California Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Commission, the
California Coastal Commission, California State Parks, NOAA, local
governments, and other interested stakeholders.***



**Prepared by
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AUTHOR'S NOTE



**Don Amador – Mouth of Redwood Creek
Redwood National Park**

This report reflects my personal research and professional observations accumulated over a lifetime of exploring and working on California's public lands. It is intended to encourage thoughtful discussion regarding the continued implementation of the California Coastal Act and the Federal Coastal Zone Management Act. While informed by decades of experience in recreation management and public policy, the opinions and recommendations expressed herein are my own and should not be interpreted as representing the official positions of any agency, organization, or commission with which I have been associated.

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Executive Summary

A Policy Review of Recreation, Public Access, Adaptive Management, and Implementation of the California Coastal Act and Federal Coastal Zone Management Act

California's 1,100-mile coastline is one of the state's greatest public treasures. For nearly fifty years, the California Coastal Act and the Federal Coastal Zone Management Act (CZMA) have guided the protection and management of this remarkable resource through a balanced public policy that recognizes environmental stewardship, public access, recreation, coordinated planning, and responsible resource management as complementary objectives.

California's Coastal Management Program has achieved significant accomplishments during that period. Coastal habitats have been protected and restored, public access has expanded, scientific understanding has improved, and numerous federal, state, Tribal, and local agencies have worked cooperatively to conserve one of the nation's most diverse coastal environments. These achievements deserve recognition and continued support.

At the same time, implementation of the Coastal Act has occurred within an evolving scientific, legal, and social landscape. Among the most significant long-term changes has been the gradual reduction of opportunities for motorized beach and dune recreation. Throughout much of the twentieth century, off-highway vehicle recreation was one of many accepted recreational activities occurring on California's coast alongside camping, surfing, fishing, horseback riding, wildlife observation, boating, beachcombing, and hiking. Today, Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area remains the only state-managed coastal beach where this historic recreational opportunity continues as a principal public use.

This report does not argue that every historical riding area should be reopened, nor does it suggest that environmental protection should be compromised. Rather, it asks a broader public policy question:

Has the cumulative implementation of California's Coastal Management Program remained consistent with the balanced legislative vision established by the California Coastal Act and approved under the Federal Coastal Zone Management Act?

That question is particularly timely as the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) conducts its periodic evaluation of California's federally approved Coastal Management Program.

This report examines that question through the lens of legislative history, public policy, adaptive management, judicial interpretation, and historical case studies. It seeks to encourage thoughtful discussion regarding how California can continue to protect its extraordinary coastal resources while maintaining the diversity of recreational opportunities envisioned by the Legislature.

Principal Findings

California's Coastal Management Program has been highly successful in advancing conservation. Habitat restoration, shoreline planning, biological monitoring, and public access improvements have established California as a national leader in coastal resource management.

The California Coastal Act establishes multiple complementary policy objectives. Environmental protection is one of those objectives, but the Act also directs agencies to maximize public access, maximize recreational opportunities consistent with sound conservation principles, consider the social and economic needs of Californians, and encourage coordinated planning among public agencies.

Motorized coastal recreation opportunities have steadily declined over the past five decades. While each management decision reflected unique environmental and planning circumstances, the cumulative result has been a substantial reduction in one historically recognized form of coastal recreation.

Adaptive management has demonstrated that conservation and recreation are not always mutually exclusive. Case studies presented in this report—including Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area and the Bureau of Land Management's Samoa Dunes Recreation Area—illustrate how monitoring, habitat restoration, seasonal management, scientific research, visitor education, and collaborative planning can protect sensitive resources while maintaining appropriate recreational opportunities.

Recent judicial decisions reaffirm the importance of statutory authority, planning processes, and administrative transparency. Courts have emphasized that implementation of the Coastal Act must remain grounded in legislative intent, certified planning documents, and established legal procedures.

Policy Recommendations

Based upon the historical record reviewed in this report, several recommendations are offered for consideration by the California Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Commission, the California Coastal Commission, California State Parks, NOAA, local governments, and other interested stakeholders.

Reaffirm the California Coastal Act's balanced legislative vision by giving meaningful consideration to all statutory objectives, including environmental stewardship, public access, recreation, and coordinated planning.

Continue expanding the use of adaptive management wherever measurable conservation objectives can be achieved while maintaining appropriate public recreational opportunities.

Strengthen collaboration among federal, state, Tribal, and local agencies together with conservation organizations, recreation groups, scientists, and local communities.

Increase transparency through measurable performance indicators that allow policymakers and the public to evaluate long-term program effectiveness.

Periodically assess the diversity of recreational opportunities available within California's Coastal Management Program to better understand long-term trends.

Continue investing in scientific research, habitat restoration, monitoring, and innovative management approaches that support informed decision-making.

Encourage periodic program evaluations that strengthen public confidence while ensuring continued consistency with the California Coastal Act and the Federal Coastal Zone Management Act.

Purpose of This Report

This report is intended to encourage constructive dialogue rather than adversarial debate.

Reasonable people will continue to differ regarding individual management decisions. Those differences are both inevitable and healthy within a democratic society. The purpose of this report is not to resolve every disagreement, but to contribute historical context, policy analysis, and practical recommendations that may assist future discussions regarding the continued implementation of California's Coastal Management Program.

Ultimately, the long-term success of California's Coastal Management Program will be measured not only by the resources it protects, but also by its continuing ability to balance conservation, public access, recreational opportunity, and collaborative stewardship in a manner consistent with the Legislature's vision nearly fifty years ago.

Chapter One

Introduction

California's 1,100-mile coastline is one of the state's most treasured public resources. From the rugged beaches of Del Norte County to the expansive dunes of San Luis Obispo County, California's coastal landscapes provide unparalleled opportunities for recreation, conservation, education, scientific research, tourism, and economic vitality. Protecting these resources while ensuring that they remain accessible to the public has long been a central objective of both state and federal coastal policy.

The California Coastal Act of 1976 established a comprehensive framework for managing coastal resources based upon a balance of environmental protection, public access, recreation, and responsible development. Similarly, Congress enacted the Federal Coastal Zone Management Act (CZMA) to encourage states to develop comprehensive coastal management programs that integrate environmental stewardship with recreational, economic, and community values.

For nearly fifty years, California's Coastal Management Program has served as a national model in many respects. Its accomplishments in habitat conservation, shoreline planning, wetlands protection, public access acquisition, and coastal resource management have earned widespread recognition. At the same time, implementation of the program has generated continuing debate regarding how the Coastal Act's multiple policy objectives should be balanced when different public interests compete for the same coastal landscape.

Among the most enduring and sometimes controversial questions has been the role of motorized recreation within California's coastal zone.

Why This Report Was Prepared

This report was prepared to assist the California Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation (OHMVR) Commission, other decision-makers, and stakeholders in understanding the historical evolution of coastal recreation policy as it relates to off-highway vehicle (OHV) recreation. It also seeks to provide context for NOAA's current evaluation of California's federally approved Coastal Management Program.

The purpose of this report is not to advocate for unrestricted motorized recreation, nor does it seek to minimize the importance of protecting environmentally sensitive habitat, threatened species, cultural resources, or public safety. Rather, it examines whether California's implementation of its Coastal Management Program continues to reflect the balanced multiple-use philosophy embodied in both the California Coastal Act and the Federal Coastal Zone Management Act.

The report is intended to encourage thoughtful discussion regarding the long-term evolution of coastal recreation policy and whether the cumulative reduction of motorized recreation opportunities has remained consistent with the Legislature's original intent to maximize public recreational opportunities while protecting coastal resources.

Historical Context

For much of the twentieth century, motorized recreation formed an accepted component of California's coastal recreation system. Families traveled to coastal beaches and dune systems to fish, camp, explore, and recreate using four-wheel-drive vehicles, motorcycles, dune buggies, and later all-terrain vehicles. These activities often occurred alongside other recreational pursuits such as hiking, horseback riding, wildlife observation, surfing, boating, and beachcombing.

As California's understanding of coastal ecology evolved, so too did management practices. During the latter decades of the twentieth century, resource agencies increasingly employed habitat restoration, seasonal closures, visitor education, biological monitoring, law enforcement, designated riding areas, fencing, and adaptive management to reduce conflicts between recreation and sensitive natural resources.

These management approaches reflected an important principle: environmental protection and public recreation need not be mutually exclusive.

Indeed, many successful public land management programs throughout California—including numerous State Vehicular Recreation Areas, National Forests, Bureau of Land Management recreation areas, and even portions of the California coast—have demonstrated that recreation can coexist with conservation when supported by sound science, effective planning, and ongoing monitoring.

A Changing Policy Landscape

Over the past five decades, however, California has experienced a substantial reduction in legal opportunities for coastal motorized recreation.

Historic riding opportunities at locations such as Tolowa Dunes, Orick Beach, Clam Beach, portions of the Humboldt Bay dune complex including the Samoa Dunes, Black Sands Beach, and other coastal areas have gradually been eliminated or significantly reduced. Today, Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area remains California's only publicly state-managed beach where motorized recreation continues as a primary recreational use.

Each of these management decisions occurred under unique environmental, legal, and political circumstances. Consequently, this report does not argue that every decision was unwarranted or unsupported by legitimate resource concerns. Instead, it asks a broader policy question:

When viewed collectively, do these decisions reflect continued implementation of the balanced recreation and conservation policies established by the California Coastal Act and the Federal Coastal Zone Management Act, or do they represent a gradual shift toward the systematic elimination of one historically recognized form of public recreation?

That question has become increasingly relevant as NOAA undertakes its periodic evaluation of California's Coastal Management Program.

Why This Question Matters

The significance of this discussion extends beyond off-highway vehicle recreation. California's Coastal Act was intentionally written to balance numerous public interests that occasionally conflict. Environmental protection, public access, recreation, agriculture, commercial fishing, ports, energy infrastructure, visitor-serving businesses, scenic preservation, and coastal-dependent industries all compete for limited coastal resources.

The effectiveness of California's Coastal Management Program therefore depends upon maintaining public confidence that these competing interests are evaluated fairly, transparently, and consistently with legislative intent.

If one category of lawful public recreation is progressively eliminated despite successful examples of adaptive management, restoration, mitigation, and resource monitoring, important questions arise regarding how the Coastal Act's balancing provisions are being implemented. These questions are appropriate subjects for public policy discussion and periodic program evaluation.

Guiding Principles

This report is guided by several fundamental principles.

- First, California's extraordinary coastal resources deserve the highest level of environmental stewardship.
- Second, public recreation constitutes a legitimate and valuable use of public lands that contributes to Californians' quality of life, outdoor heritage, physical health, and local economies.
- Third, adaptive management should remain the preferred approach whenever resource protection objectives can be achieved without unnecessarily eliminating historic recreational opportunities.
- Fourth, effective public policy should rely upon science, monitoring, transparency, and collaboration rather than assumptions or predetermined outcomes.
- Finally, periodic evaluation of long-standing public policies is both appropriate and necessary to ensure that implementation continues to reflect legislative intent and evolving public needs.

Scope of This Report

The chapters that follow review the statutory framework established by the California Coastal Act and the Federal Coastal Zone Management Act, examine the historical evolution of coastal motorized recreation in California, summarize significant management actions affecting historic riding areas, discuss recent judicial decisions, and evaluate examples of adaptive management that have successfully balanced recreation with resource protection.

The report concludes with policy observations and recommendations intended to assist the California Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Commission, public land managers, NOAA, policymakers, and

interested stakeholders in considering how California can continue to protect its remarkable coastal resources while honoring the Coastal Act's long-standing commitment to public access, recreation, and balanced coastal management.

Chapter 2

Any meaningful evaluation of California's Coastal Management Program must begin with the legislation that created it. Public policy should not be evaluated solely by contemporary controversies or individual permit decisions, but by measuring implementation against the objectives established by the Legislature and Congress. Before asking whether California's coastal management program has changed over the past fifty years, it is first necessary to understand what the California Coastal Act and the Federal Coastal Zone Management Act (CZMA) were designed to accomplish.

This chapter reviews the legislative findings and policy framework that underpin California's coastal management system. Rather than focusing on individual disputes involving off-highway vehicle (OHV) recreation, the discussion examines the broader principles of environmental stewardship, public access, recreation, coordinated planning, and balanced resource management that form the legal foundation of California's Coastal Management Program.

The California Coastal Act: A Comprehensive Public Policy

The California Coastal Act of 1976 emerged from years of statewide debate concerning the future of California's coastline. The Legislature recognized that the coastal zone represents a unique and irreplaceable public resource requiring thoughtful long-term planning rather than piecemeal decision-making. The Act therefore established a comprehensive framework intended to conserve coastal resources while ensuring that the coast remained accessible and beneficial to present and future generations.

The Act begins with legislative findings declaring that California's coastal zone is "a distinct and valuable natural resource" and "a delicately balanced ecosystem." At the same time, the Legislature acknowledged that California's coast serves many public purposes, including recreation, economic activity, public access, scenic enjoyment, and cultural value. The statute therefore reflects an understanding that environmental protection and responsible human use must be considered together rather than as competing absolutes.

The Legislature further declared that continued planning and management should rely heavily upon local government, coordinated state oversight, public participation, and integration among the numerous agencies whose decisions affect coastal resources. These provisions demonstrate that the Coastal Act was intended to create a collaborative management system rather than one dominated by any single interest or agency.

The Act's Fundamental Goals

Perhaps the most significant expression of legislative intent appears in Section 30001.5, where the Legislature identified the "basic goals of the state for the coastal zone." These goals provide the policy framework against which implementation of the Coastal Act should be evaluated.

Among those goals are the protection and restoration of coastal resources, orderly and balanced utilization and conservation of coastal resources while considering the social and economic needs of Californians, maximizing public access to and along the coast, maximizing public recreational opportunities consistent with sound resource conservation principles, and encouraging coordinated planning and cooperation among state and local governments.

Several observations emerge from these statutory goals.

- First, the Legislature did not establish environmental protection as the Coastal Act's sole objective. Instead, it directed state agencies to pursue multiple complementary goals simultaneously.
- Second, the Legislature expressly recognized that conservation should be balanced with the social and economic needs of the people of California.
- Third, recreation and public access were not incidental considerations. They were identified as core public purposes deserving affirmative protection.

These provisions suggest that the Legislature envisioned a management program capable of accommodating diverse public uses while protecting sensitive coastal resources through thoughtful planning and management.

Recreation as an Affirmative Public Policy

One of the defining features of the Coastal Act is its treatment of recreation. Rather than merely allowing recreation where convenient, the Legislature directed that California maximize public recreational opportunities consistent with sound resource conservation principles. Similarly, Article 2 of Chapter 3 provides that maximum public access and recreational opportunities shall be provided for all people while recognizing the need to protect public safety, private property, and natural resource areas from overuse.

This language is significant because it establishes recreation as an affirmative public policy rather than a discretionary afterthought. It also demonstrates that the Legislature anticipated circumstances in which recreation and resource protection might compete. Rather than directing agencies to favor one objective categorically, the statute calls for balancing these interests through informed management.

For purposes of this report, these recreation policies provide an important benchmark against which long-term changes in California's coastal recreation opportunities may be evaluated.

Resolving Policy Conflicts

The Legislature also anticipated that conflicts would inevitably arise among the Coastal Act's various policies. Recognizing this reality, Section 30007.5 provides guidance for resolving competing objectives.

The statute acknowledges that conflicts may occur between one or more Coastal Act policies and directs that such conflicts be resolved in a manner that, on balance, is most protective of significant coastal resources. At the same time, the Legislature noted that broader planning policies may, in some circumstances, provide greater overall protection than strict application of individual resource provisions.

This language deserves careful consideration because it demonstrates that the Coastal Act does not establish rigid hierarchies among every policy objective. Instead, it contemplates thoughtful balancing supported by appropriate findings. The presence of this conflict-resolution framework suggests that agencies are expected to explain how competing statutory objectives have been weighed when making significant policy decisions.

California's Coastal Management Program

Another important provision appears in Section 30008, which declares that the California Coastal Act itself constitutes California's Coastal Zone Management Program for purposes of the Federal Coastal Zone Management Act.

This linkage is particularly important because it means NOAA's periodic evaluation is not limited to administrative performance. It also encompasses whether implementation of California's federally approved program continues to reflect the policies established by the Legislature.

Accordingly, questions concerning recreation, public access, adaptive management, and multiple-use planning are not merely state policy issues. They are relevant considerations in evaluating implementation of California's federally approved coastal management program.

The Role of Local Coastal Programs

The Coastal Act also relies heavily on Local Coastal Programs (LCPs), recognizing that local governments are often best positioned to address the unique environmental, recreational, economic, and cultural characteristics of their respective coastlines. Once certified, LCPs become a principal mechanism for implementing Coastal Act policies at the local level through coordinated planning rather than case-by-case decision-making.

This planning framework reflects another important aspect of legislative intent. California's coastal management system was designed to integrate statewide policy with local conditions while providing predictability, transparency, and public participation. The significance of certified Local Coastal Programs has also become increasingly important in recent judicial decisions concerning implementation of the Coastal Act, a topic examined later in this report.

Collaboration among Public Agencies

The Coastal Act repeatedly emphasizes coordination among public agencies. The Legislature sought to minimize duplication of authority, reduce regulatory conflicts, and encourage cooperation among agencies responsible for implementing California's coastal management program.

This collaborative philosophy is particularly relevant where multiple public agencies share responsibility for public lands that serve both recreational and conservation purposes. State Parks, the California Coastal Commission, the Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Bureau of Land Management, NOAA, county governments, and local agencies frequently possess overlapping responsibilities. Effective coastal management therefore depends upon cooperation rather than institutional conflict.

The 2021 correspondence from the California Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Commission to the California Coastal Commission reflected this same principle, noting that both Commissions share a common responsibility to provide public access and recreational opportunities while simultaneously protecting and restoring coastal resources. The letter emphasized that collaborative management at Oceano Dunes had produced a multi-use park with significant conservation accomplishments while continuing to provide unique public recreation opportunities.

Implications for This Report

The legislative history reviewed in this chapter establishes several themes that guide the remainder of this report.

The Coastal Act seeks to balance environmental stewardship with public access, recreation, and the social and economic needs of Californians. Recreation is expressly recognized as an important public policy objective. The Act anticipates conflicts among competing policies but directs that those conflicts be resolved through careful analysis and supported findings rather than categorical assumptions. It also relies upon coordinated planning, public participation, and collaboration among multiple governmental agencies.

These statutory principles provide the benchmark against which subsequent chapters examine the historical evolution of California's coastal recreation policies, including the management of motorized recreation within the coastal zone.

The question explored throughout the remainder of this report is therefore not whether coastal resources should be protected. That principle is firmly established by both the Coastal Act and decades of public policy. Rather, the question is whether the implementation of California's Coastal Management Program continues to reflect the balanced legislative vision articulated in the Coastal Act—one that protects coastal resources while also maximizing public access, recreational opportunities, coordinated planning, and multiple public benefits.

Chapter 3

The Evolution of California Coastal Recreation Policy - From Multiple-Use Management to Contemporary Coastal Resource Policy

The preceding chapters examined the legislative framework established by the California Coastal Act and the Federal Coastal Zone Management Act. Together, those statutes created a comprehensive coastal management system founded upon environmental stewardship, public access, recreation, coordinated planning, and balanced utilization of coastal resources.

Understanding those statutory objectives, however, represents only the beginning of the policy discussion.

Public policy evolves over time. Scientific understanding advances. Recreational preferences change. New environmental challenges emerge. Court decisions clarify statutory authority, and public expectations continue to develop. Consequently, evaluating California's Coastal Management Program requires more than simply reading the Coastal Act. It requires examining how the program has been implemented over nearly five decades and how those implementation decisions have collectively shaped the opportunities available to Californians today.

This chapter provides that historical context. Rather than focusing on individual controversies, it reviews the broader evolution of California's coastal recreation philosophy from the post-World War II era through the present day. The objective is not to criticize past decisions but to understand how California arrived at its current management framework and whether that evolution continues to reflect the Legislature's original vision of balanced coastal management.

California's Expanding Outdoor Recreation Era

During the decades following World War II, California experienced unprecedented growth in population, automobile ownership, and outdoor recreation.

Improved highways, affordable four-wheel-drive vehicles, lightweight motorcycles, and the emergence of specialized off-highway vehicles allowed millions of Californians to explore beaches, dunes, deserts, mountains, forests, and public lands that had previously been inaccessible to many families.

Motorized recreation became one of many accepted forms of outdoor recreation along California's coast. Beach driving, dune exploration, camping, surf fishing, boating, horseback riding, wildlife observation, and hiking frequently occurred within the same public landscapes. Although management standards varied considerably by today's expectations, these activities reflected the prevailing public philosophy that California's public lands should provide opportunities for diverse recreational experiences.

During this period, coastal management focused primarily on facilitating public use while addressing localized safety concerns, infrastructure needs, and basic resource protection. Environmental science as it exists today was still developing, and relatively little was known regarding habitat fragmentation, endangered species recovery, coastal ecosystem resilience, or cumulative recreational impacts.

The Environmental Movement and Coastal Protection

The late 1960s and early 1970s marked a profound turning point in American environmental policy. Public concern regarding pollution, habitat loss, uncontrolled development, and degradation of natural resources resulted in sweeping legislative reforms, including the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Endangered Species Act, the Federal Coastal Zone Management Act, the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), and ultimately the California Coastal Act.

California voters demonstrated overwhelming support for stronger coastal protection through Proposition 20 in 1972, creating the California Coastal Zone Conservation Commission as the precursor to today's California Coastal Commission.

These actions reflected a growing public recognition that California's coastline required comprehensive planning if its ecological, scenic, recreational, and economic values were to be preserved for future generations.

Importantly, these reforms were not intended to eliminate public recreation. Rather, they sought to manage recreation more effectively while protecting increasingly understood environmental resources.

The California Coastal Act ultimately reflected this balanced philosophy by recognizing recreation, public access, environmental protection, coordinated planning, and economic considerations as complementary components of comprehensive coastal management.

The Rise of Adaptive Management

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, land managers increasingly adopted management approaches that sought to reduce environmental impacts without unnecessarily eliminating recreational opportunities.

This period witnessed the emergence of what is now commonly described as adaptive management.

Rather than relying exclusively upon permanent closures, agencies increasingly implemented seasonal restrictions, designated riding areas, habitat restoration projects, fencing, biological monitoring, visitor education, law enforcement, volunteer stewardship programs, and cooperative planning with user organizations.

These approaches acknowledged that recreation and conservation need not always be mutually exclusive. State Parks, the Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Forest Service, county governments, conservation organizations, and recreation groups increasingly collaborated to develop management strategies tailored to local environmental conditions.

In many locations throughout California, these adaptive management strategies successfully reduced environmental impacts while preserving public recreational access.

As later chapters will demonstrate, several coastal recreation areas—including Samoa/Eureka Dunes and Oceano Dunes—provide important examples of this management philosophy.

The Growing Complexity of Coastal Management

During the past twenty-five years, coastal management has become substantially more complex. Today's resource managers address an expanding range of issues including endangered species recovery, invasive species management, shoreline erosion, air quality, water quality, cultural resource protection, environmental justice, climate adaptation, sea level rise, wildfire resilience, renewable energy development, and increasing recreational demand.

Many of these issues were either poorly understood or entirely absent when the Coastal Act was enacted in 1976. Consequently, California's Coastal Management Program has necessarily evolved in response to changing scientific knowledge and public priorities.

This evolution should be expected and, in many respects, represents one of the program's greatest strengths. At the same time, evolving management priorities raise an important policy question:

How should agencies integrate new environmental responsibilities while remaining faithful to the statutory goals established by the Legislature? That question becomes particularly relevant when considering long-established recreational uses that have historically formed part of California's coastal heritage.

A Changing Recreation Landscape

Although California has expanded many forms of coastal recreation over the past several decades, opportunities for beach and dune motorized recreation have followed a different trajectory. Historically, legal OHV recreation occurred in multiple coastal settings extending from Del Norte County to San Luis Obispo County.



OHV Recreation – Eureka/Manila Dunes (circa 1970s)

Over time, those opportunities have steadily diminished through a combination of land acquisitions, changing management priorities, regulatory decisions, environmental protections, and site-specific planning actions.

Today, Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area remains California's only publicly state managed beach where motorized recreation continues as a principal recreational activity. This observation alone does not establish that any particular decision was incorrect.

Each location involved unique environmental conditions, local planning considerations, legal requirements, and resource management challenges. Nevertheless, viewed collectively, the historical trend raises a legitimate public policy question regarding the cumulative evolution of California's coastal recreation system.

Has California's implementation of the Coastal Act maintained the balance envisioned by the Legislature, or has one historically recognized form of recreation gradually become marginalized within the broader coastal management framework?

Measuring Policy Evolution

Public policy should not be evaluated solely through isolated controversies. Instead, implementation should be assessed over time by examining patterns, trends, and measurable outcomes.

For purposes of this report, several analytical questions provide a useful framework:

- Has California continued to maximize public recreational opportunities consistent with resource conservation, as directed by the Coastal Act?
- Have adaptive management tools been fully utilized before permanent elimination of historic recreational opportunities?
- Have agencies consistently balanced recreation, conservation, public access, and social and economic considerations?
- Have management decisions relied upon science, monitoring, and measurable outcomes?
- Have certified Local Coastal Programs remained the principal vehicle for implementing changes in long-established recreational uses?

These questions do not presume particular answers. Rather, they provide an objective framework for evaluating implementation of California's Coastal Management Program.

Transition to the Historical Record

To understand how California's coastal recreation policies have evolved in practice, it is now necessary to examine specific locations where motorized recreation has historically occurred.

The following chapters present a series of case studies documenting the history, management, and policy evolution of several of California's most significant coastal OHV recreation areas, including Tolowa Dunes, the Humboldt Bay dune complex, Black Sands Beach, Samoa/Eureka Dunes, and Oceano Dunes.

These case studies do not attempt to relitigate past management decisions. Instead, they illustrate how California's coastal management philosophy has evolved over time and provide a factual basis for

evaluating whether the cumulative implementation of the Coastal Act continues to reflect its original legislative objectives.

By examining these locations chronologically and within their historical context, it becomes possible to move beyond individual controversies and consider the broader policy question that lies at the heart of this report:

- Has California's Coastal Management Program continued to balance conservation, public access, and recreation in the manner envisioned by the Legislature, or has the cumulative implementation of that program fundamentally altered the role of motorized recreation within California's coastal zone?

The chapters that follow seek to answer that question through documented history, agency records, judicial decisions, and long-term management outcomes rather than through advocacy alone.

Chapter 4

California's Coastal OHV Heritage - A Fifty-Year Historical Record

California's coastline has long represented far more than an environmental resource. For generations it has served as a place where families camped beneath the stars, anglers launched boats through the surf, photographers captured dramatic landscapes, naturalists explored fragile ecosystems, and off-highway vehicle enthusiasts experienced a unique form of outdoor recreation that existed almost nowhere else in the United States.

For much of the twentieth century, these activities were not viewed as incompatible. Public beaches and dune systems accommodated a variety of recreational uses through local management practices, seasonal traditions, and community stewardship. Motorized recreation existed alongside surfing, horseback riding, bird watching, beachcombing, hiking, hunting, fishing, and countless other outdoor pursuits.

Rather than debating individual management decisions, it traces the evolution of California's coastal OHV opportunities from the state's northernmost beaches to its southern dune systems. Collectively, these locations illustrate both the diversity of California's coastal recreation heritage and the gradual evolution of management philosophies over the past half century.

The purpose is not to suggest that every historical riding area should be reopened. Rather, it is to preserve an accurate historical record of recreational opportunities that once formed an important part of California's coastal identity.

California's Northern Coast

Tolowa Dunes - Near the Oregon border is one of California's most ecologically significant coastal landscapes.

The Tolowa Dunes encompass an extraordinary mosaic of beaches, wetlands, dune systems, coastal forests, and estuarine habitats. Today the area is widely recognized for its biodiversity and its cultural significance to the Tolowa Dee-ni' Nation.

Less widely remembered is that portions of these coastal lands historically supported public motorized recreation.

During the latter half of the twentieth century, visitors traveled the beaches using four-wheel-drive vehicles and motorcycles while also participating in fishing, camping, wildlife observation, and other traditional outdoor activities.



TOLOWA DUNES STATE PARK – KELLOGG BEACH

As scientific understanding of wetland ecology, endangered species, and sensitive habitats expanded, management priorities evolved. Recreation opportunities gradually gave way to increasing emphasis on habitat restoration and ecological protection.

Few contemporary visitors realize that these beaches once represented an important destination within California's broader coastal recreation system. Today, Tolowa Dunes illustrates both the remarkable ecological value of California's northern coast and the significant transformation of recreational management philosophies over time.

Humboldt Bay Dune Complex

Traveling south, the Humboldt Bay region contains one of the most extensive dune systems on the Pacific Coast.

For decades these dunes provided extraordinary recreational opportunities on the North Spit, South Spit, Samoa Dunes, Manila Dunes, Clam Beach, and Eureka Dunes. Those recreation activities included OHV recreation, Surf fishing, Camping, Clamming, Horseback riding, Swimming, Beach Combing, and Photography, and Bird watching.

These activities frequently occurred within the same general landscape. As conservation priorities increased, land acquisitions expanded, and management objectives evolved, opportunities for motorized recreation steadily diminished while habitat restoration became the dominant management objective.

Today, much of the Greater Eel River, Humboldt Bay, Clam Beach, and Mad River dune complex serves as an outstanding example of successful coastal conservation.

At the same time, it also illustrates how one form of historic public recreation gradually disappeared from the landscape. This observation should not be interpreted as criticism of conservation efforts. Rather, it demonstrates how California's coastal recreation portfolio has changed over time.

Black Sands Beach

Located along California's rugged Lost Coast, Black Sands Beach occupies a unique place in the history of coastal recreation. Its dramatic volcanic shoreline, steep coastal mountains, and remote character created an experience unlike any other public beach in California.



DESIGNATED OHV TRAIL – BLM SAMOA DUNES RECREATION AREA
BLM ARCATA FIELD OFFICE

For many outdoor enthusiasts, reaching Black Sands required preparation, capable vehicles, and an appreciation for rapidly changing coastal conditions.

Visitors came to camp, fish, explore tide pools, photograph wildlife, and experience one of California's most spectacular coastlines. Motorized recreation represented only one component of the broader recreational experience.

As management priorities evolved, public vehicle access became increasingly restricted. Today, Black Sands remains a treasured destination, although its recreational character has changed substantially from that experienced by earlier generations.

Its history reflects the broader statewide transition from accommodating diverse recreational uses toward increasingly specialized management objectives.

Oceano Dunes

No discussion of California's coastal recreation history would be complete without Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area.



DON AMADOR - OHMVR COMMISSION TOUR
OCEANO DUNES SVRA

For more than six decades, Oceano has represented the last remaining location in California where beach driving, dune riding, camping, surfing, fishing, wildlife viewing, and family recreation continue to coexist within a single state-managed recreation area.

Unlike many earlier coastal riding areas, Oceano has not remained static.

The park has evolved through continuous adaptation.

- Habitat Conservation Plans.
- Dust mitigation.
- Seasonal closures.
- Species monitoring.
- Sensitive habitat fencing.
- Biological surveys.
- Visitor education.
- Law enforcement.
- Scientific research.
- Adaptive management.

Millions of dollars have been invested in conservation programs designed specifically to protect sensitive coastal resources while maintaining recreational access.

The result has been one of the most intensively managed recreation areas within California's State Park System. This history is significant because it demonstrates an alternative approach to coastal management.

Rather than relying exclusively upon permanent closure, State Parks has repeatedly sought to address environmental concerns through ongoing monitoring, mitigation, restoration, and adaptive management. Whether those efforts have been fully successful remains the subject of continuing public discussion.

However, they provide one of California's most important case studies demonstrating that recreation and conservation can be managed together rather than viewed as mutually exclusive objectives.

Looking at the Historical Record

Viewed individually, each of these locations tells a unique story shaped by local environmental conditions, public values, and management decisions. Viewed collectively, however, a broader pattern becomes apparent.

Over approximately fifty years, California's inventory of publicly accessible coastal motorized recreation opportunities has steadily declined.

The reasons vary from location to location.

- Some involve habitat restoration.
- Others reflect land acquisitions.
- Some resulted from changing scientific understanding.
- Others from evolving public policy priorities or legal decisions.

This report does not argue that every management decision should have produced a different outcome. Rather, it observes that the cumulative result has been a significant reduction in one historically recognized form of coastal recreation.

That observation leads naturally to the next question. Were alternative management approaches available?

Could adaptive management have preserved additional recreational opportunities while achieving comparable conservation objectives?

The following chapter examines that question through several detailed case studies demonstrating how science, monitoring, collaboration, and adaptive management have successfully balanced environmental stewardship with continued public recreation.

Chapter 5

Adaptive Management - Balancing Recreation and Conservation through Science, Monitoring, and Collaboration

One of the recurring themes throughout California's coastal management history has been the perceived tension between environmental protection and public recreation. Too often these objectives have been presented as mutually exclusive choices, creating the impression that protecting sensitive coastal resources necessarily requires eliminating long-established recreational uses. Experience across California suggests a more nuanced reality.

Over the past four decades, land managers have increasingly adopted adaptive management strategies that seek to protect natural resources while maintaining appropriate public access and recreational opportunities. These approaches rely on continuous monitoring, scientific research, habitat restoration, education, engineering, and collaborative decision-making rather than assuming that permanent closures represent the only effective management tool.

Adaptive management recognizes that natural systems are dynamic. Scientific understanding evolves, environmental conditions change, and management practices should likewise evolve as new information becomes available.

Rather than asking whether recreation should occur, adaptive management asks a different question:

How can recreation be managed (including OHV) in a manner that achieves measurable conservation objectives while preserving appropriate public access?

That philosophy closely aligns with the balanced approach reflected in both the California Coastal Act and the Federal Coastal Zone Management Act.

Defining Adaptive Management

Adaptive management is often described as "learning by doing."

Instead of relying exclusively upon predictions, managers implement carefully designed management actions, monitor results, evaluate outcomes, and modify future actions based upon measurable scientific evidence. This approach differs fundamentally from static management systems.

Rather than assuming complete knowledge at the outset, adaptive management accepts uncertainty and incorporates continuous learning into long-term resource stewardship.

Typical adaptive management tools include:

- Biological monitoring
- Seasonal closures
- Habitat restoration
- Protective fencing
- Visitor education
- Law enforcement
- Recreation zoning
- Engineering improvements
- Species recovery programs
- Air quality monitoring
- Water quality monitoring
- Visitor capacity management
- Public involvement
- Periodic scientific review

These tools have become standard components of public land management throughout California.



PROTECTED ENCLOSURE WITHIN THE OHV AREA – BLM SAMOA DUNES RECREATION AREA
BLM ARCATA FIELD OFFICE

Adaptive Management in California's Public Lands

Adaptive management has been successfully applied across numerous public land systems.

The U.S. Forest Service employs adaptive management in balancing recreation with watershed protection, wildlife habitat, fuels reduction, and post-fire recovery.

The Bureau of Land Management routinely adjusts recreation management plans based upon monitoring data, habitat conditions, and changing public use patterns.

California State Parks similarly incorporates adaptive management into numerous State Vehicular Recreation Areas through habitat restoration, trail design, seasonal restrictions, species monitoring, and public education.

These examples demonstrate that adaptive management is neither experimental nor unusual. It has become a widely accepted framework for managing complex public landscapes where multiple legitimate public interests must coexist.

Case Study: Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area

Perhaps no recreation area in California better illustrates adaptive management than Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area.

For more than half a century, the park has evolved through an extensive series of management actions intended to protect sensitive environmental resources while continuing to provide public recreation.

Those actions have included:

- Habitat Conservation Planning
- Biodiversity Management Planning
- Dust mitigation programs
- Seasonal nesting closures
- Symbolic fencing
- Habitat restoration
- Extensive biological monitoring
- Air quality monitoring
- Resource agency consultation
- Public Works Planning
- Visitor education
- Law enforcement
- Recreation management
- Scientific review

These efforts have required significant financial investment and ongoing collaboration among California State Parks, the California Coastal Commission, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, local air quality agencies, federal wildlife agencies, academic researchers, and numerous stakeholder organizations.

The California Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Commission recognized these collaborative efforts in its March 10, 2021 correspondence to the California Coastal Commission, noting that Oceano Dunes had developed into a "multi-use, multi-benefit" recreation area supported by substantial natural resource conservation programs and significant investments in habitat protection, species recovery, and dust mitigation. The Commission argued that the park demonstrated how recreational access and environmental stewardship could be pursued together through continued adaptive management rather than categorical elimination of one historic recreational use.

Whether every management objective has been fully achieved remains a matter of continuing public discussion and scientific evaluation. Nevertheless, Oceano Dunes demonstrates that agencies have repeatedly attempted to address environmental concerns through refinement of management practices rather than relying solely upon permanent closure.

Adaptive Management at Samoa/ Eureka Dunes

The experience at Samoa/Eureka Dunes provides another important illustration of adaptive management. Unlike traditional management approaches that often relied upon broad restrictions, the Samoa/Eureka Dunes program incorporated ongoing scientific monitoring, species protection, carefully defined management actions, and periodic evaluation of results.

This collaborative approach demonstrated that recreation management can evolve as scientific understanding improves and that measurable conservation outcomes may be achieved without assuming that recreation and environmental protection are inherently incompatible. The significance of the Samoa/Eureka Dunes experience extends beyond the specific location.

It illustrates an important management principle applicable throughout California's public lands: Management should remain responsive to measurable outcomes rather than predetermined assumptions.

Collaboration as a Management Tool

Another defining characteristic of successful adaptive management is collaboration. The California Coastal Act repeatedly emphasizes coordinated planning among state agencies, local governments, and the public. Likewise, successful adaptive management programs typically involve resource agencies, scientists, recreation organizations, conservation groups, local governments, Tribal representatives, and affected communities working together to develop practical solutions.

Collaboration does not eliminate disagreement. Instead, it creates opportunities to replace conflict with shared problem-solving supported by scientific information and transparent decision-making.

Many of California's most successful conservation achievements—including habitat restoration, trail design and designation efforts, invasive species control, watershed improvement, and post-fire recovery—have resulted from collaborative partnerships rather than unilateral regulatory action.

Lessons for California's Coastal Management Program

Several important lessons emerge from California's experience with adaptive management.

- First, environmental protection and recreation need not always be viewed as competing objectives.
- Second, science-based monitoring allows management strategies to evolve as new information becomes available.
- Third, collaboration among agencies and stakeholders often produces more durable and publicly supported outcomes than adversarial decision-making.
- Fourth, adaptive management provides agencies with flexibility to respond to changing environmental conditions without prematurely foreclosing future management options.

Finally, adaptive management is fully consistent with the California Coastal Act's emphasis on balancing conservation, public access, recreation, coordinated planning, and informed decision-making.

Chapter 6

Judicial Interpretation and Administrative Authority - What the Courts Tell Us about Implementing the Coastal Act

Public policy is established by legislatures, implemented by administrative agencies, and interpreted by the courts.

The California Coastal Act represents the Legislature's policy choices concerning the protection, management, and use of California's coastline. The California Coastal Commission serves as the primary agency responsible for implementing those policies, while local governments administer certified Local Coastal Programs (LCPs) throughout much of the coastal zone. Federal oversight of California's Coastal Management Program is exercised through the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) pursuant to the Federal Coastal Zone Management Act (CZMA).

As implementation questions arise, courts play a limited but important role. Rather than determining what coastal policy should be, courts interpret statutory language, define the scope of agency authority, ensure that agencies follow required procedures, and review whether administrative decisions are supported by law and substantial evidence.

Understanding these judicial principles is essential when evaluating the evolution of California's Coastal Management Program.

Legislative Policy versus Administrative Discretion

One of the recurring themes throughout Coastal Act litigation is the distinction between legislative intent and administrative implementation.

The Legislature established multiple policy objectives within the Coastal Act, including protection of coastal resources, maximization of public access, maximization of recreational opportunities, orderly planning, and coordinated management among state and local agencies. Those objectives are sometimes complementary and sometimes require balancing when they appear to compete.

Administrative agencies possess discretion in implementing those statutory policies, but that discretion is not unlimited. Agency decisions must remain grounded in statutory authority, supported by substantial evidence, consistent with applicable planning documents, and implemented through procedures established by law. This principle has guided decades of judicial review involving the Coastal Act.

The Importance of Local Coastal Programs

The Coastal Act established Local Coastal Programs as the primary planning mechanism for implementing statewide coastal policy at the local level. Once certified by the California Coastal Commission, an LCP becomes the governing land-use document for that jurisdiction and serves as the principal basis for coastal development decisions, subject to the provisions of the Coastal Act.

California courts have repeatedly recognized the significance of certified Local Coastal Programs in implementing legislative policy. This planning framework promotes predictability, public participation, and long-range planning rather than relying exclusively upon ad hoc permit decisions.

The role of certified LCPs has become particularly significant in disputes involving long-established recreational uses, where questions often arise regarding whether management changes should occur through comprehensive planning processes or through individual permitting decisions.

The Oceano Dunes Litigation

Perhaps no recent litigation better illustrates the complexity of Coastal Act implementation than the legal proceedings involving Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area.

For decades, Oceano Dunes operated under multiple Coastal Commission approvals, certified planning documents, Coastal Development Permits, Local Coastal Program provisions, Habitat Conservation Plans, and numerous resource management requirements.

The California Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Commission emphasized this history in its March 10, 2021 letter to the California Coastal Commission, noting that State Parks had relied upon more than five decades of Coastal Commission approvals while investing substantial resources in habitat conservation, species protection, dust mitigation, and adaptive management. The Commission argued that these longstanding approvals formed an important part of the legal and planning framework governing the park.

Subsequent litigation raised fundamental questions concerning the respective authorities of the California Coastal Commission, California State Parks, and local governments under the Coastal Act.

Although the specific legal issues extended beyond motorized recreation itself, the litigation highlighted broader principles concerning administrative authority, permit conditions, Local Coastal Programs, and the procedures required for significant changes affecting established public uses.

Judicial Review and Agency Authority

An important lesson emerging from Coastal Act litigation is that agencies must exercise only those powers granted by statute. The Coastal Act carefully defines the Commission's authority, establishes permit procedures, provides opportunities for public participation, and identifies the respective responsibilities of state agencies and local governments.

Similarly, the Act recognizes that decisions involving competing Coastal Act policies should be supported by findings explaining how those competing policies have been balanced. These procedural requirements are not merely technical. They provide transparency, accountability, and predictability for applicants, public agencies, local governments, and members of the public.

The Relationship between State and Federal Law

The California Coastal Act also serves as California's federally approved Coastal Management Program under the Coastal Zone Management Act. Accordingly, implementation of the Coastal Act carries significance beyond California state law.

Under the CZMA, NOAA periodically evaluates whether approved state coastal management programs continue to be implemented effectively and consistently with federal requirements. The federal review process does not substitute NOAA's policy preferences for those of California.

Instead, it evaluates whether California continues to administer its federally approved program in accordance with the statutory framework established by the Coastal Act and the Coastal Zone Management Act.

This distinction is particularly important. The purpose of NOAA's oversight is not to revisit individual permit disputes but to assess the effectiveness, consistency, transparency, and overall implementation of California's Coastal Management Program.

Implications for Recreation Policy

The judicial decisions discussed in this chapter do not answer every policy question raised in this report. They do not determine whether motorized recreation should occur at a particular location. Nor do they establish environmental policy independent of the Legislature.

Instead, they clarify that implementation of the Coastal Act must remain grounded in statutory authority, established planning processes, and the balancing framework established by the Legislature.

For recreation advocates and conservation organizations alike, this principle provides an important measure of certainty. Regardless of one's policy preferences, decisions affecting long-established public uses should occur through legally authorized processes supported by evidence, public participation, and transparent findings.

Looking Beyond Individual Cases

Individual lawsuits often attract significant public attention. Yet no single case fully defines California's Coastal Management Program. Meaningful policy evaluation requires examining long-term implementation patterns rather than focusing exclusively on individual controversies.

The cumulative history presented in previous chapters, together with the legal principles discussed here, provides the framework for evaluating broader questions concerning California's implementation of its Coastal Management Program.

Those broader questions are particularly relevant to NOAA's periodic program evaluation because they concern not simply individual decisions but the overall administration of California's federally approved coastal management system.

Chapter 7

Program Evaluation - Has California's Coastal Management Program Maintained the Legislature's Vision?

The preceding chapters examined the legislative foundation of the California Coastal Act, the historical evolution of coastal recreation policy, the role of adaptive management, and the legal framework established through judicial interpretation.



CLOSED AREA AT OCEANO DUNES SVRA – SOUTH GATE

Taken together, these discussions reveal a complex picture. California has achieved remarkable success in protecting many of the nation's most valuable coastal ecosystems. Sensitive habitats have been restored, public awareness of coastal conservation has expanded, scientific understanding has improved, and numerous public agencies have worked collaboratively to preserve resources of statewide and national importance.

These accomplishments deserve recognition. At the same time, the historical record also demonstrates that California's coastal recreation system has changed substantially during the nearly fifty years since enactment of the Coastal Act.

The purpose of this chapter is not to revisit individual management decisions. Rather, it is to evaluate whether the cumulative implementation of California's Coastal Management Program continues to reflect the balanced legislative vision established by the Coastal Act and approved under the Federal Coastal Zone Management Act.

Evaluating the Coastal Act's Fundamental Goals

The California Coastal Act established several complementary policy objectives.

Among them are:

- Protection and restoration of coastal resources.
- Orderly and balanced utilization of coastal resources.
- Consideration of the social and economic needs of Californians.
- Maximization of public access.
- Maximization of public recreational opportunities consistent with sound conservation principles.
- Coordinated planning among public agencies.
- Long-term stewardship of California's coastal resources.

The Legislature deliberately chose not to identify a single overriding objective. Instead, it created a framework requiring multiple public interests to be considered together.

Accordingly, evaluating California's Coastal Management Program requires examining each of these statutory goals rather than focusing exclusively upon any one objective.

Environmental Stewardship

By many measures, California's Coastal Management Program has achieved significant conservation successes.

Over the past five decades, substantial coastal habitat has been protected, restoration projects have expanded, scientific monitoring has become increasingly sophisticated, and public agencies have developed stronger partnerships with universities, nonprofit organizations, Tribal governments, and local communities.

The integration of biological monitoring, habitat restoration, adaptive management, and ecosystem-based planning reflects an evolving scientific understanding that was only beginning to emerge when the Coastal Act was enacted.

These accomplishments represent important public benefits and demonstrate California's continuing commitment to environmental stewardship.

Public Access

The Coastal Act also places significant emphasis on maximizing public access. California has invested heavily in coastal trails, public beaches, visitor facilities, interpretive programs, shoreline acquisitions, and recreational infrastructure that have expanded opportunities for millions of visitors each year.

These investments have substantially advanced one of the Legislature's principal objectives. At the same time, public access is multidimensional.

Different recreational activities require different forms of access. Walking access, boating access, equestrian access, surfing access, fishing access, wildlife viewing, and motorized recreation each depend upon distinct physical settings and management strategies.

Evaluating access therefore requires considering not only the quantity of public access but also the diversity of recreational experiences available to Californians.

Recreational Diversity

Perhaps the most significant policy question identified throughout this report concerns recreational diversity. Historically, California's coastline supported a broad spectrum of recreational activities.



DIVERSE MULTI-USE RECREATION ACTIVITIES – BLM SAMOA DUNES RECREATION AREA

Many of those opportunities continue to flourish today. Others have expanded considerably. However, motorized beach and dune recreation, however, has followed a markedly different trajectory.

As documented in earlier chapters, opportunities for this historically recognized recreational activity have steadily diminished over time until only one major publicly managed coastal riding area remains.

This observation does not imply that any individual closure or restriction lacked justification. Each location reflected unique environmental conditions and management considerations. Nevertheless, the cumulative historical trend raises an important policy question.

Does the continuing reduction of one historically recognized recreational opportunity remain consistent with the Legislature's direction to maximize public recreational opportunities consistent with sound resource conservation principles?

That question deserves thoughtful consideration because it concerns implementation of the Coastal Act as a whole rather than any single management decision.

The Role of Adaptive Management

Chapter Five demonstrated that adaptive management has become a widely accepted component of modern public land stewardship.

Rather than viewing recreation and conservation as inherently incompatible, adaptive management seeks measurable environmental improvements while preserving appropriate public use wherever feasible. California has successfully applied adaptive management across forests, deserts, watersheds, wildlife areas, and State Vehicular Recreation Areas.

The Oceano Dunes experience illustrates both the opportunities and challenges associated with this approach. Extensive monitoring, habitat restoration, seasonal closures, scientific research, and collaborative planning have demonstrated that resource protection and recreation can often be managed simultaneously, even when difficult environmental issues remain.

Whether adaptive management has been fully utilized throughout California's coastal management system is a question worthy of continued evaluation.

Collaboration and Public Confidence

Another recurring theme throughout this report is collaboration. The Coastal Act repeatedly emphasizes coordinated planning, public participation, and cooperation among governmental agencies.

Public confidence in resource management is strengthened when decisions are transparent, science-based, and developed through meaningful public engagement.

Likewise, conservation outcomes often prove more durable when recreation organizations, environmental groups, scientists, Tribal governments, local communities, and public agencies participate in developing management solutions.

California possesses numerous examples where collaborative approaches have produced lasting conservation achievements while maintaining important recreational opportunities.

These experiences suggest that collaboration should remain a central element of future coastal management.

Overall Assessment

Based upon the historical record presented in this report, several observations emerge. California has established one of the nation's most comprehensive coastal management systems.

The State has achieved substantial conservation accomplishments while significantly expanding many forms of public coastal access. Scientific understanding and resource management practices have advanced considerably since enactment of the Coastal Act.

At the same time, the cumulative implementation of California's Coastal Management Program has resulted in a significant reduction of coastal motorized recreation opportunities that historically formed part of the state's diverse recreation portfolio.

It proffers the question whether this long-term trend fully reflects the Legislature's direction to maximize recreational opportunities while balancing environmental stewardship remains an appropriate subject for continued public discussion and periodic program evaluation?

That discussion should not be viewed as a conflict between recreation and conservation. Rather, it represents an opportunity to reaffirm the Legislature's broader vision of balanced coastal management—one that protects California's extraordinary natural resources while providing meaningful opportunities for all Californians to experience, enjoy, and responsibly steward their public coast.

The findings presented throughout this report suggest several opportunities to strengthen California's Coastal Management Program while remaining faithful to the Coastal Act's original legislative vision.

The final chapter presents recommendations for consideration by the California Coastal Commission, the California Department of Parks and Recreation, the California Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Commission.

Chapter 8

A Roadmap for the Next Fifty Years of California Coastal Management - Building Upon a Legacy of Conservation, Public Access, and Balanced Resource Stewardship

Nearly fifty years have passed since the California Legislature enacted the California Coastal Act. Few public policy initiatives have had a more profound influence on the protection of California's natural heritage.

The Coastal Act has preserved remarkable coastal landscapes, expanded public access, strengthened scientific stewardship, encouraged coordinated planning, and established one of the nation's most comprehensive coastal management programs.

Those accomplishments deserve recognition. At the same time, nearly five decades of implementation provide an opportunity for thoughtful reflection.

Recommendation One

Reaffirm the Coastal Act's Balanced Legislative Vision. The California Coastal Act established multiple complementary objectives, including environmental protection, public access, recreation, coordinated planning, and balanced utilization of coastal resources.

Future implementation should continue recognizing these objectives as mutually important public policies rather than treating any single objective as controlling in every circumstance.

Periodic policy reviews should evaluate how effectively all statutory objectives are being advanced over time.

Recommendation Two

Expand the Use of Adaptive Management. Adaptive management has become one of the most successful resource management tools available to public agencies.

Rather than relying upon fixed assumptions, adaptive management allows agencies to respond to measurable environmental conditions through monitoring, restoration, seasonal management, visitor education, engineering solutions, and scientific evaluation.

Whenever practical, adaptive management should be considered before irreversible management decisions affecting long-established public recreational opportunities.

This recommendation does not presume that adaptive management will always permit continued recreation.

Rather, it encourages agencies to fully evaluate adaptive management alternatives before concluding that permanent elimination represents the only available solution.

Recommendation Three

Strengthen Collaborative Decision-Making - California has repeatedly demonstrated that durable conservation outcomes often emerge from collaboration rather than conflict.

Future coastal planning should continue engaging:

- Local governments
- Tribal governments
- California State Parks
- California Coastal Commission
- NOAA
- Federal resource agencies
- Academic institutions
- Conservation organizations
- Recreation organizations
- Local communities

- Coastal businesses
- Interested members of the public

Broad participation strengthens public confidence and often produces more creative, durable management solutions.

Recommendation Four

Increase Transparency Through Measurable Performance Indicators - Public confidence is strengthened when management decisions are evaluated using transparent and objective criteria.

Whenever feasible, agencies should publicly report measurable performance indicators, including:

- Habitat restoration progress
- Species recovery trends
- Visitor compliance
- Public access improvements
- Recreational opportunities maintained
- Visitor safety
- Air quality
- Water quality
- Scientific monitoring results
- Economic impacts to surrounding communities

Regular reporting allows agencies and the public to evaluate management effectiveness over time.

Recommendation Five

Periodically Evaluate Recreational Diversity - California has successfully expanded many forms of coastal recreation while simultaneously reducing opportunities for others.

Periodic statewide assessments should evaluate not only the amount of public access available but also the diversity of recreational experiences supported within California's Coastal Management Program.

Such evaluations would provide policymakers with a broader understanding of how implementation decisions collectively influence public recreation over time.

Recommendation Six

Continue Investing in Science - The Coastal Act anticipated informed decision-making supported by sound planning.

Scientific knowledge has advanced dramatically since 1976.

Future management should continue investing in:

- Long-term ecological monitoring
- Climate adaptation research
- Habitat restoration science
- Visitor use studies
- Recreation impact assessments
- Emerging conservation technologies

Reliable scientific information provides the strongest foundation for balanced public policy.

Recommendation Seven

Strengthen Interagency Coordination - The Coastal Act and the Coastal Zone Management Act both emphasize coordination among governmental agencies.

Continued cooperation among California State Parks, the California Coastal Commission, local governments, NOAA, federal land management agencies, and other resource agencies will become increasingly important as coastal management challenges grow more complex.

Interagency collaboration should remain a defining characteristic of California's Coastal Management Program.

Recommendation Eight

Preserve California's Coastal Recreation Heritage - California's coastal recreation history represents an important component of the state's cultural heritage.

Historic photographs, oral histories, management records, maps, and public archives documenting recreational use should be preserved for future generations regardless of contemporary policy preferences.

Understanding California's recreational history enriches future planning and helps ensure that policy decisions remain informed by historical context.

Recommendation Nine

Encourage Innovation - Emerging technologies continue creating new opportunities for balancing recreation and conservation.

Examples include:

- Geographic Information Systems (GIS)
- Remote environmental monitoring
- Improved visitor education platforms
- Recreation reservation systems
- Habitat restoration technologies

- Advanced dust control methods
- Low-impact recreation design
- Data-driven management evaluation

California should remain a national leader in applying innovative tools to coastal resource management.

Recommendation Ten

Commit to Periodic Program Evaluation - One of the strengths of the Federal Coastal Zone Management Act is its emphasis on periodic program evaluation.

California should embrace these evaluations as opportunities for continuous improvement. Regular assessments encourage accountability, transparency, adaptive learning, and public confidence while ensuring that implementation remains consistent with legislative intent.

Looking Ahead

California's coastline belongs to every generation. Its remarkable beaches, estuaries, wetlands, dunes, forests, cliffs, and marine environments constitute one of the world's most extraordinary public landscapes.

Protecting these resources will remain an enduring public responsibility. Equally important is ensuring that Californians continue to experience, appreciate, and responsibly enjoy those landscapes through diverse recreational opportunities consistent with sound environmental stewardship.

The Coastal Act recognized that conservation and public enjoyment are complementary rather than competing public values.

Maintaining that balance will require continued collaboration, scientific integrity, thoughtful planning, and respect for differing perspectives.

CONCLUSION

No single agency, organization, or stakeholder possesses all the answers. The future of California's coastline will instead be shaped through cooperative public stewardship built upon mutual respect and shared commitment to preserving one of California's greatest public treasures.

This report began with a simple question: Has the implementation of California's Coastal Management Program remained consistent with the Legislature's original vision?

The historical record demonstrates that California has achieved extraordinary conservation successes while substantially expanding many forms of public coastal access. It also documents that opportunities for one historically recognized form of recreation—motorized beach and dune recreation—have steadily diminished over nearly five decades of implementation.

The Coastal Act anticipated those differing perspectives by establishing a framework requiring balance rather than absolutes. As California looks toward the next fifty years of coastal management, perhaps the most enduring lesson is this:

The long-term success of the Coastal Act will be measured not only by the resources it protects, but also by its continuing ability to bring people together in the shared stewardship of California's magnificent coast.

If future generations inherit a coastline that is both ecologically healthy and broadly accessible for diverse, responsibly managed recreational experiences, the Legislature's vision will have been well served.

Epilogue

As a native Californian, I hope future generations will have the same opportunity that I did—to discover the wonder of standing on a quiet beach at sunrise, watching winter storms roll across the Pacific, exploring coastal dunes alive with native plants and wildlife, and creating lifelong memories with family and friends on public lands that belong to all of us.

If this report encourages even a few readers to approach California's coastal future with a renewed commitment to balanced stewardship, thoughtful collaboration, and mutual respect, then it will have served its purpose.

May those who follow us inherit a coastline that is not only healthier than the one we received, but also one that continues to welcome, inspire, educate, and unite all Californians for generations yet to come.

This report is dedicated to all who have cared for California's coast before us—and to those who will someday inherit its stewardship.

-END OF REPORT-

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