

## Introduction

### CAN OUR OUTDOOR ENTHUSIASM AND NATURE COEXIST?

RON UNGER, *Environmental Program Manager, Landscape Conservation Planning Program, Habitat Conservation Planning Branch, California Department of Fish and Wildlife*

[Note: As this special edition journal is published, our State, the nation, and the whole world are gripped by the corona virus pandemic. To slow its spread and not overwhelm limited healthcare resources, voluntary and mandatory directives for staying home, social distancing, and closing parks, reserves, and other public facilities have been put in place on a scale not seen for a hundred years, the time of the 1918 influenza (flu) epidemic.

Stories are emerging of more secretive wildlife seen in some park and urban areas normally filled with people, like the reports of bobcats roaming around empty Yosemite facilities, or an adult black bear roaming the nearly empty downtown Solvang. Hopefully, the pandemic and its horrible devastation will be over very soon, and we may again visit and appreciate our parks and wilderness areas. Hopefully, too, we may gain more information on wildlife's response to fewer visitors that helps us improve our management of parks and reserves in a way that protects wildlife and their habitat while also providing for great recreation experiences.]

“Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul alike” (The Yosemite, 1912). John Muir wrote so eloquently of the importance of taking time to be in, and play in, Nature to heal and nourish our spirit and help us to balance the challenges of our everyday lives. Now more than ever, people find a need to balance their work and domestic lives with the wonders, serenity, and invigorating challenges inherent in playing in Nature. In a world increasingly dominated by computers, cyberspace, and cities, people find a need to go and enjoy the Great Outdoors.

But what is the capacity of Nature to absorb the onslaught of millions of us hiking, riding, flying, boating, and otherwise tromping around the forests, fields, mountains, valleys, streams, and rivers on the other 40,000 or more species that also live in and depend on California? An increasing body of evidence is emerging that indicates non-consumptive recreational activities like hiking and biking, which don't involve harvesting of resources, can have harmful effects on species, their habitat, and efforts to protect them. As our population continues to grow and new and popular recreation technologies develop, California's natural areas are experiencing increased and changing recreation demands, such as increased numbers of hikers, nighttime group trail biking with lights, and electronic mountain bikes in wilderness areas.

Many federal, state, and local agencies' missions include non-consumptive, outdoor recreation, since it is often believed to be consistent with wildlife conservation. It is also widely believed that those who know and observe Nature are more likely to appreciate and protect her resources. Recently, however, several sites acquired primarily for conservation

have experienced extreme recreation pressures such as the Disney-like crowds coming out to see “superblooms” of native flowers of the desert in the spring or mountain biking occurring in areas where it is illegal along with the creation of several miles of unauthorized trails. So, how can we continue to provide for and manage appropriate, legal recreation opportunities while also protecting California’s amazing and vast diversity of plants, fish, and other wildlife species and their habitats? How and where can we acquire separate lands for recreation access and for protecting habitat instead of frequently demanding too much recreation access on lands set aside for conservation of species and habitat? And, how can we facilitate various consumptive and non-consumptive recreation groups (e.g., hikers, mountain bikers, equestrians, off-highway vehicle users, hunters, anglers) and conservation groups (e.g., environmental activists, land trusts, resource agencies) to work together to advocate for acquiring and managing separate recreation and conservation lands instead of increasingly coming into conflict with one another over the use of the same lands for both purposes?

This special edition journal seeks to tackle this and related questions. In the introductory essay, “Non-consumptive Recreation & Wildlife Conservation: Coexistence through Collaboration,” Dr. Ashley D’Antonio points out the unique need and opportunity California has for addressing recreation use as a social-ecological system (SES) based on its high biodiversity and quickly increasing recreation use of protected lands. Mitrovich, Larson, Barrows, Beck, and Unger, in “Balancing Conservation and Recreation,” point to a need for recreation and conservation stakeholders to work together to ensure that sufficient areas are acquired for both uses and to help plan and manage conservation lands better to reduce adverse effects on wildlife and natural resources. They summarize some of the varied research going on in the field, on wildlife behavior and physiology, habitat degradation and fragmentation, reproduction and survival, community composition and richness, and other topics. Indirect effects like the shifts in day and night activity patterns between predators and prey lead to questions on what effects that has on wildlife interactions and possible changes that may lead to in a whole ecosystem. Two case studies cover visitor perceptions and values, and the importance of having groups with different values come together and work through their differences to build trust and facilitate better management decisions and stakeholder support.

The research paper, “Increased hiking and mountain biking are associated with declines in urban mammal activity,” by Larson, Reed, and Crooks provides findings on how some wildlife can respond rapidly to changes in the levels of human disturbance, which may help planners design targeted trail closures to reduce recreation impacts in important areas. Townsend, Hammerich, and Halbur conducted somewhat similar research to that of Larson, Reed, and Crooks and present their findings in “Wildlife occupancy and trail use before and after a park opens to the public.” Their research provides good insights into how differently various wildlife species respond to trail use by people, including strong differences in how soon and how much species may habituate to people’s presence. Baas, Dupler, Smith, and Carnes make the case in “An assessment of non-consumptive recreation effects on wildlife: current and future research, management implications, and next steps” for doing more research to help wildlife and park managers more effectively manage and respond to non-consumptive recreation impacts on wildlife species and their habitats.

Elizabeth Lucas points out deficiencies and a need to improve how recreation is sited, monitored, managed, and enforced in protected areas in her paper, “Recreation-related disturbance to wildlife in California – better planning for and management of recreation are vital to conserve wildlife in protected areas where recreation occurs.” She also provides a review

of several research papers in her paper, “A review of trail-related fragmentation, unauthorized trails, and other aspects of recreation ecology in protected areas.” Elizabeth points out the need for sufficient funding, science-based approaches to managing protected areas, and educating the public on recreation effects on wildlife, to achieve real protection of species and to retain the benefits of the protected lands. Elizabeth suggests several funding options including a compelling argument for establishing a recreation equipment excise fee or tax like those paid for over 80 years now by hunters and anglers to benefit habitat conservation. With so much use of outdoor areas now by “non-consumptive” recreation uses, and with declining popularity of hunting activities in the population at large, is it time to institute such a change for recreational users to pay their share of conserving and managing habitat?

Together, the articles in this special journal edition cover a broad array of research on recreation effects on wildlife. They provide interesting perspectives and offer a variety of solutions. Learning how to best manage non-consumptive recreation to provide great outdoor experiences while minimizing harmful effects on wildlife will continue to evolve as we learn more from research and experience. We hope that you find this special edition journal useful in your own exploration of this important and emerging field.

“Keep close to Nature’s heart... and break clear away, once in a while, and climb a mountain or spend a week in the woods. Wash your spirit clean.” –*John Muir*

## Introduction--continued

### NON-CONSUMPTIVE RECREATION AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION: COEXISTENCE THROUGH COLLABORATION

ASHLEY D'ANTONIO, PHD, *Assistant Professor in Nature-Based Recreation Management, Gene D. Knudson Forestry Chair, Department of Forest Ecosystems and Society, Oregon State University*

The most basic principle in the field of recreation ecology—an interdisciplinary field that studies the ecological impacts of recreational activities and the management of these impacts—is that if outdoor recreation is allowed in an area, impacts to that ecosystem are inevitable. It is also established that outdoor recreation has a myriad of benefits to society that range from economic growth, improved human health and well-being, community building, and increases in an individual's connection to nature. Moreover, outdoor recreation is one of the primary mechanisms by which humans interact with the natural world in contemporary society. As a result, many county, state, and federal park and protected area (PPA) managers around the United States (U.S.) are faced with mandates or missions that require conserving natural resources while also providing quality outdoor recreation experiences. Key challenges facing researchers, conservation practitioners, and PPA managers as they try to balance conservation goals with recreation access are: understanding the mechanism and the level and extent of these impacts; identifying what level of negative impact, if any, is acceptable; and deciding how to mitigate or manage these impacts.

Within recreation ecology, the impacts from recreation to ecosystem components such as soil and vegetation are relatively well studied. The negative impacts of recreation to environmental factors such as water, air quality, soundscapes, and wildlife are less well understood. Studying the relationships between non-consumptive recreation use and impacts to wildlife can be complex. Part of this complexity is because impacts to wildlife can be direct (e.g., harassment or feeding) and/or indirect (i.e., habitat modification) and at times can be hard to measure or observe (e.g., changes in stress hormone levels in response to recreation presence) as compared to soil or vegetation impacts. Additionally, impacts from non-consumptive recreation use can be interacting with, or compounded by, other ecosystem pressures. These added pressures include, but are not limited to, habitat loss due to development or changes in land use, pressures from consumptive recreation (hunting or fishing), and/or climate change. Moreover, impacts at the wildlife population or community level often require long-term studies, which are somewhat rare in recreation ecology but admittedly more common in the wildlife sciences.

Despite these challenges, there is a recent resurgence of interest in studying the impacts of non-consumptive recreation use on wildlife species. Meanwhile, there is a recognition that studies focusing only on the social or human aspects of a PPA system are insufficient to address current recreation and conservation issues, especially those related to wildlife. Many recreation ecologists, conservation scientists, and managers have begun to view outdoor recreation in PPAs as a complex social-ecological system (SES). As such, we must enhance our understanding of the interactions and intersections between both the ecological and social systems that make up our PPAs. Addressing wildlife conservation and recreation

access in PPAs requires SES-focused thinking and collaborative problem solving.

The rich social and ecological systems comprising California make this state an excellent place to begin to address recreation use through an SES framework. California is one of the most biodiverse states in the U.S. and while 47% of the state is currently protected, 97% of these protected lands are opened to human access. Non-consumptive recreation use in PPA has increased rapidly in recent years across the U.S. but especially in Western states. California State Parks saw a 10% increase in total visitation numbers from the 2015/16 to 2016/17 fiscal year and many California national parks have seen exponential growth in visitation in recent years. As the U.S population becomes increasingly suburban and urban, PPAs that provide refugia and critical habitat for wildlife face increasing pressure from land use change and suburban expansion. Within California, this trend is evident as the state's population continues to grow while land use change, extreme droughts, and development increases pressure on California's PPAs.

Currently, PPAs and open space are limited, and wildlife species and their habitat face many ecological pressures. We are on the cusp of a resurgence and upswell of research exploring non-consumptive recreation impacts on wildlife. However, to meet conservation objectives, additional research is still needed to best inform recreation management in PPAs. Conserving and protecting wildlife species while providing quality recreation experiences to society requires interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary teams of researchers, managers, practitioners, stakeholders, and the public working together towards shared goals and objectives. Because of the social and ecological complexities and uncertainties around recreation impacts to wildlife, no individual field of science or management entity will be able to address this issue on its own. As such, this special issue is timely and important as it adds to the body of literature aimed at understanding non-consumptive recreation impacts to wildlife. Additionally, this special issue serves as a starting point for cooperatively exploring the challenge of protecting wildlife while balancing non-consumptive recreation use. If we are to meet conservation goals related to wildlife and wildlife habitat, it may not be appropriate to allow recreation use in all PPAs and at all times. However, collaborative dialogues (informed by the SES framework) around wildlife conservation are essential to guide decisions related to where, when, and how non-consumptive recreation use should be permitted in our PPAs.