

MIRAGE TRAIL FACT SHEET

The California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) administers 130 Ecological Reserves statewide, totaling 212,256 acres. The primary purpose of Ecological Reserves is the protection of threatened and endangered species. The Fish and Game Code allows for some recreational uses that do not interfere with the primary purpose.

The Magnesia Spring Ecological Reserve was established by the action of the California Fish and Game Commission in 1975 to consolidate a large area of critical habitat for the endangered Peninsular bighorn sheep, *Ovis Canadensis*.

Once designated an ecological reserve, it becomes unlawful to enter upon such land except when specifically authorized by regulations adopted by the Commission. Public entry, when authorized by the Commission, shall be compatible with the primary purposes of such reserves. Public entry may be restricted on any area at the discretion of DFG to protect the wildlife, aquatic life or habitat. Management of the reserve, consistent with regulations adopted by the Commission, is the responsibility of DFG. The primary management objective for the reserve is to protect, rehabilitate and maintain the habitat centered around a critical water source known as Magnesia Spring so that the endangered bighorn sheep population in the area can be maintained.

According to the Bighorn Institute, there are 65 (possibly 66 with a lamb observed last month) individual sheep in the herd that occupies the area. In 2011, 23 lambs were known to have been born into that herd. By late June 2011 only five lambs were known to still be alive. The causes of mortality are unknown.

A portion of the Mirage Trail (AKA Bump and Grind Trail) is located within the boundary of the Magnesia Spring Ecological Reserve. The last half mile of the Mirage Trail encroaches on an important lambing area. A lambing area is habitat required for ewes and their lambs to survive during the first few months after birth, not just where lambs are born.

Scientific literature on bighorn sheep behavior describes their reactions to human presence. It is well documented that bighorn sheep will leave an area when humans are present and can abandon sensitive areas due to human disturbance.

Estimates of human use of the Mirage Trail during July and August indicate 200 people per day or an average one person every four minutes. That estimate is higher in cooler months. This high number of people on the trail affects the management goals for the reserve, which are to rehabilitate and maintain the habitat for endangered bighorn sheep.

Human use of this last half mile of the Mirage Trail makes the habitat unsuitable for endangered bighorn sheep. It is contrary to the purpose of the land acquisition and impairs recovery of the species. It is also contrary to laws and regulations requiring that ecological reserves be managed to provide protections for threatened or endangered native wildlife. This is the reason for the closure of the trail.

The entire reserve, including the Mirage Trail, has been closed from June to July since 1976. Signs that have been posted with the regulations for the reserve have been destroyed by vandals.

This reserve is currently managed by DFG under the Coachella Valley Multi-Species Habitat Conservation Plan. The plan covers 1.1 million acres (745,900 are reserve acres) and 27 species. The implementation agreement of the plan was signed in 2007 by more than 20 partners, including state and federal wildlife and land agencies.

The plan underwent the public process that all such plans must undergo. It includes the permanent closure of the last half mile of the Mirage Trail. It also implemented a January through September closure of the entire reserve as part of the mitigation requirements for the construction of new trails that were specifically designed to strike a balance between providing human access to trails and protecting the endangered Peninsular bighorn sheep.

DFG is committed to providing public access to state lands whenever possible and supported the construction of these new trails (that skirt the edge of the reserve) to accommodate human recreational use. The system of new trails underwent a review by public process and the opening of the new trails and the lower portion of the Mirage Trail was approved by the Commission. In June 2011, DFG issued a press release announcing the new trails and permanent closure of the last half mile of the Mirage Trail:
<http://cdfgnews.wordpress.com/?s=Mirage+trail>.

Several gates were constructed at the point of closure of the last half mile of the Mirage Trail since 2006. The gates and signage have been vandalized and the closure ignored. In June 2011, a sturdier gate was installed. In addition, staff and volunteers have been doing public outreach to educate the public since January 2011. DFG has installed security cameras. The security cameras have since been stolen or vandalized. Vandalism has increased since the upper gate was installed. Vandals have moved boulders into the road to block the weekly visit by DFG personnel to repair vandalized signs.