

Conflicts in the Wildland-Urban Interface

Management Decisions and the "Dred" Hills¹

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Abstract: An area of public land called the Red Hills was being so abused by the public that it was often called the "Dred" Hills. Some staff work had been accomplished to protect sensitive areas within the 7,200-acre site, but depreciative behavior continued. Primary destructive activities included off-road vehicle use and indiscriminate shooting and dumping. This paper discusses a bold approach to management. Instead of talking about the problem, decisions were made and actions quickly taken. The results were dramatic, and public reaction was remarkably supportive. Methods of combining public support, media coverage, law enforcement, planning, and engineering produced a winning combination that allows for compatible uses of the Red Hills and protects natural resources.

The Red Hills Recreation Area is located just 30 miles east of major metropolitan areas in the central valley of California. The area was an easy drive for over 2 million Californians. The traditional use of the Red Hills was for target shooting, off-highway vehicle use, camping, wildflower viewing and photography, gold panning, hunting, and equestrian activities. The mix of multiple uses, however, had declined to two primary uses by 1988. The two uses were shooting and off-highway vehicle recreation. Other users of the area were simply fearful for their safety.

On February 6, 1991, the public lands in the Red Hills area of Tuolumne County were closed to the recreational activities of target shooting and off-road vehicle use through the issuance of an Emergency Closure Order. This action was taken to provide immediate protection of persons, property, and the public lands and resources.

The closure order halted the unsafe and indiscriminate use of firearms occurring throughout the Red Hills. Closing the area to off-road vehicles protected the unique soils of the region, and prevented further impacts to five species of sensitive plants found in the area.

The first actions taken were issuing press releases and holding media photo sessions on site. These were immediately followed by placing large closure signs.

The law enforcement patrol function was greatly expanded following the closure and included odd-hour shifts and placement of rangers at previous high-use staging areas. The rangers' role was as much public information and relations as it was enforcement.

To insure that the shooting and off-road vehicle use was halted, an engineering effort was immediately started. Engineering included bulldozer and backhoe work to prevent off-roaders from entering the previous trails. Dump sites associated with the shooting of targets, which ranged from paper targets to washers and dryers, were cleaned up with a use of the backhoe, trucks, semitrailer-size dumpsters, and inmate crews.

The closure order and the associated on-the-ground effort, halted more than 30 years of abuse. The management lessons that were learned were many. To the delight of the Bureau, the reaction to the closure was supported much more than expected.

User groups such as equestrian and wildflower enthusiasts quickly supplanted the depreciative activities of shooting and off-highway vehicle users. Hunters were supportive when they learned that they could still hunt but that only target shooting was banned. Shortly after the closure, Quail Unlimited indicated a willingness to fund projects in the area and have since established two water guzzlers at the Red Hills.

Those who were responsible for the depreciative uses of the Red Hills were unwilling to return to the area once they encountered a ranger, berms, fences and other barriers to their use. In November 1991, in cooperation with the Air National Guard, over 600 bales of straw were airlifted to the scarred hills. Inmate crews spread the straw, and the hills are once again becoming vegetated.

Management can solve complicated land use issues. Combined planning, enforcement, signing, media coverage, and engineering can restore sensitive areas and stop depreciative behavior.

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