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FIELDREPORT

Pacific Region • Fall-Winter 2024



Supporting Solutions for Yosemite's Overcrowding Issues

By Mark Rose

Visitors eager to experience peace and tranquility alongside Yosemite's iconic granite cliffs, towering waterfalls, and ancient giant sequoias are far too often met with hours long traffic jams, overfilled parking lots and packed trails and facilities. Yosemite's overcrowding issues have been well documented for decades. The various related impacts not only diminish visitor's enjoyment of Yosemite, they also significantly harm the park's beloved natural and cultural resources. From cars parked in sensitive areas and vehicle collisions with wildlife, to vandalism of historic structures, off-trail hiking, littering, and the use of roadside pullouts as makeshift restrooms, these individual actions when added up over course of years cause significant damage to the park.

Despite these challenges, over the last decade local counties have greenlit the creation of hundreds of new hotel rooms and thousands of short-term housing rentals just outside Yosemite's boundaries, with numerous additional lodging developments waiting to be built. The number of visitors and vehicles that the area around Yosemite can now accommodate has simply

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Three New Wildlife Crossings Coming to Mojave

By Neal Desai

For decades, there has been the idea of constructing a high-speed rail line between Las Vegas and Southern California, cutting through the California desert and, for a time, having a preferred route through Mojave National Preserve. NPCA's interest in this project had always been its potential impacts to desert national parks and public lands. The project changed ownership over those years, but never advanced, mainly due to financing challenges.

When the project was sold in 2018 to Brightline, the current owners, NPCA reached out to the company to understand what type of project was being proposed. A lot of time had passed since the project was last reviewed. Was the company proposing a route through a national park? What was the design like? And so on.

It turned out that this time around, the project would be routed generally within the right-of-way corridor for Interstate Highway 15, the major highway connecting Las Vegas and Los Angeles, which would avoid creating development in the preserve. However, it became quickly clear that the project's twin concrete barrier walls across nearly 150 miles of the California desert



★ WILDLIFE CROSSING LOCATIONS

would eliminate the ability for wildlife to move and migrate.

This would have devastating impacts to the world-class wildlife resources found in our California desert, such as bighorn sheep and mountain lions that travel long distances in search of food, water, habitat and mates. These impacts are further magnified considering the increasing effects of climate change and drought that will drive wildlife to travel farther to sustain populations. Additionally, desert wildlife such as the bighorn sheep are of tremendous cultural significance to the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians and many other desert Native peoples.

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Pacific Regional Office Staff

Ron Sundergill

SR. REGIONAL DIRECTOR

Neal Desai

SENIOR PROGRAM DIRECTOR

Julie Hogan

SR. DIRECTOR OF
FOUNDATION RELATIONS

Megan Conn

FOUNDATION RELATIONS MANAGER

Alana Weinroth

REGIONAL DIRECTOR OF DEVELOPMENT

Jarrod Fasching

MAJOR GIFTS OFFICER, WEST

Kati Schmidt

COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR

Caitlyn Burford

COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER

Alexandra Utts

SR. COORDINATOR

Los Angeles Field Office

711 W. College Street
Suite #M68
Los Angeles, CA 90012
213.482.0642

Dennis Arguelles

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA DIRECTOR

Sally Garcia

OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT MANAGER

California Desert Field Office

61325 29 Palms Highway • Suite D
Joshua Tree, CA 92252
760.600.0038

Lucas Basulto & Chance Wilcox

PROGRAM MANAGERS

Sierra Nevada Field Office

Sacramento, CA
559.385.6148

Mark Rose

SIERRA NEVADA AND CLEAN AIR
PROGRAM MANAGER

NPCA Membership Services Team

800.628.7275 • npca@npca.org

npca.org

MESSAGE FROM THE SENIOR REGIONAL DIRECTOR

By Ron Sundergill

This, dear readers of the Pacific Field Report, will be the last column that I will write. I will be retiring in early 2025.

It has been a great privilege to lead the Pacific Region team for 19 years. My greatest reward was mentoring my staff as they grew into their roles as organizers and strategists. And those staff members produced great results, which you have read about in previous Field Reports.

I have been excited that some of my staff moved into positions working for the National Parks Conservation Association at the national level. One such person is David Lamfrom, who was once a field representative in the California Desert region. He is now the vice president for regional programs. Another is Laura Navar, who began as a Los Angeles office field representative, and now serves as a senior program manager at the national level.

Speaking of Los Angeles, that was an office that opened on my watch, and we have been graced with the presence of Dennis Arguelles. Under his direction, we quickly established a strong presence. We established the first formal program in NPCA to engage under-represented young adults in park advocacy campaigns. That program, now called the Young Leaders Council, is managed by the highly talented Sally Garcia.



We have a relatively new team in the California Desert office, co-led by Luke Basulto and Chance Wilcox. They are both very prepared for the challenges to come, including the continued campaign to stop Cadiz, Inc. from mining water from the Mojave Desert.

Our veteran manager in the Sierra Nevada office, Mark Rose, has been a godsend for our efforts to protect Yosemite, Sequoia and Kings Canyon national parks.

His excellent work in the fight to curtail air pollution has been impressive.

I have benefited greatly from the work of Alexandra Utts, the senior administrative coordinator for the region. Without her the “wheels would be falling off” the Pacific Region train, if you will!

As I make my exit, I am pleased that Neal Desai, who has served the region in various capacities, will be the acting regional director. Neal has won numerous campaigns to protect our parks and to create new parks, including the restoration of Drakes Estero at Pt. Reyes National Seashore, where a polluting oyster production facility was removed.

NPCA’s Pacific Region will continue to do great things because it has great staff. Thanks for the opportunity to serve you in our common endeavor to protect our iconic national parks.

Above: Ron Sundergill



Above: Yosemite Falls ©Petr Podrouzek | Dreamstime

Supporting Solutions for Yosemite's Overcrowding Issues

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exceeded the carrying capacity of the park. Allowing for continued unfettered access or paving over sensitive ecosystems to allow for more vehicles in Yosemite are not viable solutions to ensure the park is protected for the future.

Thankfully, this fall Yosemite's leadership advanced a draft plan to require a reservation to enter the park in a private vehicle during the busiest times of the day from late spring to early fall. This proposal improves upon a series of four separate pilot reservation systems that were successfully employed in Yosemite since 2020. We believe Yosemite's peak hours reservation system is the best



option available to finally solve the overcrowding issues that have long plagued the park.

Having closely tracked the issue and advocated for common sense solutions to address overcrowding in the park for years now, NPCA staff recently lead efforts to support the park's proposal — speaking up at public meetings, drafting comments, building a broad coalition of allies, and collecting over 3,500 letters from NPCA's and our members and supporters. We're optimistic that, thanks in part to NPCA's efforts, the National Park Service will listen to the overwhelming majority of park lovers and quickly finalize Yosemite's proposed plan for a permanent seasonal reservation system by the end of 2024.

Left: Crowds in Yosemite without a reservation system in 2023. ©Alicia Acevedo

Fa'asamoa: The National Park of American Samoa

By Dennis Arguelles

The indigenous people of American Samoa have a saying: Fa'asamoa. This refers to the "Samoan Way" and the customs and traditions of Polynesia's oldest culture that continue to thrive today. This includes a communal land ownership system where title is held by "aiga", or extended family groups and which does not permit sale to foreigners and has kept the land largely under local control — a system under which perhaps America's most unique national park was established.

American Samoa was annexed by the U.S. in the early 1900s and remains an unincorporated territory. This means its indigenous inhabitants are U.S. nationals, but not citizens. They can travel to and work anywhere in the U.S. but cannot vote in federal elections. They elect a non-voting representative to Congress, but the U.S. Government, through the Department of the Interior, effectively administers the territory. However, through their own constitution and local government, American Samoans have protected and preserved their traditional values and largely kept their lands, customs and culture intact.



The National Park of American Samoa is the only American national park south of the equator. It protects a rare island ecosystem and tropical rainforest that's home to numerous threatened and endangered wildlife, including birds, bats, turtles and crabs — some found nowhere else in the world. It contains among of the most pristine and abundant coral reefs in the Pacific, as well as numerous archeological sites related to ancient Samoan culture.

But arguably the most unique characteristic of the park is how it was created on lands leased from local families. Established in 1988, the National Park Service would eventually execute leases with aiga, or extended family groups who hold ownership of the land, on the main island of Tutuila, and later on the outer islands of Ofu and Ta'u. Thanks to the park, local treasures like fruit bats, coconut

crabs and sea turtles continue to thrive, and visitors have an opportunity to observe an ecology and culture that has changed little over the centuries.

The leasing of lands to the Park Service is by no means a perfect arrangement, with locals sharing divergent opinions on its benefits to the local communities. For now, it reinforces the communal land ownership system that has existed for centuries, keeping valuable lands in the hands of Indigenous people and contributing to the preservation of traditional Samoan culture.

Above: Traditional Samoa culture continues to thrive, in part, to the communal land ownership system in the territory. Photo courtesy of NPS.

Left: Rich coral reefs exist just off the shore the island of Ofu, in the National Park of American Samoa. ©NPS



PACIFIC REGIONAL OFFICE STAFF
LOS ANGELES FIELD OFFICE
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Three New Wildlife Crossings Coming to Mojave

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To mitigate the significant impacts the project would propose to wildlife, scientists at the National Park Service and California Department of Fish and Wildlife determined that three wildlife overpasses, along the northern boundary of Mojave National Preserve, would be necessary. The three wildlife crossings would span the proposed high-speed rail project and the existing I-15 highway.

In response to findings of the wildlife experts,

NPCA launched an advocacy campaign and led a coalition to demand these wildlife overpasses be constructed. For two years, we struggled to get the commitment from the project's permitting agency, the Federal Railroad Administration, which refused to require that the project design include the overpasses.

NPCA and our partners didn't give up, knowing the stakes were so high. In 2023, we found an opportunity to insert language into state legislation that requires Caltrans, the state of California's transportation

department, to construct the overpasses. The legislation was signed into law, and following that, the California Transportation Commission authorized \$99 million toward the effort.

The high-speed rail project expects to break ground in early 2025, and the state expects to start work on the wildlife overpasses next year as well. This issue highlights the importance of ongoing advocacy needed to protect our majestic California desert ecosystem, and its wildlife and national parks.

NPCA Travel Collection 2025

We are excited to share with you **NPCA's 2025 Travel Collection** — a thoughtfully curated lineup of exceptional travel experiences that provide exclusive access to some of America's most remarkable national parks. Each trip is designed to deepen your connection to the parks, with expert-led excursions, intimate group sizes, and behind-the-scenes experiences that highlight NPCA's conservation efforts.



The National Parks of Hawaii
April 19-27, 2025, with trip extension
April 27-29, 2025

Yosemite Hiking Adventure
June 18-23, 2025

Bears, Whales and Glaciers - Kenai Fjords and Lake Clark National Parks
July 12-19, 2025, with trip extension
July 19-20, 2025

Above: Bryce Canyon National Park, UT ©iStock


Exploring Alaska's Coastal Wilderness Cruise
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Ancient Forests of the Olympic Peninsula
September 17-23, 2025

Utah's Mighty Five and Beyond
October 4-12, 2025

On the Road to Freedom: Understanding Civil Rights Through Our National Parks and Heritage Areas
November 12-17, 2025

For more information, visit www.npca.org/trips or contact NPCA's Educational Travel Program at 1.800.628.7275 or travel@npca.org.

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