

Beach Driving at Cape Hatteras



Five Facts to know about Off Road Vehicle Use, Wildlife, and Cape Hatteras National Seashore

1. Only 12 miles of the 67 miles of Cape Hatteras National Seashore are closed as a result of the consent decree. Additional areas are closed to vehicles because they are not safe to drive on, or are on areas such as lifeguard beaches or in front of the villages. Even with these closures, 24 miles of Cape Hatteras National Seashore remain open to vehicles.¹

2. The consent decree is based on sound science. The seasonal closures to protect rare wildlife like shorebirds and sea turtles are based on the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's Atlantic Coast Piping Plover Recovery Plan and the "moderate protection recommendations" contained in peer-reviewed reports prepared by scientists working for the US Geological Survey, Department of the Interior at the request of the National Park Service.

3. The consent decree is already seeing results. The number of birds nesting on Cape Hatteras National Seashore started showing preliminary signs of recovery less than a month after additional sections of the beach were closed under the consent decree. According to the National Park Service, the number of piping plovers on the beach increased from six pairs in 2007 to at least eight pairs, the highest number of piping plovers on the Seashore since 1998. American oystercatchers on the beach increased from 22 pairs in 2007 to 31 pairs so far this season.

4. Dare County, Hyde County and the Cape Hatteras Access Preservation Alliance (an ORV coalition), parties which are now supportive of legislation to undo the consent decree, helped negotiate the terms of the consent decree, even assuring a federal court that they participated in the process in good faith.

5. It is too early to assess the economic effects, if any, of the additional restrictions on beach driving. Previous surveys have found some visitors to the Seashore may visit less often if beach driving is restricted while others may visit more often if beach driving is restricted. It may also be difficult to assess effects this year in light of current economic conditions and the price of gasoline which will have major impacts on travel. However, according to a local online newspaper, the usually busy Memorial Day weekend "was, well, like any other holiday weekend on Hatteras and Ocracoke" despite the "unprecedented beach closures."² A rental agency on Hatteras Island reports that the "occupancy rate for June shows an increase of 15% over last year's June."

The bottom line:

Conservation groups simply want the Park Service to follow the law and do its job by implementing a plan to manage beach driving while protecting the natural resources of the region. Cape Hatteras is the only national seashore in the country without such a plan. We are continuing to work with the Park Service to develop a balanced, long-term management plan that will continue to allow access to the seashore by vehicle, while ensuring the health of our wildlife. **The families that have enjoyed the Seashore for generations – both human and wildlife – deserve no less.**

*Prepared by the
National Audubon Society
Defenders of Wildlife
Southern Environmental Law Center
June 2008*

¹ All figures from the National Park Service's June access report

² www.islandfreepress.com.