

NCC Quarterly

Understanding Human Perceptions, Values and Judgments



The Recreation Use and Human Valuation Study on the Nature Reserve of Orange County offers a unique opportunity to examine the impacts of open spaces on human beings. The multi-year project, funded by the Natural Communities Coalition, aims to determine use levels, types, intensities, and spatial distributions of visitors and to monitor these patterns over time. The long-term value in studying this information is its usefulness to informing park planning and management efforts relative to facilitating recreational opportunities without compromising conservation goals

Field work conducted by the research team in 2017 and 2018 resulted in a breadth of findings which establish a greater understanding of the Nature Reserve user. Data, such as park visitor demographics, personal motivations and satisfaction measures are valuable indicators to gauge who and why people recreate on the Reserve and the satisfaction derived from those experiences. Several noteworthy themes from the study include:

- 1 Visitor Demographics** – It is clear the user data from most open space and wilderness park areas reflects a non-representative sample of the County's population, with the majority of users being white and highly educated. The message to the landowners and land managers is to assess and minimize barriers, such as lack of information or lack of transportation, and work closely with community partners to improve county-wide access to Orange County's Nature Reserve.
- 2 Visitor Motivations** – Survey findings reveal visitors to the Reserve are highly motivated by nature and exercise. The opportunity to attain both of these experiences simultaneously seems to be of significant importance to the vast majority of Reserve visitors. The belief among many frequent and habitual wilderness parks and open space users is exercise and nature immersion result in good health and psychological well-being. A takeaway from this discovery suggests open spaces and wilderness parks are uniquely positioned to improve health outcomes through physical activity and nature immersion.
- 3 Recreational Impacts on Habitat** – Research findings revealed visitor use does overlap with some sensitive areas of wildlife habitat. However, analysis of the overlap between recreationists and sensitive wildlife habitat revealed the spatial behavior of visitors to the Reserve did not overlap to a great extent with the Coastal Sage Scrub habitat or occupied/unoccupied locations of the California gnatcatcher and cactus wren. Yet, a key finding of this study was that more recreation activity occurred around unoccupied locations for these birds species in comparison to areas where the birds were actually found when surveyed. Therefore, these results imply outdoor recreationists may not be a current significant threat to these species, and managers should focus more on preventing habitat loss and fragmentation. In addition, land managers may benefit extensively from utilizing habitat data and location data for the two species when planning new trail development, as to avoid building new trails or buildings near locations where these species are found.

The Natural Communities Coalition staff and Board of Directors recognizes and credits the multi-academic research team who prepared the Recreation Use and Human Valuation Study on the Nature Reserve of Orange County. The team includes Dr. Christopher Monz, Utah State University; Dr. Ashley D'Antonio, Oregon State University; Dr. Abigail Sisneros-Kidd, University of Wyoming; and Noah Creany, PhD student at Utah State University.

Covid-19 Impacts on the Reserve

The impacts of coronavirus have been felt throughout the Nature Reserve of Orange County.

Governor Newsom's stay-at-home order coupled the closure of recreation and fitness centers throughout Orange County resulted in a surge of daily use at wilderness parks and open spaces. Despite restrooms and parking lots being closed at many sites, people came out in masses to get their hiking, mountain biking and nature immersion on.

In Irvine's Southern Preserve, popular trail systems were re-routed to allow for one-way directional usage and thus maintain 6-foot or greater social distancing. The Boomer Meadow and Quail Hill Loop Trails became the City's most popular recreation and fitness destinations. Limited access trails covering Irvine's most sensitive habitats however remain closed through the pandemic.

On any given day at wilderness parks in April and May, you would see families hiking together, parents and children mountain biking, and baby strollers pushed through eroded dirt pathways. The takeaway from these sights is the realization that many of these people were experiencing recreation and nature in the open space for the first time - and were loving it! The good news is it is likely a large percentage of these people will return for ongoing future experiences.

Despite the significant rise in the number of inexperienced users on trail systems and their unintended breaches of trail etiquette, people seemed to get along and respect each other. Wilderness has an amazing way of transforming egos and me-first attitudes into a mutual appreciation of and reverence for one another, even in a pandemic.



What's New at NCC

Darin Loughrey was recently hired to serve as NCC's new Outreach and Engagement Coordinator. Darin comes to NCC after a 30-year career as park and recreation administrator, which included working stints for the Cities of Tustin, Newport Beach and Irvine. Most recently, Darin, oversaw Irvine's Open Space Preserve and the programs and services offered through its community parks.



Darin brings a people-centric skill set to the new position and a lifelong passion for outdoor and nature inspired experiences. While residing on the border edge of Aliso-Wood Canyon Wilderness Park for the past 25 years, Darin recognizes open space as a tremendous quality of life and lifestyle enriching feature.

Over the next few months, Darin indicated he will be connecting with landowners, partners, stakeholders and individuals out on the Reserve. He stated, "I firmly believe in the mantra, we work better by working together. Through NCC, I need to be our region's champion for NCCP/HCP and look to add value to the investment each landowner, partner and stakeholder have in the Reserve."

To reach Darin, send him email at dloughrey@occonservation.org or call/text him at (949) 337-6496.

Native Plant of the Quarter

Have you ever wondered how some plants get their common name?

Palmer's grappling-hook is the type of plant which comes to mind. When I think of a grappling hook, I envision Batman tossing a rope and climbing up the side of a building or seeing a fisherman pull in a crab pot on Deadliest Catch. The grappling hook, at least in my mind, is a tool that if not used correctly, can cause some serious damage.



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After googling Palmer's grappling-hook, I discovered this dramatically named plant was actually a rare and endangered annual herb native to the coastal sage brush community. Its scientific name is *Harpagonella Palmeri* and it grows to a diminutive height of about 12 inches. Its small white flowers bloom between February and April and several species of animals and birds feast on the nutlets produced by the plant.

Palmer's grappling-hook got its name from Botanist Edward Palmer (1829-1911) who led an expedition in 1891 exploring the flora and fauna of California and particularly Death Valley. My guess is *Harpagonella Palmeri* left a lasting impression on the botanist's legs and socks and thus acquired its unique name.

California Mountain Lion Petition for Threatened or Endangered Status

The California Fish and Game Commission, at its April 15-16 meeting, accepted for consideration a petition to list an evolutionary significant unit (ESU) of mountain lions in southern and central coastal California as threatened or endangered under the California Endangered Species Act.

What this means is the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) is now completing a 12-month status review of mountain lions within the proposed evolutionary significant unit. At the end of the review, CDFW will make its recommendation to the California Fish and Game Commission. While a formal decision awaits, the California Mountain Lions in southern and coastal California will remain protected.

