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Subject: Fw: Finding a good speed limit at Padre National Seashore
Date: 07/29/2010 10:32 AM

FYI

Sent from my BlackBerry Wireless Handheld
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----- Original Message -----

From: Duncan Morrow
Sent: 07/29/2010 10:28 AM EDT
To: David Barna
Subject: Finding a good speed limit at Padre National Seashore
<http://www.caller.com/news/2010/jul/28/finding-a-good-speed-limit-at-padre-national/>

Corpus Christi (TX) Caller-Times
Thursday, July 29, 2010

Finding a good speed limit at Padre National Seashore

By

PADRE ISLAND NATIONAL SEASHORE — Nobody wants to see an endangered or protected sea turtle crushed by a truck tire any more than we would want a precious child killed by a motorist on a neighborhood street.

But the fact is that over a period of decades the number of turtles accidentally run over on Padre Island National Seashore — where the highest concentration of turtles in Texas come to nest — doesn't come close to the number of pedestrians killed or injured in traffic mishaps in the Coastal Bend.

And yet, the speed limit on virtually all neighborhood streets is 30-35 mph, while the posted speed limit on the National Seashore is 15 mph during turtle nesting season.

Since the park was founded about 40 years ago, seashore officials have documented two turtle deaths from vehicles. Neither of those were the endangered Kemp's ridley. And information surrounding those incidents is sketchy. We're not sure whether these crushed turtles were injured and stranded before they were run over.

If your argument is that we have school zones to protect our children, then consider that the Padre Island National Seashore school zone is 60 miles long.

Anglers and others argue that this is an unreasonable and unnecessary precaution that significantly infringes on the park's public enjoyment mission and could lead to further public access restrictions as sea turtle numbers increase.

The National Park Service adopted the 15 mph measure last summer. But because the new rule threatens to substantially disrupt traditional public use, park officials have agreed to conduct a \$75,000 Beach Vehicle Environmental Assessment to reexamine (or rather reaffirm) its initial decision and the consequences thereof, while soliciting public comments on the issue.

Ultimately I doubt this process will have much effect on the existing rule, but it does have the potential to further restrict driving habits on about 60 miles of our National Seashore.

And without good reason, many park users believe.

“What are we trying to fix?” asked Texas Land Commissioner Jerry Patterson, who has authority over nonfederal Texas beaches. “This is a solution in search of a problem.”

Patterson said he plans to submit his opinions as a concerned Texas resident regarding the necessity of the rule. He also will write letters denouncing the plan to the U.S. Department of the Interior, the National Park Service and to Joe Escoto, superintendent of Padre Island National Seashore.

Patterson said he considers this a beach access issue. He also plans to speak with Texas legislators to get Austin and possibly Washington DC involved. We might need the additional muscle to defeat this proposal. Corpus Christi City Councilman Kevin Kieschnick, who visited Washington as part of a city hall group voicing concerns to the feds over this, also has been working within Texas Congressional circles to quash what he believes is a threat to tourism in the Coastal Bend.

“It just doesn’t make any sense,” Kieschnick said about the 15 mph speed limit. “It’s cut down on the number of trips I make to PINS during nesting season. Multiply that by the number of folks not coming from Austin and San Antonio and you have a negative economic impact. And it’s not necessary.”

Kieschnick, along with a group of mostly surf anglers called Citizens for Access and Conservation (CAC), argue that anglers are the front-line conservators of the National Seashore and also provide extra surveillance against illegal activity along more remote stretches of the park.

“The fewer eyes and ears down there the more likely that illicit activity will go undetected,” Kieschnick said.

Park officials acknowledge that few turtles, other wildlife and people were harmed when the speed limit was 25. They suggest the rule change would guard against potential future conflicts between a growing user base and a successful sea turtle program that seeks to reestablish the National Seashore as a secondary nesting site for the rare Kemp’s ridley.

During the spring and summer of 2006, 12,143 Kemp’s nest were counted in Mexico. In 2009, as many as 20,000 Kemp’s ridley nests were found during a single nesting season on beaches throughout their nesting range, but mostly in Mexico. This represents a remarkable recovery and between 6,666 and 8,000 nesting females. At the current

population growth, biologists say the Kemp's ridley could be removed from the endangered species list in the next five to 10 years, when they reach 10,000 nesting females.

But consider this. If park officials are willing to reduce the speed limit by 40 percent at the current level of nesting turtles and beach drivers, what will they propose to do when the population of nesting ridleys doubles on PINS?

To provide some perspective, a record 117 Kemp's nest were found on the National Seashore in 2009. And again there is no documentation of a Kemp's ridley crushed on PINS during that record breaking season or at any other time.

During a meeting last year involving park officials, biologists and concerned beach users, a U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service biologist said it would be possible to eliminate every Kemp's ridley on PINS and not jeopardize the survival of the species. Again, I mention this to provide much needed perspective.

Nobody is suggesting we drive carelessly where endangered turtles tread. But the practice of driving 25 mph could hardly be labeled careless. If driving 25 were careless, reckless or irresponsible, surely PINS officials could have provided convincing support in the form of negative consequences. They have shown me nothing that remotely resembles hard or convincing evidence that this change is warranted. The park has offered four alternatives for public comment in its Environmental Assessment document. Alternative One would be to resort back to the 25 mph speed limit from mile marker 2.5 to the Mansfield Jetty (about a 60 mile stretch of mostly 4-wheel drive beach). Surprising to some, the reasonable membership of CAC does not favor this option as written. The group would like to see a year-round 25 mph limit on the 60-mile stretch, but with a mandatory 15 mph slowdown enforced within 100 feet of people on the beach, campsites, parked vehicles and turtles. This specific option was not included in the list of alternatives provided by the park for public comment. I believe the omission represents an intentional bias. And I suggest we write it in as our preferred option. Yes, that's allowed.

Alternative Two essentially calls for the status quo with an addendum. It would establish a 15 mph limit for all of PINS from April 15 to July 15 (nesting season), On July 16, the speed limit would revert to 25 on the 60-mile stretch. Included in this option would be a 100-yard invisible buffer or safety zone around people, pets, campsites, vehicles and wildlife, where the maximum speed would be 15 mph.

Alternative Three would establish a 15 mph speed limit from March 1 through Nov. 30 for the entire beach. Outside of these dates, the speed limit would be 25 for the 60-mile stretch to Mansfield.

Alternative Four would establish a 15 mph limit for the entire beach year round.

GET INVOLVED IN THE PROCESS

Submit comments online at www.parkplanning.nps.gov/pais (click on project); or by e-mail to pais_superintendent@nps.gov; or by U.S. mail

0027704

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