

THE SIGNPOST

First Quarter 2021

Wishing a Happy New 2021 to members of the Park Rangers Association of California!

Last year was filled with unusually trying times for California parks, including the pandemic and wildfires. In this newsletter, Rangers from Northern to Southern California share their experiences with both. Given, the severity of events in 2020 and recent political upheaval, PRAC President Matt Cerkel makes a case for data tracking to show the value of our work and its use in the decision-making process.

Keep reading to find out more information about the upcoming virtual conference. We hope you are all staying safe and healthy during this strange and stressful year.

Whiting Ranch Flora and Fauna Rebounds After the Silverado Fire

By Aleta Walther, CIG, ATG, CTA



Upon learning the Silverado Fire was rampaging through neighboring Limestone Canyon, Orange County Park Rangers Candi Hubert and Ed Bridges began evacuating visitors from Whiting Ranch Wilderness Park. Hubert is the supervising ranger for [Whiting Ranch Wilderness Park](#) and Bridges is the supervising ranger for the nearby [Thomas F. Riley Wilderness Park](#).



Erupting at dawn on October 26, the fire barreled across Limestone Canyon like a runaway freight train. Driven by 70 mph wind gusts, the fire steamrolled over 30 percent of Whiting Ranch's 2,500 acres of riparian habitat, including oak woodlands, grassy slopes of coastal sage scrub and chaparral. In all, the Silverado fire burned about 12,400 acres across Whiting Ranch and the [Irvine Ranch Open Space](#) before it was contained 12 days later.

Luckily there was no damage to the ranch's historic structures. In the course of fire extinction, two Orange County fire-fighters suffered life-threatening burns after becoming trapped between two spot fires. An initial assessment by San Diego Gas & Electric indicates an electric line may have sparked the fire.

Although protecting human life from the fire's fury was Ranger Hubert's priority, she couldn't help thinking about the toll the fire was going to have on Whiting's wildlife species and the habitats they depend on to survive and thrive. The public also expressed these concerns about the wildlife.



“I was pretty sad the first night of the fire,” said Hubert, “but then I remembered how quickly the park rebounded following the 2017 Santiago Fire that devastated 90 percent of Whiting’s ranchlands. In fact, there is green already popping up within the burn area and the wildlife seems to be doing well based on trail camera captures. We are seeing opossum, skunks, bobcats, mountain lion, coyotes, fox and groups of deer.”



Ranger Hubert said she identified one of Whiting’s three traveling mountain lion on the trail cameras following the fire but has seen no sign of the others.

Although the public would like to have the entire park open to walkers, hikers and mountain bikers, the burn areas are closed temporarily due to restoration efforts and BMP’s are being put in place for pre-storm preparation.

“Ongoing assessment and restoration operations are underway”, said Hubert who has managed Whiting Ranch for the last six years.

Under the Flat Hat

PRAC President Matt Cerkel



As I approach my 26th year as a Park Ranger, I have come to understand the importance of documentation and statistics. I have come to realize that park professionals are often not good at this role. Sure, we know how to write incident reports, but tracking and documenting what we do on a daily, weekly, monthly and annual basis is an area that often gets overlooked.

At some point in our careers as rangers, we go through a period of budget shortfalls and showing the value of what we do is important. A lack of data reduces the effectiveness of our arguments when it comes to preserving and even adding to park ranger staffing.

A few years ago, I took over the duty of preparing the monthly report for my agency's ranger unit. The report is sent out to senior management, the General Manager and the Board of Directors. At the time, we had a newly hired Chief Ranger, who asked to revamp the report to provide an accurate picture of what the park rangers were doing on a monthly basis. The revised report showed all the documented events and incidents that occurred along with citations issued. The report also included more details on one or two notable incidents that the rangers responded and included photos. These revised reports have allowed the rangers to provide its senior management and elected officials a much more comprehensive look at what the rangers do on a monthly basis. Here is a sample of the monthly report:

General Manager's Monthly Report August 2020 Watershed Protection

The Rangers Responding to a Variety of Calls

In early August the Rangers with the assistance of Marin County Search and Rescue conducted a search for a lost hiker on Mount Tam. The hiker was found at 1 am by a Ranger after a four hour search. Other than a minor injury, the hiker was safe. The hiker got lost after it got dark and her phone died preventing her from using the App she was using for her trail map.



Ranger Assisting at the Woodward Fire at Point Reyes

Midmonth, during the heat wave the Rangers responded to multiple medical aid call for visitors suffering from heat-related emergencies. Several of these patients were transported to the hospital

During the latter part of August the Rangers managed several Red Flag Warnings and periods of High Fire Danger, which resulted in land use restrictions and limited public access to the Watershed. They also increased fire patrols, especially after multiple lightning strikes were recorded on the Watershed during the thunderstorms. The Rangers and other Watershed Staff also assisted with firefighting efforts and evacuations at the Woodward Fire at Point Reyes.

Finally, the Watershed Deputy responded to Nicasio Reservoir for a subject armed with a gun. After a standoff the subject was arrested by Deputies and booked into the Marin County Jail.



Incidents and Events	564
Warnings	171
Visitor Assists	151
Citations	145
Dam Check	14
Medical Aid	9
Search and Rescue	8
Assist Outside Law Enforcement	8
Assist Watershed Maintenance	6
Suspicious Circumstance	6
Complaint: Illegal Bike Use	5
Misc. Law Enforcement Calls	5
Vandalism	5
Illegal Trail Work	4
Citizen Complaint: Off Leash Dogs	3
Red Flag Warning/High Fire Danger Closures	3
Citizen Complaint: Recreational Impacts	3
Parking at Capacity/Lots Closed	2
Citizen Complaint: Swimming	2
Humane/Animal Related Calls	2
Weapons Violations	2
Outreach/Interp	2
Assist Fire/EMS	2
Illegal Fire	1
Lost Property	1
Response to off Watershed Fire	1
Citizen Complaint: Bike Speed	1
Citizen Complaint: ebike	1
Found Property	1
Citations	145
Non-payment of parking fees	106
Parking After Sunset	25
No Parking in Front of Gate	3
Parking in Front of Gate	2
Parking with 6 ft. of Center	2
Bike on Trail	2
Dog off Trail	2
Swimming	1
Speeding	1
Public Nudity	1

The monthly spreadsheets that are part of the monthly reports are then compiled into the annual report. The annual report help paint the overall picture and patterns that the rangers are dealing with and provide the decision makers with a clearer insight into the ranger program and allow them to make better decisions. The annual stats for 2019 and 2020 show the impact the Coronavirus Pandemic has had in the park.

Events and Incidents	2019	2020
Total	4239	6793
Visitor assists	1437	1544
Public Contacts (warnings)	953	2684
Citations Issued	936	1428
Medical Aid	69	115
Misc. Law Enforcement Call for Service	46	94
Search and Rescue	34	66
Interpretive Activity/Public Outreach	29	5
Citizen Complaint: Illegal Bike Use	18	60
Citizen Complaint: Off Leash Dog	14	21
Citizen Complaint: ebikes	7	5
Citizen Complaint: Bike Speed	4	28
Citizen Complaint: Social Distancing/Masks	0	19
Citizen Complaint: Swimming in Domestic Water Supply Reservoir	0	16
Citizen Complaint: Recreational Impacts	0	11

Looking at the chart, what do you think would have more impact on decision makers, elected officials and senior management? Telling them that the rangers saw a dramatic increase in park use, calls for service and various contacts with park visitors or stating the same, but providing them with actual numbers? In 2020, the data allowed my agency to justify staffing our entrance station for three months, which was the first time this was done in over a decade. The numbers demonstrated a 76% reduction in nonpayment of parking fee citations issued. The documentation provided by the ranger staff, tied with public pressure has also resulted in additional ranger positions.

In my opinion the key to getting better documentation from park rangers is to make it convenient and user friendly. If it meets those two criteria it is far more likely that staff will produce documentation that is useful and accurate stats. Once the stats start to impact the decision-makers, it makes it easier to convince the rangers of the importance of proper documentation and how it can be a vital part of what we do as park rangers.

Documentation and keeping stats are a vital part of any effective park ranger program. It helps inform management and elected officials of what park rangers actually do and better illustrates the importance of our work. If your agency doesn't properly document events and incidents and analyze the data, it puts the rangers at

a considerable disadvantage when it comes to decision-making process that impacts the park. I encourage all agencies to develop a documentation system that works for their needs and for the park rangers to use it. The value of proper documentation and keeping stats cannot be overstated.

Cruzin the Duzen: The COVID Files

Patrick Boyle



Last week, while cleaning the restrooms, I dropped two full rolls of toilet paper right into the toilet. If that had happened at the start of the pandemic, I would have been shot or at least received a lashing in the public square. During the Great TP Shortage of 2020, we thought about selling toilet paper by the sheet to supplement our budget. We began to ration it as people grew desperate and stole it from the public restrooms. Locks were cut, dispensers were pulled from the walls, and rolls were stripped down to the cardboard insert as fast as we could fill them.

As surrounding park departments shut down, we stayed open. We had so many first-time users at the Duzen, it was Training Day all over again for the public. Not sure if I felt more like Denzel Washington or Ethan Hawk - probably a bit of both. We got so busy that we limited park visitation due to complaints of overcrowding. Even with limited visitation, we broke our total monthly record by 400 paid vehicles in June, 300 vehicles in July, and 350 vehicles in August. On some weekends, we turned around over one hundred additional vehicles per day.

Not having campers here at the Duzen was a surreal experience for me as a park resident. Memorial Day and Fourth of July weekends were out of an episode from the Twilight Zone. I swear I could hear Rod Sterling whispering in my ear late at

night. It felt eerie to walk through the empty park on a summer evening. The chipmunks, raccoons, and stellar jays were going through withdrawal with no junk food to consume. For the first time in 28 years of living on-site, I could BBQ, have a few beers, and even enjoy a campfire in the backyard on a holiday weekend without being interrupted by the Mistress. (This is my pet name for the Park, as she can get a bit demanding of my time.)

It took us a while to adjust to the new guidelines and get the campgrounds ready to open. We had to reduce our seasonal staff due to a county-wide hiring freeze. We were short two out of seven full-time staff members, and four out of seven seasonal staff. There is nothing like being short staffed on a regular basis, let alone in a pandemic.

After looking at our options based on park visitation, staffing, and state guidelines, we came up with a plan. We limited the number of campsites available as well as the campground occupancy to allow for the greatest number of day users without overcrowding the facilities. At 6:15 A.M. on July 10th, we opened the gate on a first-come first-served basis to park visitors, who had been waiting in line since midnight. The campground filled up within five minutes. To the most frequently asked question "Are you really full?" I wanted to reply: "No, we just put the Campground Full sign out, 'cause we knew you were coming."

While I met truly understanding and altruistic people this year, I also met those who believe the whole world revolves around them and their good time. They cannot be inconvenienced by anything as small as a virus. "Damn the virus! To hell with you and your rules! We want to have our group activity here." One person threatened to spit on me, wishing I get COVID and die. But, I must say: "So far so good," as in the joke about the guy who was heard saying that phrase as he past the 12th floor on his fall down from a skyscraper. We survived the summer, caught a small break, and are now battening down the hatches for what may come this winter.

That was the summer here at the Duzen. Winter is looking like a great time to snuggle up next to a fire and read. Parks will be here for you to enjoy when this virus is over, we hope you and yours will be too.

PRAC Conference Update

PRAC's Annual Conference will take place virtually from March 10-12 and 16-18, 2021. We plan to record most of the content, so that it remains available to anyone who wishes to view it. While we'll miss seeing you in person and reconnecting, we are looking forward to presenting this year's theme of Changing Times, Changing Parks. The conference will feature speakers, who are leading experts in parks and recreation, including Keynote Steve Shackleton, who will present ideas that will help you shape your park's future.

2021 Featured Speakers and Sessions

Planning in Parks by Steve Shackleton

Rangers of the Future by Jody Maberry

Diversity in Parks. Francis Mendoza

Autism Safety for First Responders by Beth Wyatt

Navigating COVID-19 Response at Parks by Flint Glines

CZU Fire Complex: Ranger Leadership and Response by Brad Pennington and Miguel Perez

Stay tuned for more details. Registration for the Annual PRAC Conference opens soon!

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Thanks for reading! Please [let us know](#) if you have ideas for what you would like to see in future issues of The Signpost.