



Photo courtesy of the Survival Center

The University Survival Center sponsored a two-day symposium on the fate of the Oregon dunes.

Off-road recreational vehicles damaging to dunes ecosystem

By Sheri-Lyn Scully
Of the Emerald

The Oregon Snowy Plover may be on its way to extinction because off-road vehicles are destroying its natural habitat — the dunes areas along the Oregon coast.

Culminating a two-day symposium on the fate of the Oregon dunes Wednesday, Wendal Wood, a local biologist, outlined the scenic and ecological consequences ORVs have on the ecosystems of the Oregon dunes.

Both opponents of ORVs and ORV recreation club members turned out for the University Survival Center-sponsored event.

In addition to the Snowy Plover and other shore birds, vegetation such as silver beachweed, wild orchids, and sun dew are being threatened by ORVs.

Unique plantlife and wildlife that has ecologically adapted to the dune habitat is losing a battle and needs protection, Wood

said.

"Plants and animals have as much right to inhabit the beach as anyone. If we lose any of them we lose something important."

Currently, ORVs are allowed on 50 percent of the Oregon dunes classified as "recreational." Wood views this split a compromise for ORV users and nature lovers alike. However, the problem lies in the fact that the majority of beaches behind these dunes also are open to ORVs.

Of the 42 miles of beach between Florence and Coos Bay, only two miles of beach are closed to ORVs all year and 10 miles are closed for a short summer season. Wood said the percentage of open to closed sections of beach is entirely "unequitable."

Members of the "Eugene Sand Bugs," an ORV group who attended the symposium, cited the problem of European Beach Grass spreading over the dunes as justification for continued ORV use.

"ORVs are not a means of patrolling beach grass," said Wood. "The biologist is looking towards beach preservation."

He and other members of a group, Citizens for Untreaded Beaches, have collected 1,500 signatures from all over the state to call for a hearing to propose that a far greater number of beach areas be set aside as non-recreational.

ORV enthusiasts continue to enter closed dune areas because of the ability to enter the dunes from the open beaches behind them. Minors on three-wheel vehicles also often enter closed areas inaccessible to other ORVs causing destruction to already fragile ecosystems. Violators are seldom caught or given tickets, Wood said.

The Forest Service is a culprit in this problem in that it does nothing to inform the public of the ORV misuse nor has it met many of its land management plans, Wood said.

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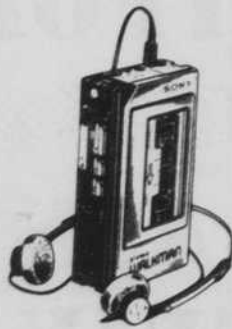
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