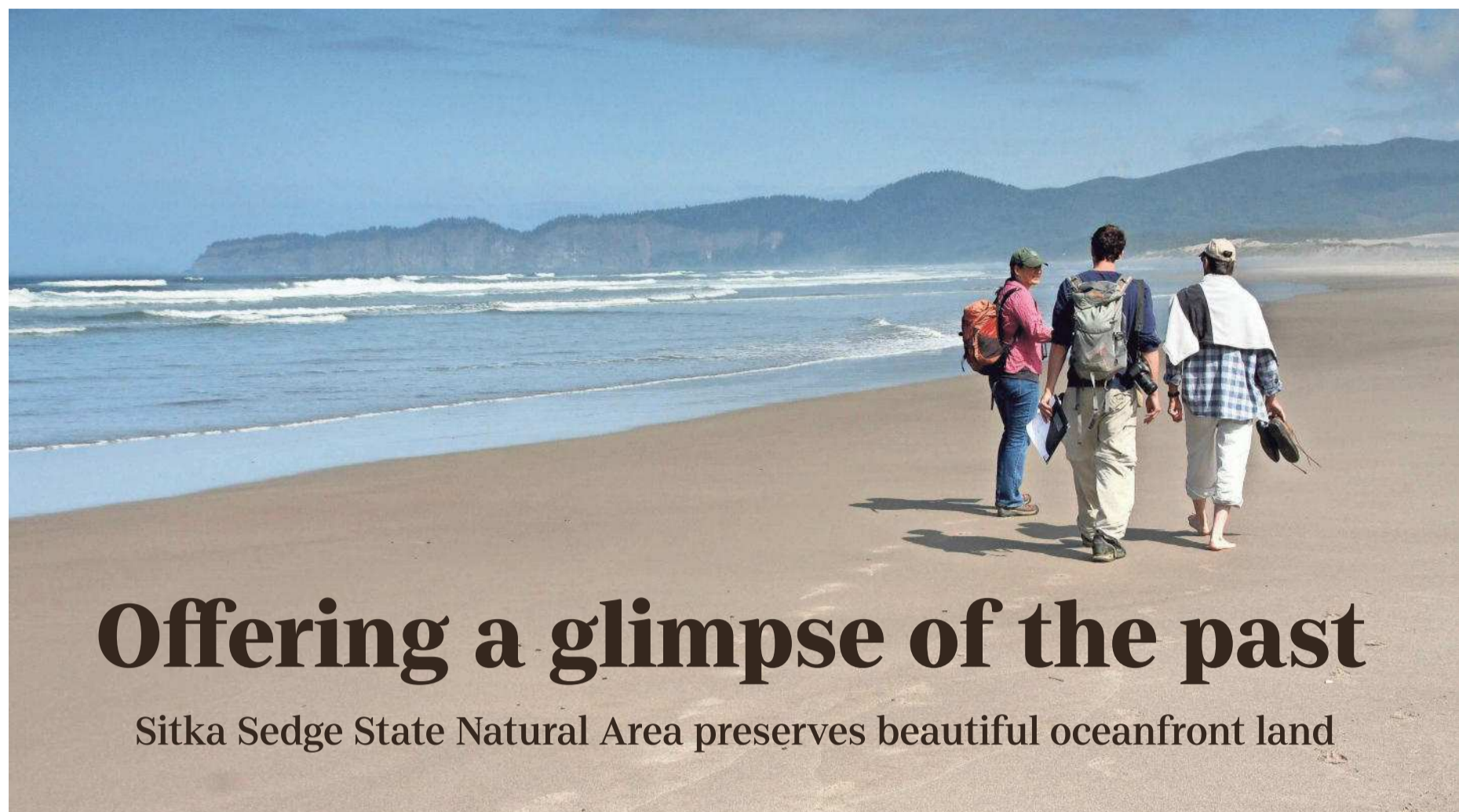


Life in the Valley



Offering a glimpse of the past

Sitka Sedge State Natural Area preserves beautiful oceanfront land

The Sitka Sedge State Natural Area recently opened to the public. PHOTO COURTESY OF OREGON PARKS AND RECREATION DEPARTMENT

Zach Urness Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

TIERRA DEL MAR — The long odyssey of a particularly beautiful patch of the Oregon Coast has finally come to an end.

Sitka Sedge State Natural Area officially opened last weekend, providing access to 375 acres of wetlands, dunes and oceanfront north of Pacific City.

The park, composed of a small parking area and 3 miles of hiking trails, is the culmination of a decades-long effort to preserve one of the most pristine sections of estuary and oceanfront in Oregon.

It hasn't always been easy.

Former owners attempted to build a destination style golf course on the land throughout the 2000s, including one proposal that would have required memberships costing \$25,000 to \$35,000 per person.

Each time, however, community members and local officials opposed the plans, opening the door for the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department to purchase the land for \$1.8 million in 2014.

Now, the landscape is open for everyone to enjoy.

"We're very excited to open the area to the public," said Kirk Barham, Sitka Sedge Park Manager. "Sitka Sedge has a unique beach ecosystem, and we want to preserve the area's natural character for visitors."

What does the new park feature?

It doesn't take long to disappear into nature at Sitka Sedge.

Just a few minutes of walking brings you into one of the largest intact estuaries on the Oregon Coast, teeming with great blue herons and bald eagles, beavers and otters, coho salmon, coyote and even black bear.

Hike a bit further and you'll reach a forest of sitka spruce that slowly morphs into dunes rising above a beach

nestled between the cliffs of Cape Lookout to the north and Haystack Rock to the south.

"Because this is one of the most pristine estuaries in Oregon — and because this sand spit didn't receive much human use — it's really in similar condition to what you would have seen pre-European settlement," said Katie Duzik, natural resources specialist for the coastal region of Oregon's state parks.

"It's a place that shows what the Oregon Coast looked like in the past, a few hundred years ago."

The parking lot is small — it fits around 28 cars — and provides access to three miles of hiking trails.

Two loops, Estuary Views and Kinnikinnik Woods, travel through the estuary and onto the forested dunes. Two beach access points branch off from the loop trails onto a very scenic beach.

Almost a golf course

The land that became Sitka Sedge was known as the Beltz Property for most of its history.

And throughout the 2000s, there were multiple attempts to turn that property into a destination golf course on par with Bandon Dunes south of Coos Bay.

One major push was led by group of Seattle-based investors — including two executives of the cell phone company Nokia Corp. — who worked toward building a "Scottish links"-style course to be called Pacific Gailes.

It was hoped the 18-hole private course, with memberships costing \$25,000 to \$35,000 per person, would feature a clubhouse, restaurant and spectacular views.

The group faced opposition from community members worried about losing water rights, damage to wildlife habitat and seeing the area co-opted by an elite group of wealthy tourists. The zoning restrictions and land use laws that came into play were another major hurdle.

The original group eventually aban-

doned its effort, but property owner Frank Bastasch continued to pursue the project. He sought to develop a "world-class environmentally friendly 18-hole golf course to be known as 'Sand Lake Golf Links,' " that would include a clubhouse, 30-room hotel and fine-dining restaurant, according to a March 27, 2007 story in the Tillamook Headlight Herald.

Those efforts slowed when the permits to develop — and a Measure 37 claim, which frees property owners from zoning restrictions — were denied by Tillamook County Commissioners 2-1 in March of 2007.

"The zoning changes made it a lot more difficult to build a golf course, and I think there was an exhaustion factor on (Bastasch's) part after trying for so long," said Bettina von Hagen, who helped negotiate the sale of the property, in a 2014 Statesman Journal story.

Oregon Parks had expressed interest in buying the property over the years. It was viewed as a "high value natural resource that would make desirable addition to the state park system" as far back as the 1960s, according to state documents, but the asking price had always been too high.

The state offered \$2.25 million for the property in 2004 while Bastasch wanted closer to \$8 million.

Once Bastasch decided he was ready to sell, it ended up being Portland conservation group Ecotrust that purchased the property for \$1.8 million (the appraised value) with the agreement they would sell it to the state for the same price.

Von Hagen said it was a tough choice for Bastasch to make in selling the property.

"It wasn't the price they expected — it was a long journey and a generous choice to sell us the property with all the public benefit that it will create as a new park," she said.

A different kind of park

The park begins with the rare combi-

Sitka Sedge State Natural Area

Size: 375 acres

Location: North of Pacific City and south of Tillamook, at Tierra Del Mar

What do to: Hiking on three miles of trail, though estuary, dunes and oceanfront beach

Directions: Put these coordinates into your iPhone or mapping system: 45.26300, -123.9539.

nation of both salt and freshwater estuaries where native plants, birds and even endangered coho salmon can be found.

"There hasn't been the same percentage of loss of estuary habitat we see in a lot of other areas," Duzik said.

"The freshwater marsh has really great songbird habitat, while in salt water marsh we have a lot of shore and sea birds utilizing the mudflats for food in their migrations."

Beyond, the landscape transitions into a forest of sitka spruce, hemlock and shorepine, before climbing over dunes and dropping onto a stretch of beach with views of Cape Lookout and Haystack Rock.

The mouth of Sand Lake rolls across a beach that feels a long way from the typical chaos of the northern Oregon Coast in August.

"The Oregon Coast isn't just a way-side pullout with a picnic table and restroom," Oregon Parks and Recreation Department spokesman Chris Havel said.

"What sets a place like this apart is that you can come in, detach, let everything settle around you and get a sense of what the coast was like 200 years ago. It's a place with a sense of stillness, where the world isn't crowding in around you."

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