



ERA OF BEACH DRIVING COULD END

Erika Bolstad/Stateline.org

Beachgoers await the sunset on one of the remaining drivable beaches north of Pacific City.

By **ERIKA BOLSTAD**
Stateline.org

PACIFIC CITY — To access the beach, Nicole Boulden eased her all-wheel drive Dodge Durango from the highway down a steep, rock-strewn access road toward the ocean. Behind her, Boulden's friend, Kari Layman, drove a Dodge Caravan very carefully down the same path.

"We take it kind of slow," Layman said. They parked in a wind-sheltered cove on the Oregon Coast where their children could play and their teenagers could sneak away. Then, they unfolded beach chairs and a sun shelter and leashed their dogs to the Durango. Only a handful of other vehicles were in view.

To the south, they could see one of the iconic haystack rock formations of the Oregon Coast. All around was the roar of the Pacific Ocean. It was a bright, sunny Friday afternoon in early June, and the weekend beckoned. Layman, a native Kansan who embraced the beach when she moved to Oregon five years ago, was at peace.

"If I'm feeling really stressed, I think: 'I need to go to the coast,'" Layman said. "The sound of the waves, it's relaxing and also refreshing. I always feel better after a day at the beach."

But accessing this sort of scene by car is increasingly difficult in states with beaches, a trend sped up by the pandemic. In California, the state's Coastal Commission recently announced plans to phase out vehicular access at its remaining drive-on beach state park, Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area, along the central coast near San Luis Obispo.

On Florida's Atlantic coast, officials in Amelia Island decided in 2020 during the pandemic to restrict vehicular access to daytime driving and residents only — and then kept it that way. And just south of where Layman and Boulden parked for the day recently, the Oregon State Parks and Recreation Commission decided to close a popular beach to driving, in part because of overcrowding.

Environmental concerns

States must balance the demands of short-term tourism that supports local economies with the desires of permanent residents, many of whom don't want cars or partygoers to interfere with their view or their enjoyment of a quiet walk along the ocean. There are also the competing needs of working fishers and shellfish harvesters, as well as the environmental stress of cars on nesting turtles, birds and other marine life.

And driving itself can damage dunes and other natural formations that protect coastal communities from storms. Many states, particularly those on the East Coast with fragile sea turtle populations, have faced legal challenges from conservation groups over

the environmental damage caused in part by beach driving.

"Certainly driving on the beach has historically been a recreational opportunity for some communities, but it also infringes on other uses," said Derek Brockbank, executive director of the Coastal States Organization, an advocacy organization that helps states with coastal management policy. "Managing public use on our coast is a real challenge. There's a lot of different dynamics at play."

A smattering of coastal states allow beach driving. In states such as New Jersey and Massachusetts, it's allowed only by permit and restricted to a few locations, mostly for fishing. Conditions vary, but many beaches — particularly on more remote coastlines — often require four-wheel-drive vehicles or advanced driving skills.

Citing environmental concerns, the California Coastal Commission this spring decided to phase out off-road vehicular access to Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area. The beach, the only coastal state park open to cars, draws thousands of all-terrain vehicles a day and an estimated 1.5 million visitors each year. The commission's decision to ban off-road driving came after a 12-hour public meeting that drew more than 200 virtual public comments. Off-road enthusiasts have filed a lawsuit challenging the changes, which are expected to be phased in over the next three years.

In Texas, the beaches along the Gulf Coast were historically used as public roadways, according to the state's General Land Office, and even today the primary way to access many beaches there is by vehicle. The state's Open Beaches Act of 1959 gives the public the free and unrestricted right to access Texas beaches.

In fact, the Texas law makes it hard for municipalities to restrict vehicular access. In the Gulf Coast community of Crystal Beach, each May an unofficial gathering known as the Jeep Go Topless event draws hundreds of thousands of people in four-wheel-drive vehicles. In 2019, more than 21,000 people signed a petition calling for Jeep Go Topless to be discontinued. This spring, the annual event resulted in more than 230 arrests, according to a local television station.

Some locals are unbothered by the Jeep invasion, saying the Go Topless event is no different from any other busy holiday weekend on the Bolivar Peninsula.

"You can camp on our beach," said David Harris, who runs a visitor bureau for the region. "That's what makes Bolivar. If we didn't have beach access, we would have no tourism down here."

In Oregon, the public also is guaranteed the free and uninterrupted use of beaches, but not drive-on access. Nonetheless, an estimated 25% of the 363-mile Oregon coastline remains open to beach driving, said Chris Havel, associate director of the Oregon

Parks and Recreation Department. Beach driving in Oregon got its first endorsement in 1913 when Gov. Oswald West, a Democrat, declared the tidelands along the coastline a state highway. His action paved the way for the 1967 Beach Bill, which maintains all of Oregon's beaches for public access.

The sands perhaps best known for unfettered beach driving, though, are the Outer Banks in North Carolina. There, off-road driving is both a way of life and a big part of marketing the barrier islands as a vacation destination. The practice allows visitors to explore far-flung places within the Cape Hatteras National Seashore and other state-managed destinations on the barrier islands, said Aaron Tuell, the public relations manager for the Outer Banks Visitors Bureau.

"The ability to move about the islands and enjoy wonderfully wide-open natural spaces is part of the Outer Banks' brand image," Tuell said in an email.

Park rangers patrol the beach every morning to stake out sea turtle nests, said David Hallac, superintendent of the National Parks of Eastern North Carolina. He described driving on the Cape Hatteras National Seashore of the Outer Banks as more akin to a beach "parking" program. In the high season, four-wheel drive vehicles often line up side-by-side, tailgates aimed at the waves, fishing lines pulling in the surf.

"This is not a program where people are where there's sand flying in the air and everybody driving on the dunes," Hallac said. "Typically, they're either anglers or surfers or just families that are spending their day at the beach."

Last year, the National Park Service sold 48,000 off-road vehicle permits, which cost \$120 for an annual pass or \$50 for a 10-day permit. To obtain a permit, drivers must say they watched a safety video.

On Amelia Island in Florida, there were

"literally no rules" before the pandemic, said Sabrina Robertson, a spokesperson for the board of county commissioners. Nassau County had been working before the pandemic to restrict nighttime driving to protect nesting sea turtles. The closures during the pandemic allowed the community to address long-standing concerns about beach driving. Now, they've restricted beach driving access to county residents only, those who own property on Amelia Island and people with military identification. Most days, fewer than 200 people drive on the beach.

Daytona Beach, a storied beach driving destination in Florida, until the late 1950s used to host car races on the hard-packed sand. The Daytona 500 moved, and the local government now charges most visitors \$20 a day to drive and park on the beach. But the cost hasn't deterred beachgoers.

"It is very political in nature," said Kate Sark, a spokesperson for Volusia County, which contains the city of Daytona Beach. "We get feedback from the public on both sides. We get some people who say, 'This is what we're famous for, we should have it.' And then we get other people who say there shouldn't be cars on the beach. It's a big toss-up."

Closing beach access

In Oregon, the state Parks and Recreation Commission recently closed public access to a popular drive-in beach in Pacific City, just south of where Boulden and Layman parked on their recent excursion. Two hours west of Portland, the tiny beach town has a photogenic rock formation, excellent surfing conditions and a popular brewpub with a view of the ocean. It's also used by commercial dory boats, flat-bottomed fishing vessels launched directly from land into the sea.

See Beach driving, Page A6

DEGREES, CERTIFICATES, CLASSES, & MORE

CARLA MOHA
BUSINESS INSTRUCTOR

Bookkeepers are in demand. CCC offers classes to get you ready for a successful career in bookkeeping. Take your Bookkeeping classes from me at CCC.

REGISTRATION IS OPEN



Clatsop Community College

www.clatsopcc.edu

Clatsop Community College is an affirmative action, equal opportunity institution. ADA accessible. For the complete Non-Discrimination and Accommodations statements, please visit www.clatsopcc.edu/ada.

Clatsop Community College es una institución de igualdad de oportunidades y de discriminación positiva. Para las declaraciones completas de No-discriminación y de Ayuda a las personas discapacitadas, por favor visite www.clatsopcc.edu/ada.

Going to the Dogs!



Welcome to

the
Astorian's
National Dog Day
Photo Contest!

Grab your collars and your cameras, **National Dog Day is Aug. 26** and we are on the prowl for the bestest, cutest, snuggliest pups on the coast.

According to www.nationaldogday.com, the day celebrates all dogs, mixed breed and purebred, and works to promote the many dogs that need to be rescued.

Last year we had 144 shots of over 160 critters.

Submit your photo(s) before midnight Wednesday, Aug. 18 here:
dailyastorian.com/dogdays

Then, come back and visit the pooches all that next week and **vote on your favorite before midnight Sunday, Aug 22**. Vote once a day.

The top vote-getters will be featured in the annual Going to the Dogs section on Thursday, Aug. 26.

Share with your friends and family: #Going2TheDogsNW

Now, who's a good boy? Who's a good girl?

For more information, call The Astorian at 971-704-1555 or email sales@dailyastorian.com