

# OC Parks Trails: Balancing Recreation and Conservation

OC Parks Trails Subcommittee | October 9, 2025

# PRESENTATION OVERVIEW



Trail sign in Caspers Wilderness Park

1. OC PARKS TRAIL SYSTEM HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT
2. UNAUTHORIZED TRAILS
3. CURRENT CLOSURE PRACTICES
4. UNIFIED TRAIL CLOSURE APPROACH

# OC Parks Trail System History and Development



# Overview of OC Parks Trail System



**Trail runners** at Peters Canyon Regional Park

- OC Parks currently manages approximately:
  - 200 miles of regional trails
  - 300 miles of natural surface trails
- Parks with significant trail networks include:
  - Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park
  - Laguna Coast Wilderness Park
  - O'Neill Regional Park
  - Peters Canyon Regional Park
  - Ronald W. Caspers Wilderness Park
  - Santiago Oaks Regional Park
  - Thomas F. Riley Wilderness Park
  - Whiting Ranch Wilderness Park
  - Irvine Ranch Open Space

# Trail System Establishment



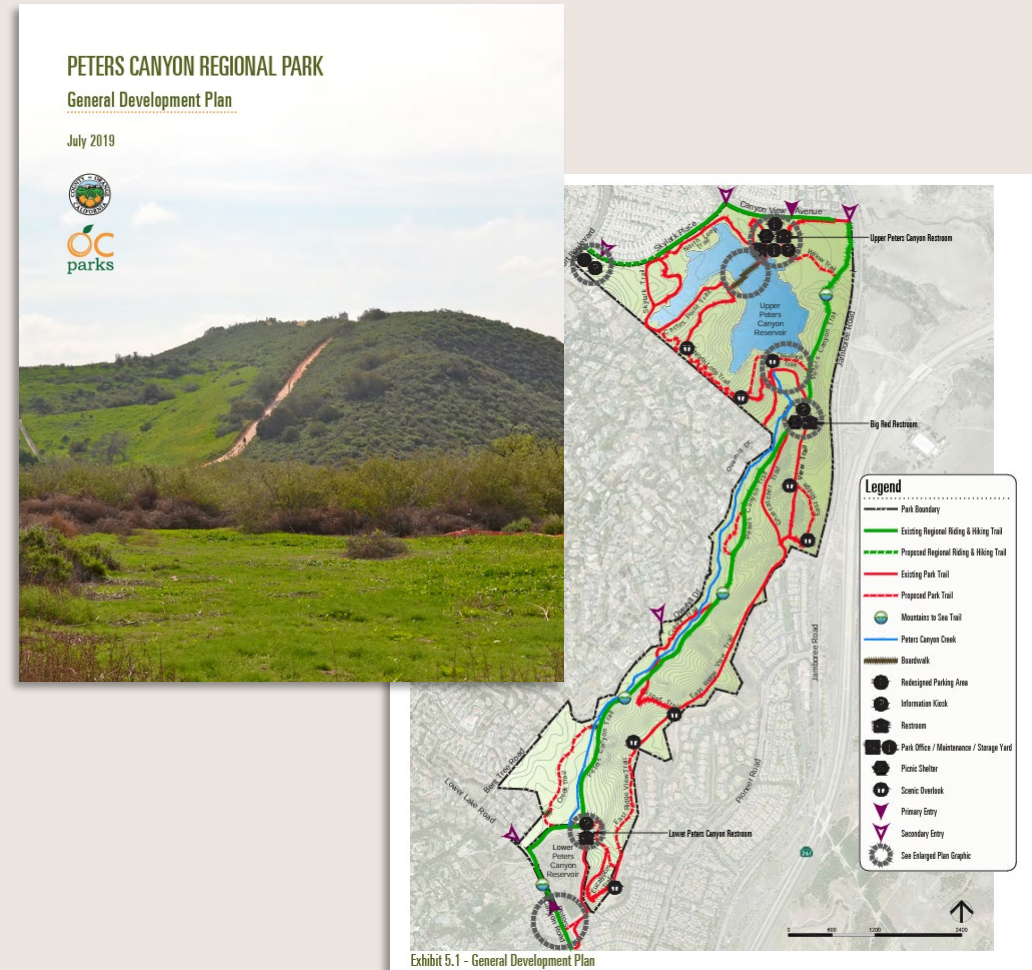
**Mountain bikers** in Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park in the 1990s

*Photo credit: Randy Vogel and Larry Kuechlin, Mountain Biking Orange County, California (1996)*

- Most parks with extensive trail networks were deeded to OC Parks between the 1960s and the 1990s
- Network consists of ranch roads and preexisting trails
- Many of these routes were adopted into official trail system
- Some trails were constructed after acquisition

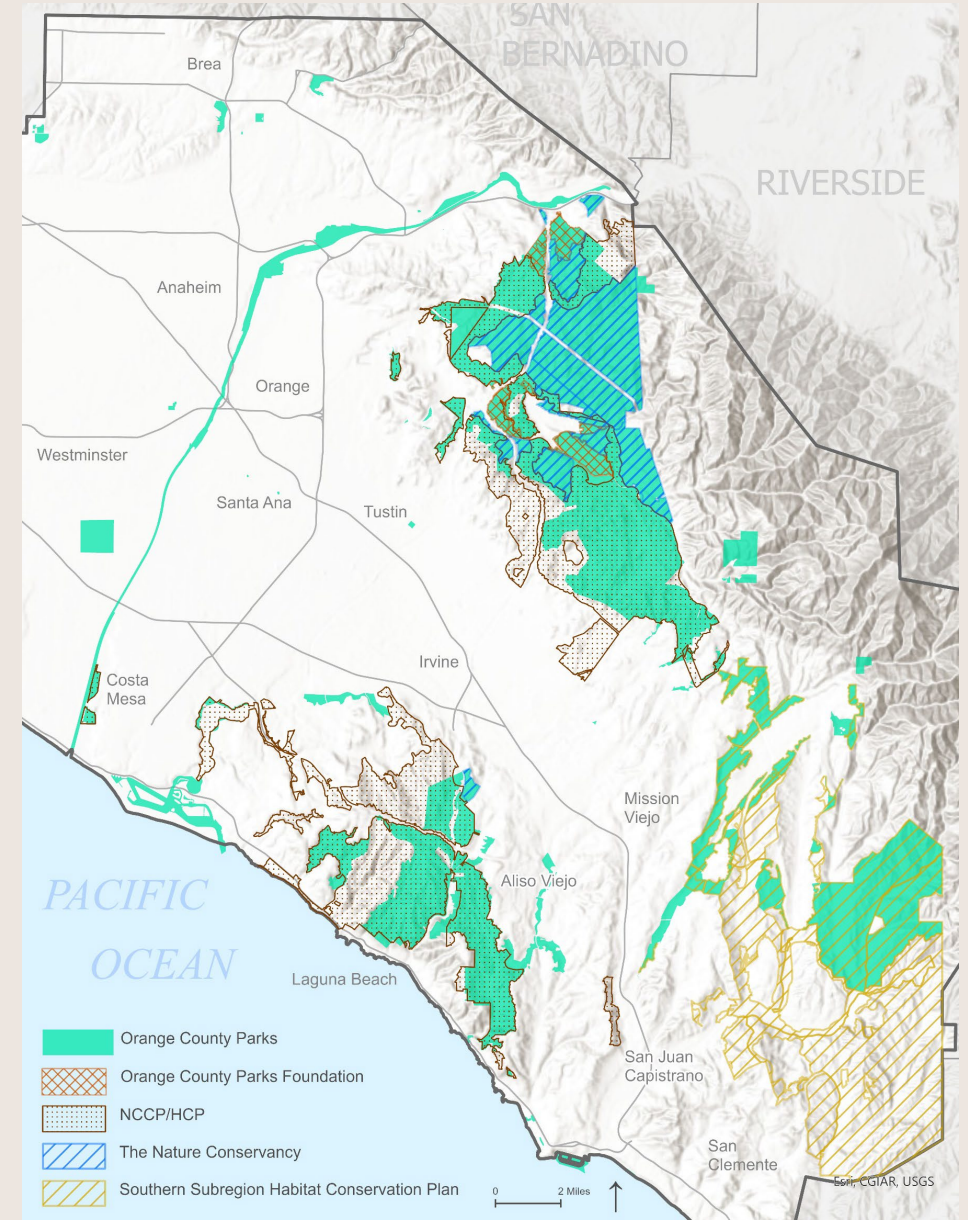
# Master Plans

- Many parks are guided by Master Plans, often called GDPs and RMPs; serve to define uses and infrastructure
- Trail systems are outlined in the plans
- Approved by Board of Supervisors



# Plans and Easements

- Most OC Parks facilities are required to follow conditions established by conservation plans or easements including:
  - Orange County Parks Foundation Easements (OCPF)
  - The Nature Conservancy Easements (TNC)
  - Central and Coastal Orange County Natural Community Conservation Plan/ Habitat Conservation Plan (NCCP/HCP)
  - Southern Subregion Habitat Conservation Plan (SSHCP)
- Each plan or easement allows either only a limited amount of habitat impact, beyond which no further disturbance is permitted or no impact entirely



# Recent Trail Development

- **Peters Canyon Regional Park**
  - Completed two major trail reroutes
  - Added a new connector trail
- **Recently Opened Wilderness Areas in Irvine Ranch Open Space**
  - Saddleback Wilderness (2023)
  - Gypsum Canyon Wilderness (2023)
  - Red Rock Wilderness (2024)
- Together these additions contribute to 17 miles of new trails



Guided hike in Red Rocks Wilderness

# Unauthorized Trails



# Unauthorized Trails

- Unauthorized trails exist within OC Parks facilities
- Inclusion of any new trails requires OC Parks to consider a variety of factors



# Trail Design and Maintenance

- Unauthorized trails often lack sustainable design, causing erosion and channelization ultimately leading to a loss of vegetation
- Erosion-prone trails contribute sediment to runoff, impacting aquatic habitats downstream
- Many existing trails already require heavy maintenance; poorly built unauthorized trails add to the burden



Poorly designed trails concentrate runoff, resulting in **channelization** and **widening**

# Environmental Considerations

## Trail creation:

- Removes native plants
- Creates a vector for invasive plants
- Fragments habitat
- Risks disturbing protected species
- Unauthorized trail maintenance rarely follows best practice



Intact **coastal sage scrub** habitat



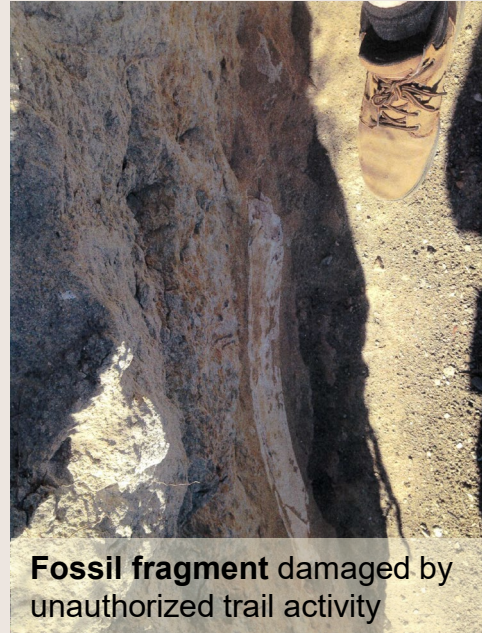
The **coast horned lizard** is listed by California as a Species of Special Concern

# Cultural and Paleontological

- Impacts to archaeological and cultural heritage sites
- Disturbance of paleontological resources



Fossil impression of a bivalve



Fossil fragment damaged by unauthorized trail activity



Park staff confiscating tools used to excavate an unauthorized trail

# Current Closure Practices



# Current Closure Practices

- Trail assessed and identified as priority
- Resources allocated
- Physical decommissioning
  - Breaking up tread
  - Removal of built features
  - Brush over tread
  - Signage and communication

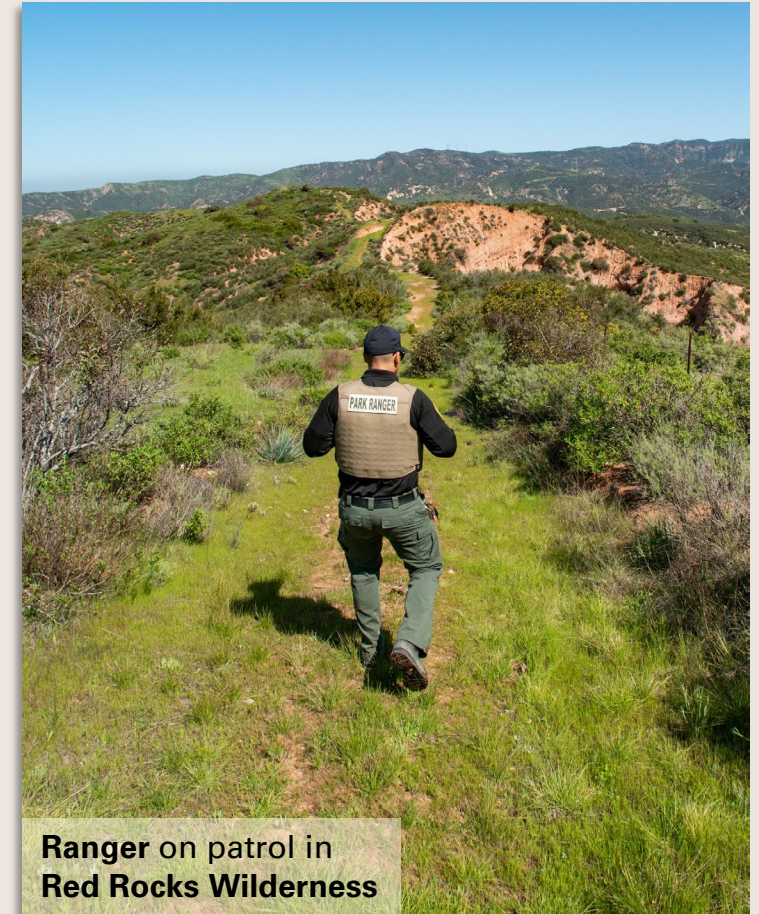


# Building a Unified Approach to Unauthorized Trail Closures



# Draft Sections: Unauthorized Trail Decommissioning Guidelines

1. Unauthorized Trail Identification
2. Baseline Data Collection
3. Prioritization and Approval
4. Compliance Coordination
5. Trail Closure Planning
6. Evaluation of Resources
7. Communication and Signage
8. Physical Decommissioning
9. Monitoring



Ranger on patrol in  
Red Rocks Wilderness

## Recommended Actions

1. Discuss and provide feedback to refine Draft Sections of OC Parks Unauthorized Trail Decommissioning Guidelines.
2. Recommend OC Parks staff move forward with developing Unauthorized Trail Decommissioning Guidelines in consideration of Subcommittee feedback.

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# Thank You