

FINAL
Trail Assessment Report

Heritage Trail
Vasquez Rocks Natural Area

Prepared for
Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation

Prepared by
The Planning Center | DC&E
September 19, 2012

A. *Introduction*

This report was prepared in response to request to allow bicycle use on the Heritage Trail in Vasquez Rocks Natural Area. Vasquez Rocks is classified as a Natural Area under the guidance of the *County of Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation Natural Area Staff Handbook, 2000*. The Natural Area Staff Handbook precludes the use of bicycles in Natural Areas, referring such use to designated and approved trails which are located primarily in Regional Parks.

Mountain bikes are currently not allowed on the Heritage Trail. A request to open the trail to mountain biking was made. In response to this petition and given the high level of interest for mountain bike use on trails, the Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation (County Parks) contracted with The Planning Center | DC&E to complete a Trail Use Change Survey modeled after the process used by California State Parks.

The trail use change evaluation process provides an objective process for evaluating the current conditions of a trail and determining whether additional uses are appropriate. The process and survey forms used by the County are almost identical to that used by State Parks, although the County's survey forms have been modified slightly to reflect County standards and classification systems. The process consists of completion of detailed trail logs that document existing conditions and assess sustainability under current usage; completion of detailed action logs that recommend improvements necessary to create a sustainable trail for existing and/or additional uses; completion of the Trail Use Change Survey evaluation form; and recommendations reports. This process is designed to objectively evaluate change in use proposals according to the following seven criteria:

- ◆ Existing conditions
- ◆ Compatibility for multi-user trails

- ◆ Effects to trail circulation patterns within the Park
- ◆ Effects to trail user safety
- ◆ Effects to trail sustainability
- ◆ Effects or impacts to the Natural and Cultural Resources
- ◆ Effects or impacts to the facility maintenance and operational costs

State Parks' provided training for County Staff and The Planning Center | DC&E on use of the Trail Use Change process, using the Canyon Trail at Placerita Canyon Natural Area as an example. On February 15 and 16, 2012, State Parks provided training and assisted in the completion of a field review, initiation of trail logs and action logs, and initial evaluation using the Trail Use Change Survey. The Trail Use Change Survey was filled out by a review team consisting of the consultant team and County staff members that participated in the field review and/or are knowledgeable about current trail conditions. The review team included: Karl Knapp and Brad Michalk from State Parks; Lorrie Bradley, Stephen Copley, Dwight LaCroix, and Ralph Beltran from LA County; and Melissa Erikson, Isby Fleischmann, and Isabelle Minn from The Planning Center | DC&E. The Planning Center | DC&E conducted additional field work to complete the trail logs on March 5 and 6, 2012 and finalized the evaluation based on additional coordination with the review team.

The possible outcomes of the Trail Use Change process include allowing mountain bike use; allowing mountain bike use with conditions and/or improvements; allowing partial mountain bike use; allowing partial mountain bike use with conditions and/or improvements; not allowing mountain bike use; and potentially removing other uses and/or closing the trail.

B. Summary of Existing Trail Conditions

Heritage Trail is approximately 0.5 miles long and connects the parking area by the temporary Ranger office with the larger parking area southeast of the most well-known of the rock formations, providing access to cultural interpretation areas and the unique geological formations of the park. There is a picnic and camping area near the temporary Ranger office; camping is limited to organized groups only (Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, etc.). The trail generally follows a parallel path to the park road that accesses the southern parking lot. The Heritage Trail has a junction with an unnamed horse trail that continues to the southwest area of Vasquez Rocks. The trail is generally in fairly good condition, predominately sandy, with even grades but has a significant number of user created trails that are impacting trail definition and adjacent vegetation.

Baseline information

- ◆ **Existing trail connections:** Pacific Crest Trail (federal trail) and several semi-formal, unmapped County trails within Vasquez Rocks Natural Area
- ◆ **Adjacent open space:** none, surrounded by highway and rural residential
- ◆ **Allowed uses:** hiking, equestrian
- ◆ **Level of Use:** High use
- ◆ **Parking:** Parking is available at both ends of the trail by the temporary Ranger office as well as at the larger southern parking lot

- ◆ **Tread:** Natural; 6 feet wide in most areas; extended sections 10 to 20 feet wide or more
- ◆ **Special Status Species with ranges bisected by trail:** Prairie falcon (*Falco mexicanus*); slender Mariposa-lily (*Calochortus clavatus* var. *gracilis*), Perison's morning glory, Swainson's hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*), southwestern pond turtle (*Clemmys marmorata pallida*), San Diego horned lizard (*Phrynosoma blainvillii*), San Bernardino ringneck snake (*Diadophis punctatus modestus*), two-striped garter snake (*Thamnophis hammondi*), black-shouldered kite (*Elanus axillaris*), northern harrier (*Circus cyaneus*), sharp-shinned hawk (*Accipiter striatus*), Cooper's hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*), golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), burrowing owl (historic - *Athene cunicularia*), loggerhead shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*), yellow warbler (*Setophaga petechia*), western mastiff bat (*Eumops perotis*), American badger (*Taxidea taxus*)¹
- ◆ **Sensitive communities bisected by trail:** None according to CNDDB review.

C. Findings

This section summarizes findings and considerations of the evaluation based upon the existing conditions noted above. Additional information regarding existing trail conditions is provided in this section as it relates to considerations and findings.

- ◆ **Potential Connectivity.** There are no trails in Vasquez Rocks which currently allow mountain bikes. The Heritage Trail connects two parking lots and provides access to the rock formations and an unnamed horse trail. Access to the rock formations and parking lots is currently provided by a park access road which roughly parallels the Heritage Trail. The park access road is an unpaved road that provides two-way traffic with no sidewalk and limited shoulders. The Pacific Coast Trail (PCT) is a federal trail that runs through Vasquez Rocks Natural Area. Under U.S. Government regulation, bikes are prohibited on the PCT. Allowing mountain bikes on the Heritage Trail may inadvertently impact the PCT if cyclists are unaware of this regulation and proceed to and along the PCT.
- ◆ **Soil and Erosion.** The trail bed is comprised entirely of natural tread. Natural soils are primarily sandy (50 percent of trail), with two different sections of rocky soil (26 percent) and one long section of partial rocky soil (24 percent). Based on the survey, 32 percent of the trail is mildly entrenched (typically less than 6") and it is estimated that there has been approximately 98 cubic yards of soil loss from the trail tread surface. The main factors in erosion appear to be migration of sandy soil due to rain, drainage and level of use. There are approximately 30 user created trails in

¹ Based on review of CNDDB, April 2012 and LACO Natural Areas, Parks and Sanctuaries Sensitive Animal Species 8/2003 by M. Long

this one half mile trail which is contributing to the erosion issues. There are large sections of trail that are braided, wider than 20 feet, and/or the main path is unclear due to user created trails.

- ◆ **Cultural resources.** Vasquez Rocks has significant prehistoric and historic archaeological resources needing protection and conservation/management. The resources could be impacted if modifications to the trail were required to bring the trail to a sustainable state.
- ◆ **Safety considerations.** With brushing and proper maintenance, sight distances are acceptable in most locations.
- ◆ **Passing Space.** The tread width varies with a typical width of at least 6 feet. There is adequate room to step off trail as needed to allow for passing or adequate site distance to see other users approaching narrow sections and employ common trail etiquette.
- ◆ **Facilities and Maintenance.** Increased use of the trail will put an additional burden on County Parks for maintenance needs and may require additional law enforcement patrols to ensure user compliance.

D. Additional Considerations

County staff and The Planning Center | DC&E has utilized State Parks' Trail Use Change Process to assess the existing conditions of the Heritage Trail, review the trail's current condition and sustainability, determine if additional use is potentially viable given existing conditions, and to determine modifications that would be necessary to allow mountain bikes to use the trail. In reviewing the trail's existing condition and evaluating the potential for additional use, several related items were identified that need further consideration and resolution by the County. Resolution of these considerations will inform the findings of this evaluation and the County's final decision on next steps.

- ◆ **Purpose of Trails.** The purpose of State Parks' trails is to provide opportunities for visitors to experience parks, while protecting the natural resource. The County provides trails for recreation, which is a different mandate and could result in different evaluation mandates.
- ◆ **Different Practice for Natural Areas.** Prior to making any recommendations, the County must consider the intent of trails within Natural Areas. It is possible that the practice for trails within Natural Areas differs from the policies for recreational trails located in other County Parks. The Trails Manual 2011 points to access and recreation as the two general purposes of County trails: "Trails offer multiple recreational opportunities to County residents and visitors, providing access to open space and related natural resources, and facilitating exercise, outdoor education, and opportunities to explore new environments." (Trails Manual 2011, page 1-1).
- ◆ **Maintenance Thresholds.** The level of acceptable trail conditions is a key consideration when determining the sustainability of a trail and

recommended improvements. County staff should consider the conditions that are acceptable for County trails. Levels of entrenchment, frequency of social trails, and desired condition of drainage crossings should be determined.

- ◆ **Speed Limit.** There are currently no speed limits on trails. The County relies on County Code which requires reasonable and prudent speed based on conditions and to protect people and property. Given the amount of foot traffic on the Heritage Trail and the sensitive cultural resources, establishing and posting a speed limit would address safety concerns. A speed of 15 mph is recommended for County trails, which is consistent with posted speed limits in several other park systems.
- ◆ **As-Is Assessment; Policies and Standards for Existing versus New Trails, and for Different Uses.** Assessing trails in their current conditions (“as is” assessments) may lead to determining that a trail is not sustainable and that use or uses should be removed. Given the County’s commitment to multi-use trails, the County should consider whether it would remove all use or select incompatible uses to be removed. If the latter approach is selected, the County will need to consider how standards for existing trails differ from standards for new trails (identified in the Trails Manual 2011), and consider how criteria for equestrian, bike and pedestrian use may differ. State Parks’ criteria are identified in their Checklist for Low- Conflict Multi-Use Trail Design.

E. Recommendation

Consideration was given to the above stated Potential Trail Modifications and Additional Considerations. The recommendation is to not allow mountain bikes on the Heritage Trail for the following reasons:

- ◆ There is an existing unpaved road which provides connection to the two parking areas.
- ◆ There are no trails or connections to trails where mountain biking is allowed from either parking lot or from the Heritage Trail itself.
- ◆ There are significant cultural resources which could be negatively impacted by additional trail use. Vasquez Rocks is “...designated a ‘natural area’ meaning its pristine nature is to be preserved and protected by all who visit.”²
- ◆ The existing trail has been significantly compromised by the number of user created trails. Significant revegetation is necessary to clarify the trail alignment.

² Vasquez Rocks Natural Area park brochure

- ◆ The PCT runs through Vasquez Rocks in proximity to the park entry, park access road, and the parking lot southeast of the Famous Rocks. The PCT is a federal trail and does not allow bicycles.

F. Potential Trail Modifications

If mountain bikes were to be allowed on Heritage Trail, modifications to the trail would be necessary to improve trail user safety and the sustainability of the trail; most of these improvements are necessary given existing use. This section describes these trail modifications.

- ◆ **Revegetation.** Significant revegetation is recommended along the entire trail due to the large number of user created trail.
- ◆ **Signage.** Some of the existing signage is located off the trail and indirectly encourages visitors to stray from the trail. Additional signage is recommended to clarify the trail location and to allow revegetation efforts to have greater success. If mountain bikes are allowed, additional signage is recommended to warn trail users that the trail is heavily used by Ranger-led groups.
- ◆ **Trail re-route.** A re-route of the trail is recommended in one location to improve sustainability and/or trail safety. Trail reroute should be designed to avoid impacts to cultural resources and natural resources, including special status species and sensitive habitats. Prior to re-routing any trail section, a qualified biologist must verify that the proposed route will not impact any special status species or sensitive habitats. Where rerouting is necessary and avoidance is not possible, permits must be obtained from jurisdictional agencies must be obtained as necessary.
- ◆ **Armored drainage crossings.** There are two drainage crossings that are contributing to trail erosion; a third drainage crossing is also of concern but grade and trail material precludes a correction. Armored drainage crossings should be constructed using rock rip rap at the location of the two drainages.
- ◆ **Walk Zone.** More than half of the Heritage Trail, from the temporary Ranger office parking area to rock formations, is used for interpretive walks due to the rich cultural resources. A *walk zone* should be considered to prevent conflicts between trail users and Ranger led groups. This could be accomplished by placing step overs within the area used by the groups. The step overs will require cyclists to dismount to lift their bicycle over the step over.

The final decision regarding allowed trail use rests with the County, taking into consideration this recommendation, staffing availability, budget constraints, project prioritization, and environmental constraints.