

The Hourglass



Newsletter of Friends of the Dunes Vol. 20, Num. 1 February 2009

Secretary of the Interior Visits the Dunes



NPS Photo

Secretary of the Interior and San Luis Valley native, Ken Salazar, spoke on Sunday, February 15th in front of an enthusiastic crowd at Great Sand Dunes National Park. Against the backdrop of North America's tallest dunes, Secretary Salazar addressed the economic stimulus package signed by President Barack Obama. "Here, in my native San Luis Valley," said Secretary Salazar, "there is an urgent need to deploy President Obama's recovery plan so that we can help turn our economy around. The President's plan will not only help people get back to work, but it will restore the luster of some of our nation's crown jewels, like Great Sand Dunes National Park and the San Luis Valley's national wildlife refuges. These proud places will benefit greatly from these investments."

\$4 million of the \$787 billion dollar stimulus bill may go toward projects including restoration of native fisheries and reclamation of old sand and gravel pits along the base of Sand Creek. The pits, inherited when the Great Sand Dunes National Preserve was established, are home to the tubifex worm which passes whirling disease to native trout. Medano Creek's successful Rio Grande Cutthroat trout refugia cannot be duplicated in Sand Creek until the whirling disease is eliminated.

Also possible is the restoration of 1930's Work Progress Administration structures and upgrading old liquid petroleum gas tanks with a more modern and efficient system. Salazar estimated that these "shovel-ready" projects would create up to 100 jobs for local citizens.

Silence is Golden

Listen. What do you hear? Most of us live with a constant background hum of lights, refrigerators, and all of the modern electronics that make our lives so convenient. Think of that the strange silence that follows a power outage... it will still be louder than what you'd hear in the quietest parts of Great Sand Dunes National Park.

National parks represent more than scenic landscapes, wildlife, and historic objects. They also protect water quality, air quality and lesser recognized resources like viewsheds, dark night skies, wilderness values, and even natural quiet.

National Park Service Management Policies dictate that sound levels be monitored and managed as a resource, just like bison, waterfalls, cliff dwellings, or the Liberty Bell. Unlike these tangible objects, however, the health of a park's soundscape is difficult to establish. How much noise is too much noise? What is the natural ambient sound level (without human-caused noises)? What kinds of noises are considered intrusive? What are the effects of noise pollution on wildlife?

Friends of the Dunes Welcomes New Board Member

Loree' Harvey is currently a resident of Monte Vista, Colorado, and has lived in the San Luis Valley since moving to the area in the early 1980's with her family as a young teen.

She graduated from Adams State College with a B.S. in Biology in 1992, and completed a Master's degree in Biology at Northern Arizona University in 1995, with an emphasis on amphibian physiology and ecology. Job opportunities led her back to the San Luis Valley, where she began working on a long-term collaborative research effort with the University of Missouri and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, studying the effects of grazing on wetland ecosystems



on the Monte Vista and Alamosa N.W.R.s. Since completing this research, she has continually worked with the Colorado Division of Wildlife, the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service, and Bureau of

Land Management collecting data on a multitude of threatened and endangered species in the area.

Loree' accepted a position with the Monte Vista School District in 2005, and is currently in her 4th year as a 7th grade Science Teacher, girl's basketball coach, and track coach at the Monte Vista Middle School. She's enjoying her new teaching career, and remains passionate about studying and preserving local ecosystems and wildlife. She continues to work for the BLM and other state and federal agencies as a wildlife technician in the summertime.

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Until recently, the answers to these questions were largely subjective. One person's disruption may be simple background noise to another. In order to answer these questions scientifically, acoustic monitoring crews are dispatched to various parks throughout the system. Finely tuned equipment measures and ambient sound levels, duration of time between human-caused sounds, and can even identify bird and wildlife vocalizations. This baseline data allows parks to monitor its soundscape and watch for changes.

Over 50 different sites have soundscape data; Great Sand Dunes National Park is among the quietest ever recorded. Ambient sounds were at times lower than the equipment could record. Only the center of the crater at Haleakala National Park can rival the low natural quiet of this park's wilderness along its western border.

Extraordinarily quiet places like Great Sand Dunes can give us a mental refuge from the aural bombardment of modern life. Like a pristine lake or a clear night sky, they can remind us of our place in the world and of its fragility. Even a small noise disturbance can be heard immediately and felt intimately in this type of environment. The good news is that natural quiet is a 100% renewable resource and thanks to its protected status, at Great Sand Dunes National Park, everybody can have some.



Sound monitoring equipment on the north side of Great Sand Dunes National Park picks up the sounds of -- almost nothing.



Great Sand Dunes National Park provides options for people of all abilities.

Universal Access to Great Sand Dunes

Seven young people from the Southwest Conservation Corps worked with park staff to build a universally accessible viewing deck at Great Sand Dunes National Park. “This is the third component of a park project to upgrade universal access,” Superintendent Art Hutchinson said. “We were very happy to receive a gift of recycled plastic lumber from Unilever, Inc., which we used to build the viewing deck.” Thanks go to The National Park Foundation and Unilever, a Proud Partner of America’s National Parks.

The new viewing deck is located on the north end of the Dunes Parking Lot, and allows barrier-free access for photographers and those who would like watch family members hiking in the dunes. In addition to the deck, the park maintenance crew installed a short section of matting that stabilizes the pathway leading to the dunes, improving pedestrian, stroller, and wheelchair access to the creekbed from the Dunes Parking Lot.

For many years, Friends of the Dunes have provided two sand wheelchairs which can be borrowed by wheelchair users. Large balloon tires keep the chair from sinking deeply into the sand. The chairs are non-motorized and users need to bring a helper to push. “We’re grateful to the Friends and to many other donors for supporting and maintaining those chairs,” Hutchinson said.

Resource Management Specialist Fred Bunch Wins Award

Fred Bunch, Resource Management Specialist at Great Sand Dunes, was awarded the 2008 Intermountain Regional Director’s Award for Natural Resource Management.

A San Luis Valley native, Fred has served at Great Sand Dunes since 1988. He worked seasonally at Mesa Verde National Park, but began his Great Sand Dunes career in the division of Interpretation. He soon became a Natural Resource Specialist under the Great Sand Dunes Chief Ranger. In the face of threats to park resources, Fred worked with the Superintendent to establish a separate Resource Management Division. Fred is the first, and to date the only, chief of the division.

Regional Director Mike Snyder cited Fred’s “many diverse efforts to identify, understand, and document, interpret and ultimately protect natural and cultural resources of the Dunes,” and specified his recent work “to identify, quantify, assess the condition of, monitor and protect significant and often threatened resources in the park, including ground water,



wetlands and other ‘vital signs’ of park health, ecological and economic sustainability, bison and other ungulates, natural quiet, dark night sky, archeological resources, and ethnographic resources.” Snyder also recognized and commended the value of Fred’s work outside the park’s boundaries, ranging from the Caminos Antiguos Scenic Byway to the County Tourism Board to various National Park Service committees and networks within the region.

Fred will accept his award at the George Wright Society conference in March.

Membership Form

Come join us in protecting and enjoying
a unique and special place.

Every new member will receive a Great Sand Dunes pin, triannual newsletter, and advance notices and invitations to special events.

There are 3 levels of membership available for Friends of the Dunes:

Friend _____ \$15
Associate _____ \$40
Patron _____ \$100

ASSOCIATE members will also receive a copy of Great Sand Dunes, "The Shape of the Wind" by Stephen Trimble.

PATRON members will receive all of the above plus a year pass to the park.

I'd also like to contribute \$_____ to the following:

_____ Wheelchair Fund

_____ General Operations Fund (to assist the Friends with the day to day cost of managing the organization; i.e. event coordination, membership mailings, office equipment and supplies and administrative expense)

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