

Guadalupe Oil Field, a study in contrast

Sierra Club California Coastwatcher: August, 2002

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Looking out across 2,700-acres of some of the finest dune habitat in the world you would never know tens of millions of gallons of oil lays just beneath the surface. A couple of weeks ago Unocal Oil Company announced that it had purchased the underlying land rights to its leasehold at Guadalupe Dunes in San Luis Obispo County. Guadalupe Dunes is the place where Unocal operated hundreds of oil derricks and hundreds of miles of pipelines for decades, and where they managed to spill upwards of a hundred million gallons of oil. During the early and mid-1990's the site was the subject of lawsuits, fines and massive excavation and cleanup efforts along the ocean, adjacent to the Santa Maria River and in the sand dunes. Millions of gallons of oil have been recovered and removed from the site. Millions more remain trapped and are being addressed in ongoing cleanup efforts and a subsequent environmental analysis.

What is staggering is the abundance of wildlife, rare and endangered plants, coastal resources and archeology sites. Guadalupe's 2,700-acres, which will now be permanently protected (Unocal plans to pass title to the property to a governmental agency or nonprofit organization following completion of cleanup efforts), are part of the much larger 20,000-acre Guadalupe-Nipomo Dune Complex. More than 280 plant and 320 wildlife species (excluding fish and invertebrates) have been identified in the area. Rare plants such as Blochman's Leafy Daisy, Sand Plant, Beach, Spectacle-Pod, Surf Thistle, Dunedelion, La Graciosa Thistle, Dune Mint, Suffrutescent Wallflower and Giant Coreopsis are found in abundance in the dunes. Exotic invasives are generally not present and those that are, like iceplant, are being removed. Teams of biologists are using local seed banks to establish dune nurseries from which thousands more of these rare plants will be established. Other biologists are monitoring large populations of California Red-Legged Frogs, Western Snowy Plovers, Silvery Legless Lizards, Tidewater Goby, California Brown Pelican and dozens of other species. Numerous wetlands and freshwater lakes throughout the dunes support a large population of dune deer. Brown bears and mountain lions come from inland along the Santa Maria River and from the south across Pt. Sal.

The transformation of Guadalupe Dunes from California's largest coastal oil spill to unparalleled environmental dune habitat is nothing less than miraculous. Yet it isn't happening without tremendous expense and effort. The legacy of Guadalupe is that people can have a positive impact on nature, and we owe an obligation to carefully clean up the messes we have made. It is also amazing [how] quickly nature can re-establish itself given the opportunity.