

Opinion: Come fly the friendly skies of state parks? Keep your drones away

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Virtually unknown before 2013, recreational drones have appeared across American airways and multiplied with few or no controls on their use. The drones' bee-swarm "buzz" and unwanted trespass have become familiar to many. Today's "dronescape" even includes the air space at 250 state parks in Oregon, where visitors can no longer expect to evade the noise of these micro-helicopters.

Drone use has grown from a curiosity to an annoying public nuisance and deadly threat to wildlife. The accidental crash of a drone at California's Bolsa Chica Preserve last year triggered abandonment of 1,500 Elegant Tern nests and loss of 2,000 eggs. Surveys in Oregon show that drones have disturbed nesting oystercatchers three times weekly, leaving eggs cold and exposed to predators. The entire Oregon shore, which includes half the seabird habitat of the West Coast, is vulnerable.

One might think that our state parks, collectively regarded as the crown jewels of Oregon's natural heritage and as the obvious highlights of our world-renowned coastline, would be spared the unnecessary buzz. The parks, after all, represent just 0.2% of Oregon's land, a small piece where one might expect nature to take priority, given the Parks and Recreation Department's official mission "to provide and protect outstanding natural, scenic, cultural, historic and recreational sites for the enjoyment and education of present and future generations." But drone use is virtually unregulated, and the department now proposes to officially allow drone use everywhere except where expressly prohibited — a vague reference that's left undefined, unquantified and unmapped.

Our state parks receive an astounding 54 million visits per year, most by people coming for peace, quiet and nature. But with drones, the noise of mechanical trespass can reach everywhere: ocean beaches, ancient forests, scenic rivers, sublime deserts, historic landmarks. Unrestricted use of drones might be imagined as the air-space-equivalent of off-road vehicles having the liberty and ability to crisscross every square foot of ground within park boundaries. That, of course, would not be allowed.

The department offers no estimate of drone use in the parks. But even if the number is as high as 1,000, that's only one drone operator for every 54,000 other park visitors. Even 50,000 drones would be just one for every other 1,000 park users. The point here is that whatever the number drone operators represent a miniscule portion of the population that uses our state parks, yet these aircraft impose enormous impacts.

I'll wager another bet here: Few people other than those flying the drones enjoy having them buzzing overhead and frightening birds, not to mention invading our private sun-bathing spot on the beach by intruding from directly above with the camera that a recreational drone typically carries. Who wants to be watched like that?

To benefit the few people who use drones, our professional park guardians have proposed to sacrifice the rights of everyone else who cherishes our state parks and ocean beaches. The question might come to mind: Who do our park officials think they're supposed to represent? There are no words for the disappointment this situation brings to myself and many others who have tenaciously supported the parks system for decades and longer.

The department is now finalizing rules for the regulation or, I should say, *non*-regulation of drone take-off and landings. Actual flight of drones is, thus far, regulated only by the Federal Aviation Agency, though state administration of take-off and landing will go a long way toward management. Of course, some "official" functions for drones should be allowed — search, rescue and scientific studies, for example. And special permits could be available for prescribed uses. However, parks department rulemaking has proceeded without anyone surveying what park visitors want, and without soliciting guidance of bird experts and other wildlife biologists, including those of the National Wildlife Refuge System, which shares stewardship of vital coastline habitat that can easily be reached by drones launched from state parks.

After an initial meeting when only drone users were invited to negotiate with park personnel, public hearings were held, March 30-31. Testimony at the two hearings overwhelmingly opposed the agency's proposal. The Parks and Recreation Commission will likewise soon be taking up the issue.

Oregonians deserve better than what the Parks Department has recommended.

Tim Palmer is a nature writer and professional photographer with 30 books published about the outdoors, recreation and Oregon.