



March 31, 1995

Mr. Brian O'Neill
Superintendent
Fort Mason, Building 201
Golden Gate National Recreation Area
San Francisco, California 94123

Dear Mr. O'Neill:

In the past few months we have had several meetings with National Park Service officials concerning the future of off-leash dog walking in the Presidio and other areas of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area ("GGNRA"), including Crissy Field, Fort Funston, and Ocean Beach. At each of these meetings, we have been assured the National Park Service has no intention of limiting the areas that have been used for off-leash dog walking for decades.

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In spite of these assurances, we are now being told there are plans to significantly reduce GGNRA off-leash areas. Last Monday, for instance, we toured Ocean Beach with District Ranger Jim Milestone, who informed us that over half the Ocean Beach area would soon be off-limits to off-leash dogs--a step considered necessary to protect the snowy plover who visits some areas of this beach. This information came less than two weeks after it was announced to 250 Fort Funston dog walkers that nearly 45 acres of this popular off-leash area would be closed to both dogs and people--both to control erosion and to create native plant habitats. And both these announcements come on the heels of the dramatic changes proposed for Crissy Field, including the proposal to set aside a major portion of this traditional dog run area for the creation of a new man-made wetland.

In defense of these restrictions, Park officials have pointed to the mission of the National Park Service. This mission, as they've explained to us, is first and foremost to preserve and expand native habitats. And we are told National Park Service staff share a strong personal, as well as professional, commitment to these goals. No doubt this commitment is to be applauded, and it may indeed be precisely what is needed to protect our nation's wilderness areas.

The Golden Gate National Recreation Area is not, however, a wilderness area. As evidenced by its name, it is a *recreation* center, surrounded by a heavily populated urban environment. And it is the GGNRA's recreational value that was of the utmost importance to the Congress that established this great urban park. In their words, the GGNRA was to be a "new national urban recreation area which will concentrate on serving the outdoor recreation needs of the people of the metropolitan region," and its objective was "to expand to the maximum extent possible the outdoor recreation opportunities available in this region." H. R. Rep. No. 1391, 92nd Cong., 2nd Session (1972).

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Over the last 20 years, it seems to us that the intent of Congress in creating the GGNRA has by and large been honored. Wildlife and recreation--the dogs and birds, joggers and raccoons, bicycles and squirrels--have coexisted relatively peacefully. Only since the arrival of literally hundreds of new National Park Service staff has anyone thought there was a conflict. And now that the conflicts are multiplying--at Fort Funston, Ocean Beach, and Crissy Field--we are becoming increasingly concerned about how the Park Service plans to resolve them.

What happens, for instance, when the wetland proposed for Crissy Field attracts new and existing wildlife species in greater numbers, and these animals venture outside the wetland's boundaries? Will the Park Service fence off more and more of Crissy Field to protect the new residents from off-leash dog walkers, joggers, bicyclists, frisbee players, picnickers, and thousands of others who use this area today? If the native habitat projects at Fort Funston succeed and native plants begin to flourish and support new wildlife populations, will the fences be moved further and further, taking more and more space away from traditional recreational uses? And if the snowy plover, who now rests on some of the soon-to-be restricted portion of Ocean Beach, flies further down the shore, will the entire beach be put off-limits? If what we have seen and heard so far is a picture of what is to come, we fear that major portions of the GGNRA may well turn into fenced compounds--off limits to all but the National Park Service staff assigned to keep the rest of us out.

Mr. O'Neill, we believe the question of whether the GGNRA is to be a wildlife habitat, a recreation area, or a combination of both needs to be answered before site-specific plans and policies are adopted for each unique area of the GGNRA. But we don't believe this question should be answered by National Park Service staff alone. Rather, we ask that it be put to the public--to the hundreds of thousands of people who care deeply about the future of these spectacular lands. We ask that public hearings be held before the Golden Gate National Recreation Area Advisory Commission, or other appropriate body, to specifically address this question. We also ask that there be adequate notice and a meaningful opportunity for the public to comment and be heard. And, finally, we ask that the National Park Service listen to those who testify, and that it work to create a GGNRA that balances habitat preservation and recreation area enhancement.

Sincerely,

RICHARD AVANZINO
President

cc: Golden Gate National Recreation Area Advisory Commission
Mr. Robert Chandler, Presidio Project Manager
Golden Gate National Recreation Area
Mr. James Milestone, South District Ranger
Golden Gate National Recreation Area