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# Overregulation of San Francisco Ocean Beach protects no one

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 [Ocean Beach \(Examiner file photo\)](#)

Many years back when a number of whales mysteriously beached themselves on The City's ocean shore, it brought together a major outpouring of San Francisco's deep-felt compassion and often wayward political correctness.

And that union produced a bumper sticker for the ages: "Save the Gay Whales."

I was reminded of this recently by the heat wave that followed weeks of rain and drove thousands of people to Ocean Beach. It's a place where people can flock to, but yet average citizens cannot swim. It's a place where regular people may no longer be allowed to have their dogs run free. And yet it will be safe for sand-bound plants and the elusive snowy plover.

So what do the aforementioned things have in common, besides a popular beach? That would be an increasingly unpopular oversight agency called the National Park Service, which controls the spacious reserves known as the Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

I understand the desire to protect creatures great and small. And there's no doubt that the innate lives of animals and humans can sometimes be at cross purposes.

But really, do we really have to police the activities of pets and people in our wide-open spaces to determine which ones belong on a leash? And if an agency wants to remind people how dangerous our ocean waters are, wouldn't it be better to provide lifeguards to protect them?

In the eyes of the National Park Service, the answer would be a resoundingly no. Potential restrictions that would close popular Bay Area beaches and parks to dog owners are still being reviewed by federal park officials, but as the recent spate of hot weather showed, the policies regarding beaches in general are, well, a little wet around the ears.

On Thursday when temperatures in The City reached into the low 80s, thousands of beach-goers descended on the sands of Ocean Beach to pack fun into their little self-anointed sand-filled districts. Dozens ventured into the waters, only to be warned by a park officer to get out, because swimming is too dangerous. This happened in just one tiny stretch of a 2-mile-long beach.

How's that for effective crowd control — one supervisor, for about every five thousand visitors?

San Francisco's Ocean Beach is considered by experts the most dangerous urban beach in America because of its powerful rip tides which carry unsuspecting swimmers far out to sea, and many people, including experienced surfers, drown there each year.

That is not a new story. But the NPS, which oversees it, has long had a policy of posting it rather than living it. Ocean Beach is one of the unique strips along the urban West Coast that does not have any full-time designated lifeguards. It employs a daily beach patrol instead, usually consisting of one person. It relies on posted signs along the sandy stretch telling visitor just how dangerous it is: "People swimming and wading here have drowned," they are informed.

The official reason why the park service doesn't employ lifeguards, unlike say, Los Angeles, San Diego, Santa Barbara and other popular California beaches, is because to do so would suggest that it would be safe to swim there. No lifeguards mean no, in other words. And that's not a policy as much as an abdication.

Not unlike the proposed policy on off-leash dogs. A few weeks ago when the tsunami warnings closed San Francisco's beaches for a day, dog owners found themselves in a quandary. Gardeners at Sigmund Stern Grove, already a popular dog gathering, said they had never seen so many pooches in one place.

But federal park officials didn't even bother to include the impact of their proposed limitations on city and state parks in their draft environmental report. They only studied the effect on the lands they govern. And if the term short-sighted came to mind, you wouldn't be the only one jumping around in those fast-churning waters.

If the NPS really wanted to set guidelines, perhaps they should consider zoning human behavior — like saying people can only swim between designated lifeguard towers at Ocean Beach. Or allowing Fido ample, but limited, off-leash runs.

It would surely help them survive in the place we call the real world.

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