

A CHECKERED PAST

The Dunn Road

Mike Dunn was a burly, rapacious, and apparently charming man. The first time I saw him in action, he was barreling along Dunn Road in a pickup truck, dragging tires behind him to hide his illegal bulldozing tracks from the feds. It was the Santa Rosa Mountains in the early 1970s, and I was hidden behind a rock filming him, and getting a lesson in what conservation is all about. I have to admit that, in a perverse way, I had to kind of admire his *cojones*.

But what Mike Dunn did by cutting his road through the eastern slope of the Santa Rosa Mountains was anything but admirable. His road nearly resulted in the demise of Peninsular Bighorn Sheep. What's more, it created a man-made intrusion in this beautiful de facto wilderness adjacent to the Coachella Valley, California, a wound which is finally recovering from 40 years of insult.

At times, the story of the Dunn Road sounds like a saga from the old West, but it's really a grim reminder of the present-day need to secure lasting protection for our remaining wild places. Otherwise they can and will fall prey to the Mike Dunsns of this world.

The Road and the U.S.

Looking at a topographic map of the Dunn Road, a pattern emerges. The road crosses straight through one section of land, but cuts the corner of the next, or skirts along its edge. This is because the federal and private lands are "checker-boarded" in



BIGHORN INSTITUTE

Dunn Road today: Bighorn are re-colonizing the area in peace

The first time I saw him in action, he was barreling along Dunn Road in a pickup truck, dragging tires behind him to hide his illegal bulldozing tracks from the feds.

this part of the world, and Dunn figured he'd outsmart the government by skirting the edges of federal land. He had a garage full of law books, and fancied himself a self-taught lawyer.

Since the major Dunn Road construction took place in the late 1960s, there was no National Environmental Protection Act to stop Dunn. But there did exist requirements for a legal right-of-way to construct a road across federal lands, and a US Attorney named Ernestine Tolin in Los Angeles was determined to enforce these regulations.

So the U.S. sued Dunn for trespass, and in the late 60's or early 70's the feds built a gate across the Dunn Road to stop Dunn. But he bulldozed it down. Then the government would repair it, and again it would be flattened. This went on for some time, until Dunn decided to outflank the government, and accessed his road by bulldozing down Palm Canyon along an eroded jeep track and then up a wash back around to Dunn Road.

Dunn Gets Stalled

Into this state of affairs I was thrust as a nascent Sierra Club activist in 1970. In 1972 when the US Attorney asked me to testify against Dunn as a witness to his illegal maneuvers, I was only too happy to oblige, and we successfully prohibited Dunn from trespassing again in Palm Canyon.

Then in 1975 the government entered a final judgment against Dunn. The judgment enjoined Dunn from entering the Dunn Road except to bring it up to code, which would take a fortune he didn't have. But meanwhile, Dunn's land speculation plan had gained a lot of traction with the City of Palm Springs.

Palm Springs Atajo

All along it had been clear why Dunn had bulldozed this road from Highway 74 in the Santa Rosa Mountains down to the floor

of the Coachella Valley. It was to make money off the land he had acquired from the private landowners in return for constructing an access road to their property.

A cooperative city of Palm Springs was only too happy to annex 32 square miles of the Santa Rosa Mountains along the Dunn Road in 1972 - not just annex it, but also up-zone it for a population of 40,000 people, and call it Palm Springs Atajo. Its symbol was a bighorn sheep - exactly the threatened species!

Resource Destruction

As Mark Jorgensen of Anza Borrego once said, the Dunn Road was built in just about the worst possible place for endangered Peninsular Bighorn. It traverses across the heads of all the canyons and watering holes and bisects the core lambing habitat from Rancho Mirage to Palm Springs.

What had always been a wild inaccessible land for bighorn and other wildlife, became instead an entry for illegal Off-Highway Vehicle use, commercial jeep tours, and a small contingent of 4WD enthusiasts who gained Mike Dunn's favor and a key to the road.

The cultural losses caused by the Dunn Road are incalculable. There were Cahuilla gathering and hunting sites along the road's route as well as permanent springs and Cahuilla travel areas. A short drive down Dry Wash from Dunn Road lies Palm Canyon with its many sensitive and irreplaceable resources.

The on-the-ground destruction from the Dunn Road was immense. In addition to blading 15 miles of road that was 60 feet wide in spots, Dunn bulldozed a landing strip in Dry Wash. He drilled wells along the Dunn Road, put in trailers and a prefab home, and he dumped oil and left inoperable heavy equipment wherever he pleased.

Dunn Road Now

Thanks largely to the legal muscle of the Center for Biological Diversity, plus the erosive forces of nature, the Dunn Road has been pretty much shut down. Mike Dunn died in the 1990's, and in the early 2000's, as part of our larger challenge against the BLM California Desert Conservation Area (CDCA) Plan, the Center and the Sierra Club entered into a Stipulation requiring BLM to severely restrict use on the Dunn Road, and to prohibit mechanized repair of the Dunn Road without an EIS.

Later these prescriptions were somewhat watered down by the BLM's CDCA Plan Amendment for the Coachella Valley. The Dunn Road has now undergone many years of erosion without being repaired. It is impassable. And since the road is now part of a National Monument, it's harder for anyone to just sneak in and grade it, as has happened in the past. As a matter of fact, the BLM estimates that it will cost over \$300,000 to fix it.

Most importantly, the bighorn have returned. After so many years of absence in that part of the range, now one rarely hikes the Dunn Road without seeing myriad bighorn tracks along it. If you're quiet and unobtrusive, you might just see a bighorn or two, or maybe ten, watching you from a safe distance. This is again a lambing area, again a watering area, again an area largely untrammelled by man, except for a remnant scar across the land.

Due in part to National Monument status, most of the private lands in this part of the Santa Rosas have been acquired, either

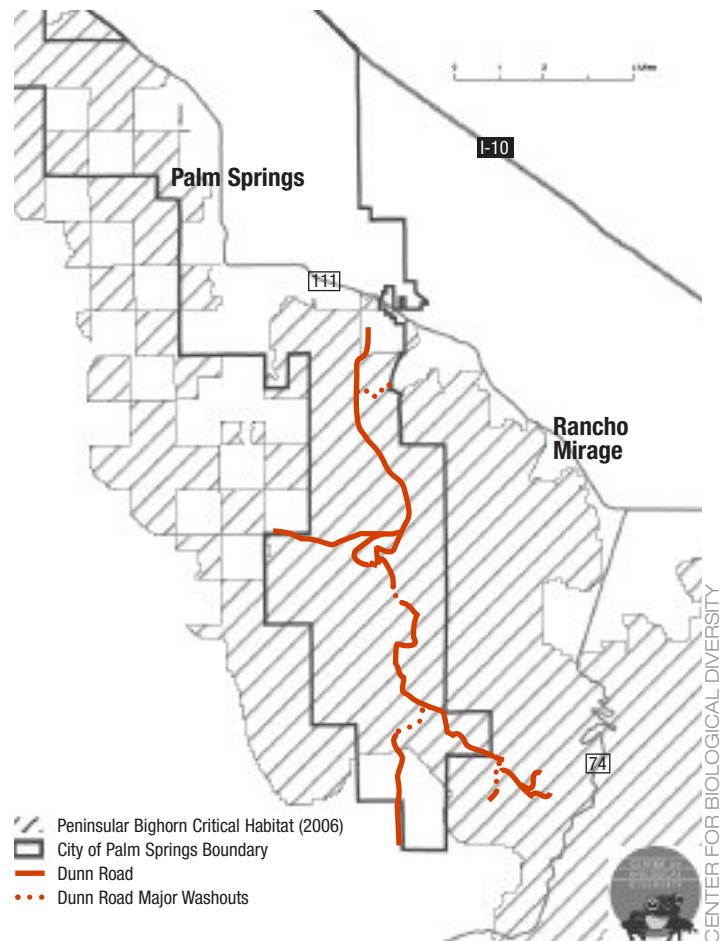
by BLM, the Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy, Friends of the Desert Mountains, or the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians.

The Future of the Santa Rosas

Unfortunately, there are still people out there who want the Dunn Road resurrected for their own selfish reasons, to make money off jeep tours, to enhance the value of their land, or just to drive it for their own personal pleasure. These people are opportunists, quietly trying to get grant monies to pay for the repair work and waiting for a friendly nod from BLM or USFS to do so.

It's up to us to make sure that does not happen: by lobbying for wilderness protection and additional land acquisition; by vigilance over BLM and USFS; by supporting legal action to protect the Santa Rosa Mountains and their endangered bighorn if necessary. It's our job to ensure that the Dunn Road is a part of history that forever stays in the past! ♦

Joan Taylor has been a Sierra Club activist since 1970. She worked for designation of the Santa Rosa Wilderness, lobbied for the Desert Bill, and then worked closely with Mary Bono in the designation of the Santa Rosa & San Jacinto National Monument. Joan now devotes much of her time in following energy development in the California/Nevada desert.



Dunn Road - R.I.P.