

Mayor Orders Children's Pool Beach Closed from Sunset to Sunrise through May 15

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by Deborah Sullivan Brennan, San Diego Union-Tribune

Mayor Bob Filner on Tuesday ordered Children's Pool beach in La Jolla to be closed from sunset to sunrise through mid-May after video surfaced of the seals there being sat on, kicked and punched.

His decision marks the latest notable chapter in a years-long conflict between people who want to protect the seals by making the cove off-limits to humans and those who believe dual access is a historical right. The dispute has generated national attention with litigation, dozens of rallies on both sides over the years and numerous attempts by the San Diego City Council and state Legislature to forge compromise.

The video footage, which viewers of a live seal camera at Children's Pool recorded last month and then posted on YouTube, shows two women crossing a city-installed rope barrier and disturbing mother seals and their pups. One of them engaged in the physical abuse while the other took photos.

"I felt it was important to take this step after evidence of individuals seen on videotape harassing, taunting and causing stress to the seals," Filner said in a statement Tuesday.

The closure took effect on the same day and will continue until May 15, the approximate end of the annual pupping season. The mayor's aim, he said, is to protect the animals during this sensitive period. Disturbances can cause mother seals to abandon their young.

"The pregnant seals are giving birth and when they're harassed, they end up being separated from their offspring, and then the chances of survival for the offspring are very much reduced," said Larry Wan, founder of the Western Alliance for Nature in Malibu, which donated the seal cam to the city. "And if they're forced into the sea when they're giving birth, that also doesn't bode well for the seals."

The alliance installed the video camera last month in cooperation with the city. The camera, donated at a cost of \$40,000, provides around-the-clock monitoring of the pool and its inhabitants. It's equipped with windshield wipers for rainy weather and infrared capability to capture mother seals birthing pups at night. That function allowed the camera to stream shots of the women harassing the animals.

The video camera doesn't record images, Wan said, but some viewers captured video segments with cellphone cameras and posted them online.

He said the incident drew new attention to intentional disturbance of the seals, but that such violations have occurred repeatedly.

"There are records of harassment that have been going on for a decade," Wan said. "The seal cam has been letting the whole world know about it, and it's not a pretty picture for the whole world to see of San Diego unless they do something about it."

On Tuesday, he provided video of other incidents in which visitors to the cove dispersed the seal colony by getting too close to them, running toward the animals or taking up-close flash photography at night.

After learning about the harassment involving the two women, Filner asked police to make extra checks at Children's Pool and called for the nighttime-closure permit, said mayoral spokeswoman Irene McCormack.

The City has also notified the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which is charged with enforcing the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Officials with the agency could not be reached for comment Tuesday night.

San Diego Police Department Capt. Brian Ahearn said for the past several weeks, the department has put an officer on patrol at Children's Pool 24 hours a day seven days a week, with officers working in shifts.

The harassment case involving the two women is still being investigated, said Ahearn, who oversees the department's Northern Division, including La Jolla.

Having police at the site is meant to keep the peace and prevent future abuse of the seals, Ahearn said. Since officers have been stationed there, he said, there have been no incidents and no arrests.

“The officers have become a part of the community,” interacting with the visitors and even answering questions about the seals, Ahearn said.

Ahearn said the police presence won't be indefinite, and that San Diego's Park and Recreation Department is looking at a transition plan that involves using private security guards.

Source: <http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/2013/mar/19/childrens-pool-seals-la-jolla/>