

Death by GPS in the desert

By Tom Knudson, Sacramento Bee

Five harrowing days after becoming stuck on a remote backcountry road in Death Valley National Park in August 2009, Alicia Sanchez lay down next to her Jeep Cherokee and prepared to die.

Then she heard a voice.

"I called as I approached, asking if she was okay," wrote Ranger Amber Nattrass in a park report. "She was waving frantically and screaming, 'My baby is dead, my baby is dead.'"

In the SUV, Nattrass found Sanchez's lifeless 6-year-old son Carlos on the front seat. "She told me they walked 10 miles but couldn't find any help (and) ... had run out of water and had been drinking their own urine," Nattrass wrote.

"She turned down a wrong road," Nattrass said in a recent interview. "She said she was following her GPS unit."

Danger has long stalked those who venture into California's desert in the heat of summer. But today, with more people pouring into the region, technology and tragedy are mixing in new and unexpected ways.

"It's what I'm beginning to call death by GPS," said Death Valley wilderness coordinator Charlie Callagan. "People are renting vehicles with GPS and they have no idea how it works and they are willing to trust the GPS to lead them into the middle of nowhere."

The number of people visiting Death Valley in the summer, when temperatures often exceed 120 degrees, has soared from 97,000 in 1985 to 257,500 in 2009. That pattern holds at Joshua Tree as well, which recorded 128,000 visitors in the summer of

1988. Last year: 230,000.

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