

Opinion: A compromise for dogs at Upper Truckee Marsh

Publisher's note: This is an open letter to the staff and board of the California Tahoe Conservancy and for all those concerned about access to the Upper Truckee Marsh.

By Anthony Cupaiuolo

Due to a ban by the California Tahoe Conservancy board, no dogs are allowed (leashed or otherwise) in the Upper Truckee Marsh through July 31. This three-month closure is the first of its kind for the marsh, and there is talk of banning dogs permanently from this area. This would be a tragic outcome for residents and visitors to this area.

The reason for the closure is to protect wildlife and nesting grounds in the marsh – a commendable goal. The marsh is a special area and it deserves special protection. I'm a volunteer videographer for Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care, where my wife, Karen, is a board member and also a volunteer – so we're keenly aware of the needs of wildlife in our region.



People
allowing dogs
to run off-
leash led to
the ban of
canines at
Upper Truckee

Marsh.

Photo/LTN

Unfortunately, this closure does little to protect wildlife while punishing responsible dog owners. The board doesn't want dogs off-leash chasing wildlife and disturbing nesting grounds. Neither do we. But, dogs already aren't allowed off-leash in the meadow. So, what we have is an education and enforcement issue.

Additionally, it doesn't address other irresponsible behaviors that are harmful to wildlife, such as those who use the marsh to fly loud gas-powered radio-controlled planes. Or let their cats outside, free to stalk and kill small birds and animals. Or those who use the area as a late-night party spot. (I've even seen people drag some pretty big power generators out there for music.) And although the meadow is a great place to teach kids about wildlife, they can be pretty disruptive themselves – ever seen a 5 year old go running up to a bunch of ducks just to see them scatter? Again, education and enforcement (and more on both in a moment).

Currently, responsible dog owners like my family are unable to enjoy the beauty of our nearby treasure for three prime months of the year (and possibly permanently). My wife and I have a small child and my parents live next door. If we want to enjoy an off-pavement walk with our Lab (also a member of our family), we have to load up two cars and drive somewhere.

Yes, there are other areas dog owners can take their dogs for walks – but none is as beautiful or as accessible for young and old family members as this meadow. It's as if you were told you couldn't go to Kirkwood, but only Boreal on a powder day. Why should this beautiful area be reserved for just a few? This meadow should be open to everyone who respects it.

Clearly, denial of access is unfair. But there is another side – one with which I empathize. The residents who live on or

nearby the meadow's access points have had to contend with disrespectful people who allow their dogs to roam freely and don't pick up after them. They've had to deal with those who use the trails to access the beach for late night parties. This, also, is unfair (although not connected with the dog/wildlife issue).

There is a solution that I see as a middle ground. Last month, I had the opportunity to voice my concerns about the closure to Ray Lacey and Dana Dapolito, deputy director and associate environmental planner, respectively, for the Conservancy. During that conversation the idea of a permitting process emerged.

Although we didn't cover the specifics, this is how it might work: Those who wish to walk their dogs (on a leash) would have to go the Conservancy's office to get a permit to walk their dog in the meadow. During this process, they would learn about the sensitive nature of the marsh and the reasons why keeping dogs on leash are necessary. Those with permits would be able to walk their dogs in the meadow. If you are caught walking your dog in the meadow without a permit, even if it's on leash, you would be fined. If you have a permit and you let your dog off-leash, you would be fined.

Once the word gets out about this process, there's every reason to believe we can accomplish the goals of protecting the marsh while allowing access to those who are responsible and respectful of this local treasure. Of course, dog owners who want this area to be open to dogs off-leash will be disappointed – so might residents who live on the marsh who wish to keep this area as private as possible for themselves. But for the vast majority of us, this is a solution that works.

Anthony Cupaiuolo is an Al Tahoe area homeowner.