

# Sunset Cliffs Natural Park San Diego, California

City of San Diego  
Park and Recreation Department



Coastal access at Ladera Street

San Diego City Council and by the California Coastal Commission (2005).

The mission statement for the master plan is: "Create a Park where people can enjoy San Diego's natural coastal environment as it once was, free from the effects of man and intended to inspire the user to reflect on the grandeur of the sea, and the beauty of the cliffs that are Point Loma."

### Exploring the Park...

Trails offer one of the best ways to experience the park. Beginning at Adair and Sunset Cliffs Blvd., a one mile coastal trail along Sunset Cliffs Blvd. allows access to views of sea arches, rocky promontories, and sandy coves.

Steps descend to the ocean at Sunset Cliffs Blvd. and Ladera St. This is the gateway to the intertidal zone at low tide.

South of Ladera St., the character of the park changes dramatically into a 50-acre natural hillside

### Caution:

The cliffs are extremely dangerous.

Falls can be fatal.

Steps and rocks can be slippery, and cliff edges can collapse without warning.

Tides can change the sea level more than 9 feet within 6 hours.

Consult tide charts.



Ladera St. stairs at -0.9 foot low tide

Ladera St. stairs at +6.5 foot high tide

Eric Swanson and Jonathan Louie



Abalone, *Haliotis*, once abundant, are now rarely seen at the cliffs, in part because of disease in the past century.

John Lyons / San Diego Natural History Museum

area. Trails follow the curving coastal slopes, offering access to the diverse native habitat.

### Advocating for the Park...

**Sunset Cliffs Natural Park Council (SCNPC)**, the City of San Diego's official advisory group for Sunset Cliffs Natural Park, was chartered by the San Diego Park and Recreation Board in 1988. The Council is currently working toward implementation of the *Sunset Cliffs Natural Park Master Plan* in collaboration with the City. The Council holds monthly meetings. The public is welcome.

**The Friends of Sunset Cliffs** is a nonprofit 501(c)3 California Corporation established in 1999. "Friends" Articles of Incorporation define a mission of protecting the natural cliff process, working to preserve the environment, promoting public aware-



Hillside trail

Ellen Quick

ness, supporting public access, and raising funds through donations and grants.

Website for both organizations: [www.sunsetcliffs.info](http://www.sunsetcliffs.info)



Starburst anemone

Benjamin Phezer, PhD/Cabrillo NM

### To Preserve And Enjoy The Park...

- Use the designated trails
- Keep the park clean
- Follow the rules
- Do not remove plants, animals, shells, rocks, or cultural artifacts
- Join work parties and clean up efforts
- Participate in Sunset Cliffs Natural Park Council meetings and activities

### Location and directions to Sunset Cliffs Natural Park

Located on the west side of the Point Loma peninsula, the park is just south of Ocean Beach.

#### Freeway Access to Sunset Cliffs Blvd.:

Take I-8 west to Sunset Cliffs Blvd. / From downtown San Diego, take I-5 north and follow signs for beach access along the I-8 Freeway to Sunset Cliffs Blvd. / From locations north of I-8, take I-5 south and take the Sea World Dr. exit, following the signs to Sunset Cliffs Blvd.

#### Sunset Cliffs Blvd. Entrance:

Travel south on Sunset Cliffs Blvd. for approximately two miles, through Ocean Beach, to Adair St. and the northern entrance to the park.

#### Ladera St. Entrance:

From Sunset Cliffs Blvd., proceed up the hill on Ladera St. for 2 blocks. Turn right at the park entrance.

#### Eastern Entrance:

From Catalina Blvd., turn west onto Lomaland Dr. toward the Point Loma Nazarene University entrance. Continue on Lomaland Dr., past the university entry kiosk, through the campus, and down the hill to the Sunset Cliffs Natural Park parking lot on the right. The parking lot offers a panoramic view.

#### From Cabrillo National Monument:

Drive north on Catalina Blvd. to Lomaland Dr. Turn left and continue to the eastern entrance as described above.



location of park, relative to San Diego

- P parking lot
- unimproved trail
- improved dirt trail

### FACT OR FICTION

Which are realities, myths or misconceptions? Test your knowledge!

1. The main cause of unnatural cliff retreat is the pounding surf.  
**False!** Uncontrolled runoff and seepage from both rain and landscaping irrigation are major contributors to unnatural cliff retreat.
2. A favorite feature viewed from the park is part of a national monument.  
**True!** The formation locally known as "Cormorant Rock" near Froude St. and Sunset Cliffs Blvd. is part of the California Coastal National Monument, established by President Bill Clinton in 2000.
3. Those plants are all brown. They must be dead.  
**False!** Many coastal sage scrub species are dormant in the summer. They are very much alive, with leaves and flowers returning after the winter and spring rains.
4. The yellow-centered daisy, *Chrysanthemum coronarium*, seen throughout the hillside section of the park in the springtime, is a native species.  
**False!** The *Chrysanthemum coronarium*, or yellow daisy, is a very invasive non-native species that is often mistaken for a native. It is considered a prime fuel for fires. The bush sunflower, *Encelia californica*, bright yellow with a dark brown center, is the true native. The bush sunflower has a longer blooming season and helps to keep the soil from eroding.

The intertidal ecosystem includes narrow sandy coves and rocky reefs extending into the ocean. Here, where the land and sea overlap, the diversity of species within 10 vertical feet is among the greatest on earth.

Diverse habitats can be found in the intertidal zone. On the sandy beach, where food comes primarily from plankton and other particles delivered by crashing waves, there are crabs, clams, and worm shells. In the rocky headlands, some areas are exposed only at the lowest tides.

Surfgrass and various kinds of algae, including kelp, are visible among the reefs at moderate to low tides. Tidepool nooks and crannies offer protection for baby sculpin, opaleye, and other small fish.



Karen Straus

Vulnerable invertebrates, including barnacles, anemones, and limpets, tenaciously hold onto rocks, experiencing exposure to the sun's rays as the tide rolls in and out. Gravitational pull by the moon and sun creates two high and low tides daily. The times and heights of the tides vary from day to day. **Remember to step carefully near these fragile marine homes.**

### People and the Natural Resource...

Sunset Cliffs has inspired people throughout the centuries. Native Americans were in this area more than 7,000 years ago. The Kumeyaay traveled seasonally to Sunset Cliffs, gathering roots and seeds from native plants on the coastal terrace. Seafood was harvested from the intertidal zone and roasted in fire hearths on the bluff tops.

Madame Tingley and her followers created the Theosophical Community of Lomaland on the bluffs in 1897. Later, in 1950, the site became the campus for Balboa University, which evolved into California Western University in 1952, and then United States International University (USIU) in 1968. In 1973, USIU sold the hilltop acreage to Pasadena College

(now Point Loma Nazarene University) and 48 hillside acres to the City of San Diego. Later the City purchased additional acreage to complete the park's 50-acre hillside section, which was dedicated in 1983.

In 1903 Albert Spalding purchased acreage north of the Theosophical Community, including what is now the 18-acre linear section along Sunset Cliffs Boulevard, naming the property "Sunset Cliffs."

In anticipation of the 1915 Panama-California Exposition, Spalding hired a Japanese architect and spent two million dollars to create picturesque cobblestone paths, bridges, and carved stairways leading to the sandy coves. This linear section was later acquired by John Mills, who spent an additional one million dollars for restoration. The features added by Spalding and Mills eroded over time. Most of the linear section of the park was transferred to the City of San Diego in 1926.

### Creating a Legacy...

The Master Plan for this regional resource based park focuses on protecting the significant coastal resources, restoring the endangered natural landscape, and improving public access. Following many years of broad based community input, the *Sunset Cliffs Natural Park Master Plan* was approved by the

