

CAPE HATTERAS NATIONAL SEASHORE - Consideration of Modifications to the Final Rule for Off-Road Vehicle Management Environmental Assessment

Rationale used to modify or retain existing vehicle-free areas and ORV routes

Purpose of this Document

This document provides a summary of the rationale and criteria used when considering potential changes to VFAs at the Seashore. It is based on project team discussions during internal scoping, agency scoping, alternatives development, and alternatives refinement. It was also updated after the EA was published to provide additional information. It provides a supplement to the existing notes, correspondence, and other documents contained in the Decision File for this project. Public input during the EA scoping period, the EA comment period, and the proposed rule public comment period was considered.

Ramp 1 to 0.5 miles south of Coquina Beach

This is an existing VFA that is approximately 1.7 miles in length. This section of beach is immediately adjacent to a developed town (Nags Head) and provides for a non-motorized use in an area next to a town that has seasonal ORV use. This is the northern-most section of the Seashore and the first opportunity for visitors to experience a non-developed and primitive area of beach at Cape Hatteras National Seashore. The park has made investments in this area to allow access to the beach to people who do not have vehicles. There are several parking areas and a swimming area that helps provide a high quality visitor experience. Areas to the north of Ramp 2 and Coquina Beach tend to be narrow has a narrow beach, and there have historically been no turtle nests in that location.

As part of the preferred alternative in the EA, the NPS re-opened ramp 2 to ORV use and converted ½ mile of the existing VFA to a year-round ORV route to the south. Opening Ramp 2 would eliminate the costs and environmental impacts associated with building a new Ramp 2.5. Shorebird nesting in this area is limited and turtles do not historically nest here, so no substantial increase in workload to install wildlife protection buffers is anticipated.

0.5 mile south of Coquina to 0.2 mile south of Ramp 4

This is an existing year-round ORV route.

0.2 mile south of Ramp 4 to southeast corner of Bodie Island Spit

This is a seasonal ORV route between September 15 and March 14. The team discussed modifying the seasonal dates for this route and chose not to make any changes due to nesting wildlife that use this area in the spring and late summer.

Southeast corner of Bodie Island spit along inlet shoreline to southwest edge of Bait Pond

This is an existing VFA that serves as an important area for nesting and migrating wildlife.

On the topic of modifying or removing a VFA from Bodie Island, the team agreed that only having one vehicle-free area for the northern island would not provide a balance of motorized and non-motorized experiences. Bodie Island Spit is very close to an existing seasonal ORV route and is easily accessible to those with ORVs who want to walk into this location. This area provides a vehicle free experience, also easily accessible to ORV users.

Rodanthe boundary to 0.1 mile south of Rodanthe pier

This area in front of the village of Rodanthe consists of a very narrow beach that has traditionally not been particularly suitable for ORV use.

0.1 mile south of Rodanthe Pier–Waves-Salvo to Ramp 23

This section of beach borders a village. This is a seasonal ORV route between November 1 and March 31. Dates for ORV use were changed to October 15 through April 14th.

Ramp 23 to 1.5 miles south of Ramp 23

This is an existing 1.5 mile long VFA. This area is traditionally used by least terns for nesting, so it would be difficult to be routinely used during the shorebird nesting season and should remain a VFA. However, there would be potential for a seasonal ORV route south of Ramp 23. The NPS would like to continue to provide an area for pedestrians to walk from the village of Salvo to the VFA for a non-motorized experience during peak visitation. However, there could still be vehicular use in the off-season which would allow connectivity to existing year-round ORV route to the south. It's a challenging place to have year-round ORV route due to nesting activity and workload complexity.

1.5 miles south of Ramp 23 to Ramp 27

This is a year-round ORV route.

Ramp 27 to Ramp 30

This is an existing 2.2 mile long VFA. This area meets the intent of the Seashore's enabling legislation as it provides a "wilderness-like" experience and is located an equal distance from both villages.

NPS wanted to have at least one, 2-mile long section for pedestrian beachgoers to have primitive experience between tri-villages and Avon. The area between ramps 27 and 30 would remain vehicle free year-round to protect habitat for breeding and nonbreeding birds and to provide visitors the opportunity to experience a vehicle-free beach.

Ramp 30 to Ramp 32

This is a year-round ORV route.

Ramp 32 to Ramp 34

This is an existing 2-mile long VFA. This area is walkable from Avon village, parking accessible from Highway 12, as well as an important area for resource use. Additionally, there are ORV routes surrounding this VFA area. Terns have nested on either side of the ramp and have closed ramp 34 in the past.

NPS recently built (2015) a new pedestrian parking lot and footpath south of ramp 32 to provide year-round access to allow for some (1 mile) of vehicle experience north of Avon. However, the NPS extended the existing seasonal ORV route north of ramp 34 for approximately 1 mile to provide motorized access to a popular area during fall, winter, and spring fishing seasons.

Ramp 34 to Ramp 38 (includes Avon Village Beach)

This section of beach borders a village. This is an existing Seasonal ORV route between November 1 and March 31. Dates for ORV use were changed to October 15 through April 14th.

Ramp 38 to 1.5 miles south of Ramp 38 (i.e., Haulover)

This is an existing year-round ORV route.

1.5 miles south of Ramp 38 (i.e., Haulover) to 0.4 mile north of Ramp 43 (includes Buxton)

This is an existing VFA approximately 4 miles long. The portion of the VFA north of the lighthouse is often a very narrow stretch of beach and some of the wider sections may have nesting turtles and shorebirds. This area provides a VFA in an around the village of Buxton and for pedestrians coming from the nearby lighthouse.

0.4 mile north of Ramp 43 to Cape Point to 0.3 miles west of the hook

This is an existing year-round ORV route.

0.3 mile west of the hook (Cape Point) to just east of Ramp 48

This is an extremely well-used area for wildlife nesting for shorebirds and turtles. It is one of highest shorebird nesting density locations at the Seashore making ORV use difficult and impractical during the shorebird nesting season. This area is far from roads and the highway. The scenic qualities make it most appropriate for a more remote location in the Seashore to have a wilderness-like experience without the presence of vehicles. The NPS decided to build a parking area at old ramp 45 to allow easier pedestrian access to this area. This area provides a large south-facing beach that wintering shorebirds can utilize relatively free from disturbance.

Just east of ramp 48 to the east Frisco boundary (includes Ramp 49)

This is an existing year-round ORV route.

Frisco Village Beach (east village boundary to west boundary)

This section of beach borders a village. This is a seasonal ORV route between November 1 and March 31. Dates for ORV use were changed to October 15 through April 14th.

Sandy Bay / Frisco day use area (west Frisco boundary to east Hatteras Village boundary)

This area contains a narrow beach that not particularly suitable for driving. The NPS invested in a day-use area for non-motorized users in this area. This VFA provides a valuable pedestrian-only experience between the villages of Hatteras and Frisco and it's the only VFA that's directly adjacent to both villages, making it easily accessible.

Hatteras Village Beach (east boundary to Ramp 55)

This section of beach borders a village. This is a seasonal ORV route between November 1 and March 31. Dates for ORV use were changed to October 15 through April 14th.

Ramp 55 along ocean beach to Bone Road

This is an existing year-round ORV route.

Bone Road to Hatteras Inlet, along inlet shoreline to Spur Road

This area no longer exists due to erosion. Additionally, it has been accessible to ORVs because pole road extends to the end of the island and parking currently exists near the end of Pole Road.

Pole Road from NC-12 to Spur Road

This is an existing year-round ORV route.

Cable Crossing route (from Pole Road to sound)

This is an existing year-round ORV route.

Spur Road route (from Pole Road to sound)

This is an existing year-round ORV route.

Interdunal road from eastern portion of Spur Road west toward inlet

This is an existing seasonal ORV route between September 15 and March 14. The team discussed modifying the seasonal dates for this route and chose not to make any changes due to nesting wildlife that use this area in the spring and late summer.

Ocracoke Inlet to Ramp 59

This is an existing VFA. However, the NPS extended the existing year-round ORV route from 59.5 to 59 so that proposed ramp 59.5 will not need to be built; consequently, eliminating new resource impacts and only requiring a minimal changes to the VFA. This change provided a 0.5-mile of additional year-round ORV route up to existing ramp 59. The northern tip of the spit is a very narrow beach and not particularly suitable for driving. The easterly tip of this area is well-used by shorebirds and provides an undeveloped, remote, non-motorized experience.

Ramp 59 to Ramp 63

Most of this area is an existing year-round ORV route. As described above, the NPS converted 0.5 mile of the VFA around existing ramp 59 to a year-round ORV route. This resulted in cost savings and no new environmental impacts associated with building a new ramp traversing the dunes.

Ramp 63 to 1.0 mile northeast of Ramp 67

This is an existing VFA. The NPS invested in a parking area and boardwalk across from the Pony Pens where non-motorized activities will be available. There are several parking areas and a swimming area that helps provide a high quality non-motorized visitor experience.

1.0 mile northeast of ramp 67 to 0.5 mile northeast of Ramp 68

This is an existing year-round ORV route.

0.5 mile northeast of Ramp 68 to Ramp 68 (Ocracoke Campground area)

This is an existing seasonal ORV route between November 1 and March 31. Like the seasonal routes in front of the villages, the seasonal dates in front of the campground were changed to allow 2 more weeks of ORV use in the spring and fall.

Ramp 68 to 0.4 miles northeast of Ramp 70 (includes Ocracoke Day Use area)

This is an existing VFA that provides a vehicle-free experience close to the village of Ocracoke. The area between Ramp 68 and 70 is a popular location for wintering and migratory birds. The park has made investments in the area to allow access to the beach to people who do not have vehicles. The NPS continues to maintain and invest in the large lifeguarded beach and day-use area for non-motorized users.

0.4 mile northeast of Ramp 70 to Ocracoke Inlet (includes Ramp 72)

This is an existing year-round ORV route.

Inlet shoreline along South Point

This area represents another highly-used area for shorebirds and turtles. It's one of the highest density nesting areas in the Seashore. It's also an important stopover for wintering shorebirds and having a VFA there allows for limited disturbance to those species.

There is existing ORV access close to south point. It's also easy to access the VFA and get a non-motorized experience from its proximity to the existing year-round ORV route along the ocean beach.