

Jan. 24, 2022

Good afternoon members of the San Mateo County Planning Commission and the Midcoast Community Council,

I am born and raised in Redwood City and a frequent visitor to Pillar Point Bluff. I am also a coastal and nearshore ecologist with training and degrees in both marine science and environmental policy. I respectfully urge you to vote NO on the Coastal Development Permit (CDP) for off-leash dogs at Pillar Point Bluff.

You may expect because of my background in marine ecology and policy that I am writing to you to ask you to protect wildlife and sensitive habitats by voting NO on the CDP. While I would like you to protect wildlife and sensitive habitats, out of consideration for your time I will limit my comments to maintaining maximum public access and public safety.

Re. maximum public access, and public safety:

Parks all across the nation, including in San Mateo County, suffer from racial disparities in access to and time spent in nature, which one might call a "nature gap." A majority of park visitors are white and aging.[1][2] In a county like San Mateo County, where the majority of the population is no longer white, this means that most county residents are disproportionately underutilizing the stunning public spaces and coastal landscapes that they are entitled to. This disparity has been observed for decades but came under increased scrutiny during the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, when videos of Black people being policed by white people in parks and other public spaces started going viral.

The work to transform nature and "the outdoors" into a space where all groups of people can belong and feel safe is unfinished and ongoing. Any debate about "maximum public access" or public safety must also ask: "Maximum access and public safety for whom?" Underserved communities and historically (and currently) excluded minorities must be at the forefront of that conversation.

So where do these racial disparities, or nature gaps, fit in with off-leash dogs? Dog owners who advocate for off-leash privileges in sensitive habitats and on stunning coastal trails like those found at Pillar Point Bluff are like the average park user: disproportionately white and aging. Meanwhile, sociological studies have found that by reinforcing white, middle-class style relationships with the outdoors and with nature, white residents use dogs "to maintain interracial boundaries and feelings of safety" (Mayorga-Gallo, 2018).[3] Indeed, white people have a long and unsavory history in the United States of using dogs to enforce control over Black people.[4][5] In light of this information our nation's historical, cultural contexts, it's not surprising that when a Black activist on Twitter polled both white and Black dog owners, the data showed that white respondents overwhelmingly welcomed behavior from dogs that Black respondents would not tolerate or allow.[6]

Let's not forget that when Amy Cooper, a white woman, made headline news around the world for calling the police on Christian Cooper, a Black man who was birdwatching, she did so because she threatened Christian with police violence after **he had asked her to keep better control of her dog within the park space they were both using**. [7] Because this incident involved a white dog owner threatening a Black man with police action just because she was told by him to properly control her dog, both dog owners and Black, Indigenous and Other People of Color (BIPOC) were forced to think about how they use public space, and to have tough conversations about who has true, maximum access to these spaces and who doesn't, and who feels safe in those spaces and who doesn't. [8] Scientists of color, including myself, who have similarly been policed by white dog owners and other white people in parks and other public spaces while conducting research for academic institutions, also weighed in on the concept of public access and feelings of safety, [9] as did LGBTQ+ folks whose own interactions with dog owners in parks left them feeling unsafe. [10]

It is critical to understand that "maximum public access" and "public safety" does not mean reinforcing the cultural norms and interactional relationships with nature that belong to a select demographic of an already overrepresented group in San Mateo County. There are many of us who aren't white and aging; who don't possess the sort of cultural desire to bring partner animals with us wherever we go regardless of who else in the community we might inconvenience or make feel unsafe; or who simply don't have the same overwhelmingly positive attachments to dogs as a select overrepresented few. We also have the right to enjoy this one coastal spot without having to worry about the presence of off-leash dogs. In fact, in the absence of 24/7 monitoring from county park rangers, many of us already worry at Pillar Point Bluff about what will happen to us and our safety if we ask dog owners to comply with rules that exist already, and which they are breaking.

County residents see our furry friends all the time: on our sidewalks, in our apartment buildings, at outdoor cafes, outside grocery stores, and in plenty of other already existing parks. We don't need to create more spaces on the Coastsides that make those who already less likely to feel welcome in such public spaces to shy away from them. Far more people than just white, middle-class dog owners deserve maximum public access to stunning coastal trails and ocean views.

Because of these considerations for maximum public access and public safety, and because of the threat posed by off-leash dogs to wildlife and sensitive habitat, I respectfully urge you to vote NO on the Coastal Development Permit (CDP) for off-leash dogs at Pillar Point Bluff.

Thank you,

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- [1] [Why Are Our Parks So White? \(New York Times\)](#)
- [2] [Our National Parks Belong to Everyone. So Why Are They So White? \(Grist\)](#)
- [3] [Whose Best Friend? Dogs and Racial Boundary Maintenance in a Multiracial Neighborhood](#)
- [4] [Attack Dogs and the History of Racial Violence](#)
- [5] [Police Still Use Attack Dogs on Black Americans \(Washington Post\)](#)
- [6] ["Dog Gate" — The Divide Between Liberal White People & Black People](#)
- [7] [Amy Cooper, White Woman Who Called the Cops on Black Bird-Watcher in NYC, Has Been Charged](#)
- [8] [An Open Letter From Black America to White People's Pets](#)
- [9] [Whose Space? Our Space \(University of Washington\)](#)
- [10] [Black Lives Matter: How White People's Choices in Dog Ownership Perpetuate Racism and Violence](#)

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