

More Mesa Preservation Coalition Recreational Use and Values of More Mesa

Overview

Documented public use of More Mesa dates back nearly 100 years, to the 1930s, when residents and visitors began using the unimproved trails for recreation, including walking, running, dog walking, horseback riding, bird watching, hang gliding, and beach access. Recent surveys show tens of thousands now use roughly 10 miles of informal trails each year.

More Mesa encompasses approximately 325 acres, including 271 acres currently under the control of two private owners in seven parcels on the mesa, and 54 acres owned by Santa Barbara County in the northwest corner, consisting of level mesa and low-lying forested lands adjacent to Atascadero Creek. These County lands support more than two miles of public trails, while the privately owned parcels include roughly eight miles of informal trails.

The More Mesa Preservation Coalition is a community organization founded in the 1980s and includes neighbors, scientists, and 1,000 community members who work to protect More Mesa from development through education, advocacy, and outreach.



Purpose

The More Mesa Preservation Coalition (MMPC) launched a recreational user survey to document community recreational use and the values associated with More Mesa. While past studies and County plans have focused on land use, habitat protection, and recreational access, no detailed County surveys have examined how the public actually recreates on More Mesa or what specific recreational values the public associates with it. By gathering data on recreational use, public priorities, and community concerns, this Recreational Use and Values analysis is intended to provide the public, decision-makers, and agencies with focused data and insights on these issues.

“Visiting More Mesa is a staple and sacred part of my daily life that makes me feel relaxed and connected to nature.”

Key Findings

Many respondents visit weekly or more, most often for walking, running, dog walking, birdwatching, or cycling. When asked how important More Mesa is to their personal fitness routine, 76% said it is “very important,” highlighting its essential role in supporting community health and everyday recreation.

Others described horseback riding, paragliding, photography, and simply relaxing at the beach, underscoring the land’s versatility. Together, the blufftop trails and coastal access make More Mesa one of the most dynamic outdoor spaces on the South Coast.

Figure 1-Visitor Frequency

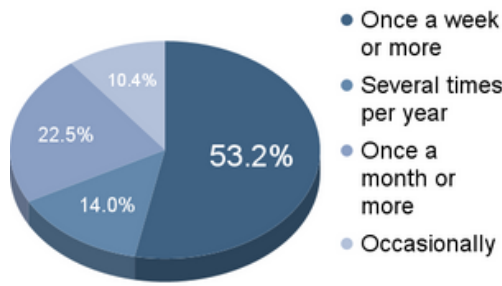


Figure 2-Importance to Recreation, Health and Fitness Regime

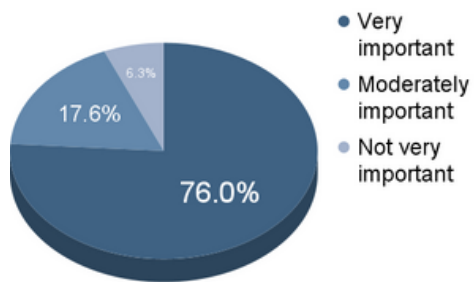
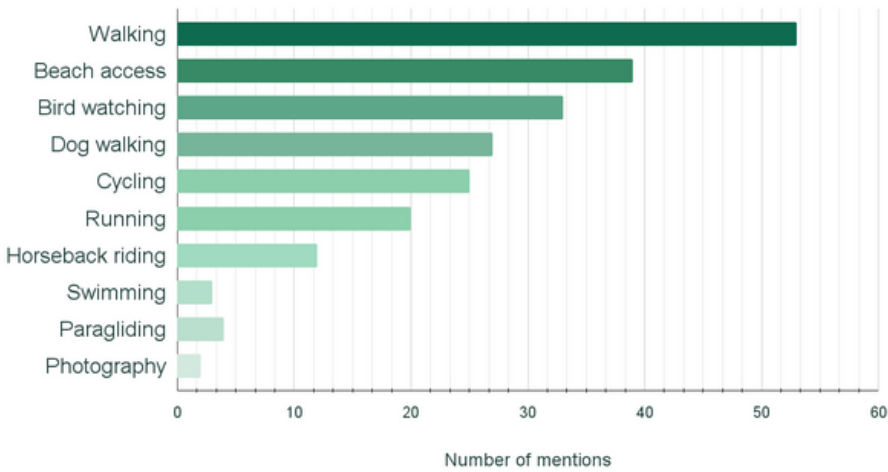


Figure 3-Recreational Activities Mentioned

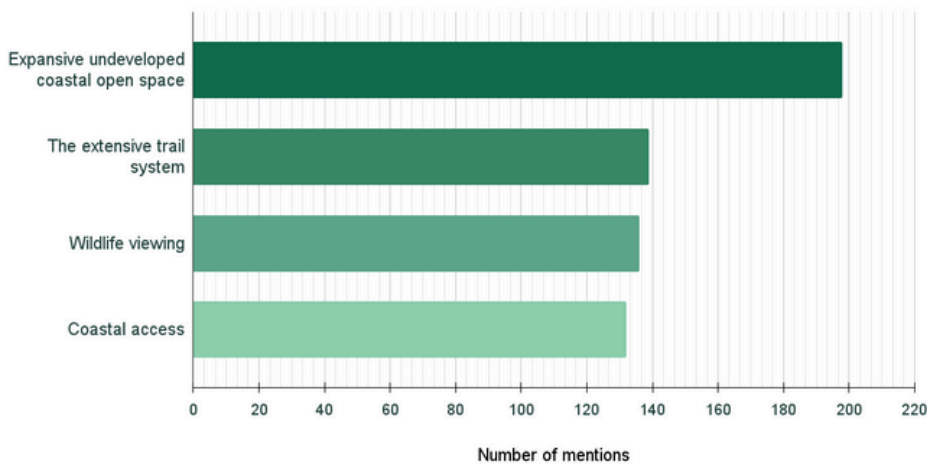


Alongside recreation, many visitors value More Mesa’s tranquility, scenic beauty, and abundant wildlife. Across responses, the most valued features were consistent: expansive open space, extensive trails, wildlife habitat, and access to the coast. Others pointed to rarer qualities, such as the vernal pools, opportunities for solitude, and the sense of communal access to nature that binds generations together.

“I have a running group that has been doing a weekly run around More Mesa for almost 20 years now!”

With so many different users sharing the same trail network, occasional conflicts, especially on narrow or degraded paths, do arise, underscoring the need for careful planning and ongoing maintenance.

Figure 4-Most Important Values of More Mesa



“More Mesa is very important for our collective health, and would be a shame to lose it.”

Figure 5-Trail System and Access Points

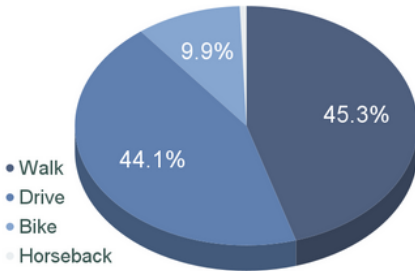


More Mesa can be reached through a network of formal and informal access points connecting surrounding neighborhoods, parking on public roads, and trails. Survey respondents identified which of the 8 access points to More Mesa they utilize. The numbers add up to well over 100% as some respondents utilize multiple access points.

NUMBER	ACCESS POINT	% OF RESPONDANTS USING THIS ENTRY
1	Mockingbird Lane (via sidewalks from Vieja Drive)	52.5%
2	Trail at Hacienda Vieja neighborhood (off Vieja Drive and Shoreline Drive)	10.6%
3	Public trail starting at Vieja Drive and Via Huerta	18.4%
4	Hope Ranch access trail off of Via Roblada	19.9%
5	Shoreline Drive (trail near horse stables)	19.1%
6	Public trail along Atascadero Creek at west end of horse stable (parking on S. Patterson Dr.)	17%
7	Shoreline Drive and Orchid Drive (gated trail at base of hill)	14.2%
8	Orchid Drive (400 ft south of Shoreline)	9.9%

Survey responses show that Mockingbird Lane is by far the most frequently used entry, which may reflect both neighborhood use, ample public on-street parking, and the most direct route to the beach. While other access points receive more moderate use, visitors accessing More Mesa from the west (access points 5–8) include both More Mesa Shores residents and cyclists using the Obern Regional Trail, as well as others seeking a diverse experience that combines the heavily wooded County property along Atascadero Creek with the mesa’s open grasslands.

Figure 6-Mode of Access

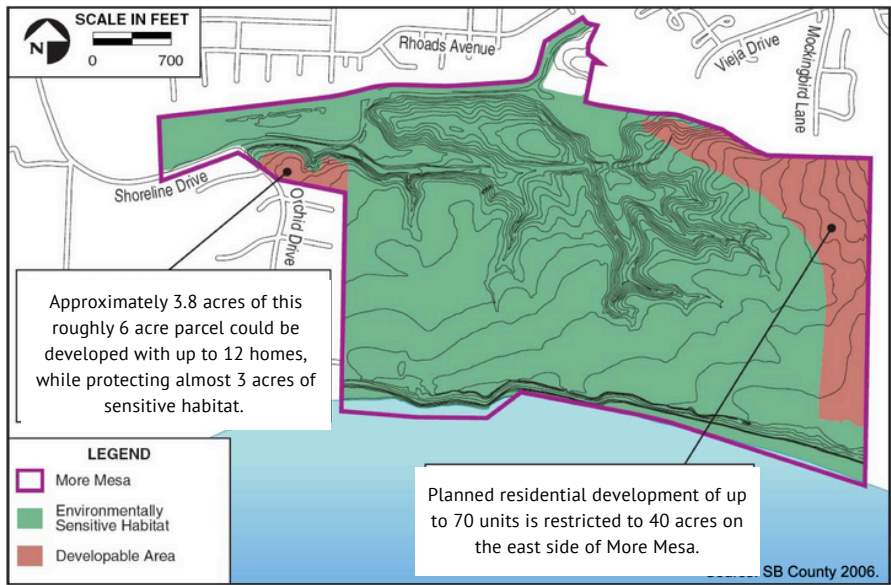


While a majority of visitors live close enough to walk to More Mesa, many users drive to access points, and a smaller portion bike to the mesa and its trails.

Public Awareness of Threat of Development

Despite heavy public recreational use, most survey respondents were unaware that the majority of More Mesa is privately owned, not a protected reserve, and therefore vulnerable to future development. More than 92% of respondents were very concerned over possible development threats. County plans currently allow up to 82 homes—70 homes on 40 acres off Mockingbird Lane adjacent to Hope Ranch, and 12 homes off Orchid Drive adjacent to More Mesa Shores. Roughly 227 acres of private land on the main mesa are designated as Environmentally Sensitive Habitat (ESH), which restricts development, although such policies can be amended (see Figure 7).

Figure 7-Map of Developable Area



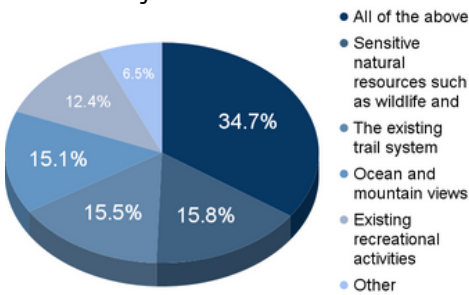
The currently planned development would affect existing public access, including potential trail relocation, prolonged construction closures, and temporary impacts such as noise and dust, as well as long-term effects like loss of views, changes to trail aesthetics, tree removal, and disruption of wildlife. Five key trails would be impacted, including those from Mockingbird Lane, Vieja Drive/Via Huerta, Hacienda Vieja/Vieja Drive, Hope Ranch/Via Roblada, and More Mesa Shores/Orchid Drive (see Figures 1 and 4). These impacts would affect more than 85% of visitors to More Mesa.

Such impacts could increase substantially if the County were required to approve higher-density or expanded development to meet mandates in the 2029 Housing Element (see MMPC website for further discussion).

Conclusion and Next Steps

The recreational use survey provides a snapshot of how the public uses and values More Mesa today. The results highlight the recreational importance to the community and the strong desire to preserve it in perpetuity. The MMPC’s goal is to purchase all of More Mesa within the next two years.

Figure 8-Priorities for Protection



The results will guide advocacy, inform leaders, and support future planning. Partnerships with community groups, schools, and conservation organizations will expand awareness and stewardship. By documenting the public’s connection to More Mesa, this project lays a foundation to keep this rare landscape open and protected for generations.

Methodology

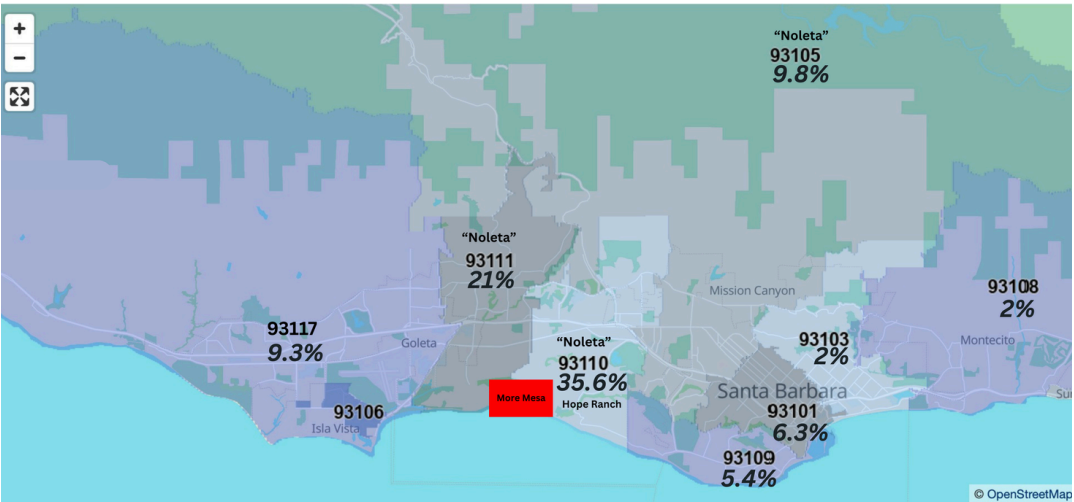
Survey data were collected between late May and early August 2025 through the More Mesa Recreational User Survey. In-person data were gathered during two field outreach days held on May 31 and June 7, 2025. On May 31, surveyors were present at a key trail junction above the beach access stairway from 11:00 AM to 4:00 PM, and on June 7 from 9:00 AM to 2:00 PM.



During these events, recreational users encountered at More Mesa were invited to participate by completing a hard-copy questionnaire, scanning a QR code to access the survey online, or providing verbal responses recorded by a staff member. Additional responses were collected in the following weeks through two main channels. The survey was shared with MMPC supporters, allowing respondents to complete it online at their convenience. In addition, physical flyers containing the survey QR code were posted at all eight main entrances to More Mesa, enabling visitors to easily access and complete the survey.

This mixed-method approach—combining in-person outreach, digital distribution, and posted signage—garnered input from a cross-section of 215 recreational users.

Figure 9-Respondant Zip Codes



Participants

Survey participants represented neighborhoods across the Goleta Valley and greater Santa Barbara area, with the largest share coming from communities closest to More Mesa. Respondents also included residents from downtown Santa Barbara, the Mesa, and Isla Vista, underscoring that More Mesa is valued as a regional resource.



Acknowledgments

The More Mesa Preservation Coalition (MMPC) extends heartfelt thanks to the hundreds of community members who participated in the Recreation Survey. Your voices and stories help guide efforts to preserve More Mesa's open space, wildlife, and public access.

Photo credits: Mark Bright, Ariella Jessica Zulc, Rachel Corry, Meredith Klassen

