

## Opinion: Restrictions on Brigantine beach drivers were inevitable

The days of largely unrestricted vehicle access to North Brigantine Natural Area are over. A fabulous freedom to enjoy one of South Jersey's most beautiful outdoor settings has been reined in after half a century, a sad loss for thousands of people ... yet an inexorable advance of some of society's other interests.

We're only surprised that the status quo there lasted this long.

New Jersey acquired the undeveloped peninsula with its 2.5-mile-long beach in 1967. From then until this year, the state allowed Brigantine to oversee its use by people.

The city allowed a wide range of recreational activities there. Purchasers of an annual permit could drive the beach to its northern end for fishing, surfing, kayaking, sunbathing, painting and more. And there was no limit on how many people could drive the beach on a given day.

This year, the state Department of Environmental Protection has assumed management of the beach and its driving access. Where the city sold more than 3,000 permits last year for \$180 each, which also gave them access to driving on beaches at the south end, the DEP is selling just 500 this year at \$50 for New Jersey residents and \$75 for nonresidents. And the state driving permits are for fishing only, although State Parks and Forestry Director Mark Texel said at a recent public meeting the DEP is considering allowing other passive types of recreation. But for now, non-fishing users will have to walk in.

Permitted fishing drivers will be limited to 75 per 24-hour period. The state said a vehicle count last year never exceeded that limit.

State management of this large beach and coastal dunes area was inevitable. As undeveloped and undisturbed beach became increasingly scarce in the nation's most densely populated state, the species that depend on it became more threatened and endangered. The state's Endangered and Nongame Species Program simply doesn't have enough suitable beach to give species such as piping plovers, least terns, sea-beach amaranth and black skimmers the help they deserve. And Brigantine North Natural Area is part of the longest stretch of undeveloped barrier island beach in the state.

The numbers for endangered piping plovers alone at North Brigantine, for example, suggest state management could benefit them. About 15 years ago 17 pairs of the plovers were breeding there. Last year there were just four.

State officials said they will work with special needs users to try to accommodate them.

But people shouldn't think they can just buy a fishing permit and drive in for whatever purpose. At Island Beach State Park to the north, for example, beach drivers are required to have fishing equipment and bait and tackle for each person over 12 ... as well as several other pieces of equipment.

In short, North Brigantine Natural Area is coming under normal state management for its kind of resources and habitat.

That will annoy many users familiar with the more open access of the past. They may as well focus on making the most out of the remaining options for beach-driving access, including with a city permit on the beach's south end.

We hope state officials can accommodate North Brigantine users to some degree, but we know that there's no stopping or reversing New Jersey's urbanization and population growth that make efforts to protect its natural areas necessary. In this case as in so many others, the good old days are just a memory, but that's no reason not to focus on the good now.