

Opinion: State Park police in Tahoe ruin visit

By Steve Hutchison

I am writing to express our collective disappointment at the treatment we received during an encounter with a member of the State Park police on Nov. 8 at D.L. Bliss State Park at Lake Tahoe.

My wife, our Friends, their boys, (6- and 8-years -old), and our two small dogs, a 14 pound French bulldog, and a 17 pound Boston terrier, packed a small lunch and took a walk down the beach toward D.L. Bliss State Park along the low water line, as we have often done this time of year for the past 40-plus years.

After an hour or so of walking along the completely deserted shoreline, we arrived at a similarly empty beach adjacent to D.L. Bliss State Park, where my friend and I, with our dogs, stopped just past a line coincident with the park fence to wait for the kids and our wives.

The dogs were tired from the walk, (they are quite small and it's a long boulder strewn walk), so we took them off leash so they wouldn't tangle on the bench legs where they both promptly fell asleep in the afternoon sun. After a half hour or so, the girls and the kids arrived, at which point we broke out water and some sandwiches.

After a few minutes we observed an official looking white pickup truck arrive and stop in the parking lot with police radio on, obviously some sort of park ranger, about a 150 feet from our position.

We awoke the dogs, placed them back on leash, (as we always do in public or when any potential stimulus for the dogs is

seen), and expected an inquiry regarding our presence (as I assumed the park was closed as are all the others around the lake this time of year), and expected to be greeted by a bored ranger, asked to be careful or at worse, asked to leave.

Instead, we were challenged by an angry policeman (name illegible on citation) badge No. 1513 (complete with flak vest and completely equipped police utility belt and side arm) who approached us, and in an agitated manner, informed us that there are no dogs allowed on the beach, to which I responded: "Oh, we thought the park was closed, if it's a problem, we'll leave back the direction we came down the beach." (Pointing north along the deserted beach).

To which the policeman responded in an even more accusatory and combative manner: "If it were closed, you would all be trespassing and all going to jail!"

"Now I need to see everyone's ID!"

To which we responded that none of us had any as we were out for a walk. This seemed to further incense the policeman to which he responded: "You drove here without a license?"

"No, again we walked here and are fine with just leaving."

All of us are now also becoming quite angry with the treatment we were being subjected to, but not wanting to escalate a silly situation into something else that it was obviously headed for, we again volunteered to simply diffuse the situation and leave the abandoned beach the way we came.

Then he informed us in an even angrier tone that not only are dogs not allowed, but that they must be leashed, to which we responded: "Well they are [leashed] see?" (Holding both dogs up to chest level displaying their harnesses and leashes-they are toy breed sized).

"I don't believe you! They weren't leashed," adding angrily,

“Don’t you see the big sign? No Dogs.”

There is indeed a 3-foot-by-4-foot “No Lifeguard On Duty” sign whose main purpose (judging by the fact that 75 percent of the sign is dedicated to those words) is to inform that there is no lifeguard on duty, but includes about a half dozen smaller icons with red slashes through them indicating all the various things that are prohibited, one of which is a dog, which on shading our eyes and squinting toward the setting sun we could just make out, next to the parking lot over 100 feet away.

We acknowledged the sign, but pointed out that it was far away and obscured by the glare of the setting sun; and that there is no sign when approaching the beach from the north (where we came from). Explanations which fell on the policeman’s deaf ears. When asked if the policeman was detaining us, he confirmed that he was detaining us and to remain where we were, stating: “You all stay here while I decide what I am going to do with these dogs.”

At this point the children think:

1. We may be going to jail,
2. That this policeman may try to seize our dogs.

I commented that I found it quite sad that the park rangers I remember from my youth at the lake in the 1970s were kindly naturalists, who were friendly and helpful, who would never have dreamed of subjecting us to the DHS storm trooper kind of treatment we were receiving from this officious and bullying policeman, all of which was brought about by having two small docile dogs on an empty beach.

At this point we were insulted, angry, and upset and (although not stated) definitely not about to let this rogue policeman so much as touch our harmless and special needs dogs.

Is this really the kind of demeanor and public relations policy the parks department seeks to promote? Threatening hikers and children with jail and seizure of their beloved pets? I fear the altercation that will inevitably occur when (not if, in my opinion) this policeman takes this very aggressive and combative tone and attitude with somebody with less to lose, or who for whatever reason is not in a mood to be bullied while on vacation in front of their children, in a campground where they are on vacation by the likes of this individual.

This is all of our business as citizens, as when someone exercises authority to the point of being ludicrous, we all lose; especially when it escalates to an altercation that potentially gets physical (that in my opinion this policeman was game for in threatening arrest and seizure of our dogs), and when, in the courts a decision is made to rightly award a victim of authority run amok, we as taxpayers and citizens all pay monetarily and in further erosion of confidence in our country's leadership.

In this instance, a simple friendly warning would have been immediately heeded and we would have gone the 100 feet it would have taken to pass the fence where the policeman assumed his jurisdiction began.

We again had two small dogs completely under control (with refuse bags attached to their leashes) and causing no disturbance whatsoever on a 100 percent deserted beach in November. We were cited (§ 4312, e and f) for dogs on state park property, and dogs off of a leash then mockingly told to have a nice day and come again.

In conclusion, we will fight this in court and share this negative experience with our friends and associates, and recommend a second thought when considering visiting a State Park.

Steve Hutchison is a resident of the Bay Area.