

Shaggy palm trees at Doheny State Beach get trims that Capo Beach residents hope will save them

Erika I. Ritchie

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DANA POINT Unkempt palm trees planted by beach-goers at Doheny State Beach decades ago have been a source of concern for Capistrano Beach residents, who have watched the frond-laden trees sway, snap and fall during winter storms.

But recently, after repeated requests by the residents, State Parks officials trimmed 19 of the trees, giving them “high and tight” cuts.

Rich Haydon, superintendent of State Parks, said it was part of an area-wide tree trimming that came from money the department received last year.

The Doheny palms were the last to get their trims, following the palms at San Onofre State Beach, Calafia at San Clemente State Beach, Huntington Beach and Bolsa Chica.

Toni Nelson, whose Capo Beach cliffside home overlooks the palm trees and the beach, has been trying to raise awareness for palm maintenance for years. Her concerns were heightened after nine toppled in this year’s winter storms.

Prior storms in the 1990s, 2005 and 2010 had already wreaked havoc on palms clustered at the south end of Doheny State Beach. The constant erosion started to cause the hard pack part of the sand they were rooted in to disappear, causing many of the palms to uproot and fall.

“It feels wonderful to know that polite persistence has paid off and we might get to enjoy these stoic palms a bit longer,” Nelson said. “These are iconic trees that are part of our Capo culture — part of the landscape that surfers and locals have seen for decades. It’s such a quintessential Capo story.”

Jim Serpa, who retired as supervising ranger at Doheny State Beach in 2013, said he always loved seeing the trees.

“If you used your imagination, you would swear you’d been transported back to the Florida Keys on some days with the palms, ocean water color and scarce crowds during the week,” said Serpa, who had been at Doheny since 1991.

The story of the palm trees can be traced back to 1985 when Brad Raymond, a local painter and freelance photographer, spent \$250 to buy 11 palms with plans to beautify an area he and his friends surfed and sunbathed in, Serpa said.

Raymond, then 29, was a member of the Hole-in-the-Fence Beach Club, located on the south end of Doheny. He and his friends named the palms, calling them Scruffy, Big Guy and Dr. Feelgood.

Raymond coordinated a benefit concert to raise money for the palms, drawing more than 500 people.

While State Parks officials were not initially happy with the palms, public pressure eventually led to then-District Manager Al Oliver agreeing the palms could stay. He even allowed more to be planted in 1986, Serpa said.

Over the decades, the palms have become a familiar landmark to Capistrano Beach residents, surfers and beach-goers at what is the oldest and most popular state park.

But the hard pack has been receding. Some years the beach gains sand but never any hard pack.

Serpa said he watched as the palms started to go one by one.

“It’s really a bummer to lose them,” he said. “We’ve lost so many trees at Doheny, it’s tragic. We had so many at one time, it was like a forest.”

Nelson and others in Capistrano Beach have asked State Parks to build a revetment around the palm trees to save them. But Haydon said the agency won’t do that to save the trees.

“We’ll do that for the parking lot and the restrooms but we’re not doing it for the palms,” he said. “Hopefully, Mother Nature will leave them alone.”

Storms earlier this year, the most powerful in recent years, took away beach sand from Seal Beach to San Onofre. At Doheny, the sand was pulled from some areas and redistributed to others but not enough to make a difference for the palms.

For now, Capistrano Beach residents who are part of the 800-member Capo Cares group, say they appreciate the trim on the trees and hope they can stay anchored.

“We’ve watched these trees slowly topple like soldiers into the water, and it’s sad to think they’ll soon be gone,” Nelson said. “We’re happy that state parks finally agreed to trim them, but sad that they won’t consider replanting them.

“It would be wonderful if State Parks would be willing to work with the community to replace these beauties,” she added. “Maybe another fundraising concert?”