

Winter 2014

SOUTH DAY USE

It Can Be a Dangerous Beach!

Todd Shanklin
Former Doheny Lifeguard

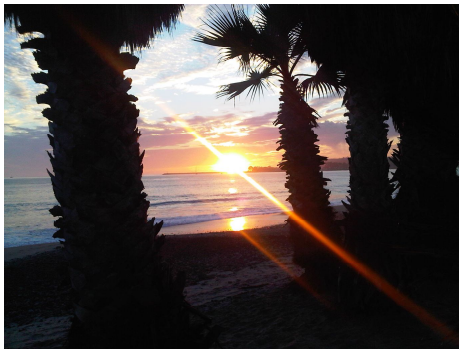
[The South Day Use area of Doheny is a popular stretch of beach. Visitors can park next to the sand where there “seems” to be no surf to interfere with swimming as the waters just off shore looks to be smooth with no waves in sight, and there are numerous picnic tables and fire pits. But looks can be deceiving and all should be aware that South Day can be an extremely dangerous swimming beach, especially for children and swimmers of minimal or moderate swimming abilities.

*I enjoy South Day and often go there in the spring, summer and fall for a swim to wash off the day; jump in, swim a few strokes and enjoy a soak in the salt water, but South Day is **not** just a small step above a swimming pool experience. I’m a waterman of over 40 years with lots of ocean experience, yet I have been pounded by the surf and pulled into the South Day Use trench just beyond the shoreline. Swimmers, and especially parents of kids playing at the shore’s edge need to be aware.*

Following is a portion of an article by former Doheny Lead Lifeguard Todd Shanklin. This piece deals with the South Day Use area. The complete article on the various sections of Doheny State Beach can be found in the Summer 2012 issue of South Swell E- Magazine.

<http://www.dohenystatebeach.org/news/e-magazine/> ED]

South Day is a completely different animal [than the other beaches of Doheny]. South Day extends from the (San Juan) creek mouth, pass the campground and all the way to the southern boundary of Doheny, the “Hole in the Fence.”



South Day is where all of California shows up on a hot weekend to park their RV’s on the sand and drink beer from apparently law enforcement proof red plastic cups (“I thought the “NO ALCOHOL” sign at the gate just means that it’s OK to booze as long as you can’t SEE me drinking, right?”). Further, many people choose to opt out of the day-

use fee by parking on PCH and walking over the pedestrian footbridge to South Day. Many of these people are from out of the area and not particularly ocean savvy. This *Peaceful South Day / Russell Primrose* is unfortunate as South Day is the last place you would want a non-ocean-savvy person wading or swimming.

Unfortunately, we’ve had drownings at South Day for just these very reasons. The shore break can be extremely treacherous on this end of the beach. Powerful swells travel thousands of miles through deep water. At other areas of the coast the swells would be slowed down expending their energy before hitting the shore by breaking on shallow reefs and sandbars offshore. Unless the swell is large enough to break on some of the deeper reefs offshore of South Day, the waves that hit our stretch of beach travel unobstructed until they break right on the shore. They quickly rise out of deep water and pound directly on the sand and any thing or person who might be there.

In the North Day Use area, you can wade out a good 20 to 30 yards and still touch bottom, jumping over smallish, tame lines of whitewater. At South Day, the bottom drops off dramatically just as you enter the water. I have measured it at times to be a drop of 14 feet. This

drop is right at the shoreline, just steps from dry sand. We are talking about the sandy bottom one walks on while wading into the sea, suddenly dropping from one foot of water around your lower legs to a depth of 14 feet... in one step. This drop-off, combined with powerful, raw swells rising up from the deep to crash on the sand creates a perfect storm of aquatic maelstrom making lifeguards cringe. I instruct rookie lifeguards while watching over South Day as such- "See that person getting thrashed on the sand? That is what drowning people look like."

At South Day, you can watch toddlers and children of various sizes naively playing 5 feet away from certain danger, parents obliviously sipping wine spritzers or river kool-aid (beers) on the dry sand. The nightmare scenario plays out as follows: a young unattended child playing wave tag at the shoreline gets a little too close to the breaking waves. One larger rogue wave breaks in front of the child with great ferocity, knocking the hapless innocent off his/her feet. The wave at first pushes the laughing child up the inclined beach towards



safety, but quickly reverses direction and the child is swept directly down into the zone of mayhem. Suddenly the laughing, playing child is pulled into a deep trench underneath walls of extremely murky, dark and turbid water. All this in a matter of 5 seconds! Accordingly, lifeguards working this stretch of beach are instructed to be extremely proactive.

For lifeguards working South Day on a busy day, it is hoped that they have NO RESCUES. Numerous safety warnings and public contacts are much preferred to even one white-knuckle rescue on this unforgiving stretch of beach. The possibility for tragedy is much too great. Public education and prudence are what keeps visitors alive at South Day and that is what lifeguards stress down there. Do not be offended if the lifeguard talks to you on a busy day when the south swell is pounding onto the shore.