



## **Santa Ana River Mouth Monitoring Project July-December 2021 Report**



Orange County Coastkeeper (Coastkeeper) is a nonprofit clean water organization that serves as a proactive steward of our fresh- and saltwater ecosystems. We work collaboratively with diverse groups in the public and private sectors to achieve healthy, accessible, and sustainable water resources for the region. We implement innovative, effective programs in education, advocacy, restoration, research, enforcement, and conservation.

The Santa Ana River Mouth Monitoring Project (SAR Project) enlists volunteers, community groups and local government to monitor human, dog and bird activity in the Santa Ana River Mouth area, a 13.2 acre parcel of land that is owned by four agencies including the California State Lands Commission, California State Parks, the County of Orange, and the City of Newport Beach. Due to the fragmented ownership of the area, management of activities and law

enforcement in the area have been difficult. The second six months of the SAR Project covered in this report (July 2021 through December 2021) was run as an ongoing project by Orange County Coastkeeper (OCCK) with funding from the City of Newport Beach. The project is continuing with funding from the City of Newport Beach Community Grants Program and the Rose Foundation. The goal of the SAR project is to monitor human, dog and bird use of the area and to provide education and outreach to residents and visitors about the Wildlife Management Area at the Santa Ana River Mouth and the endangered species that reside within it.

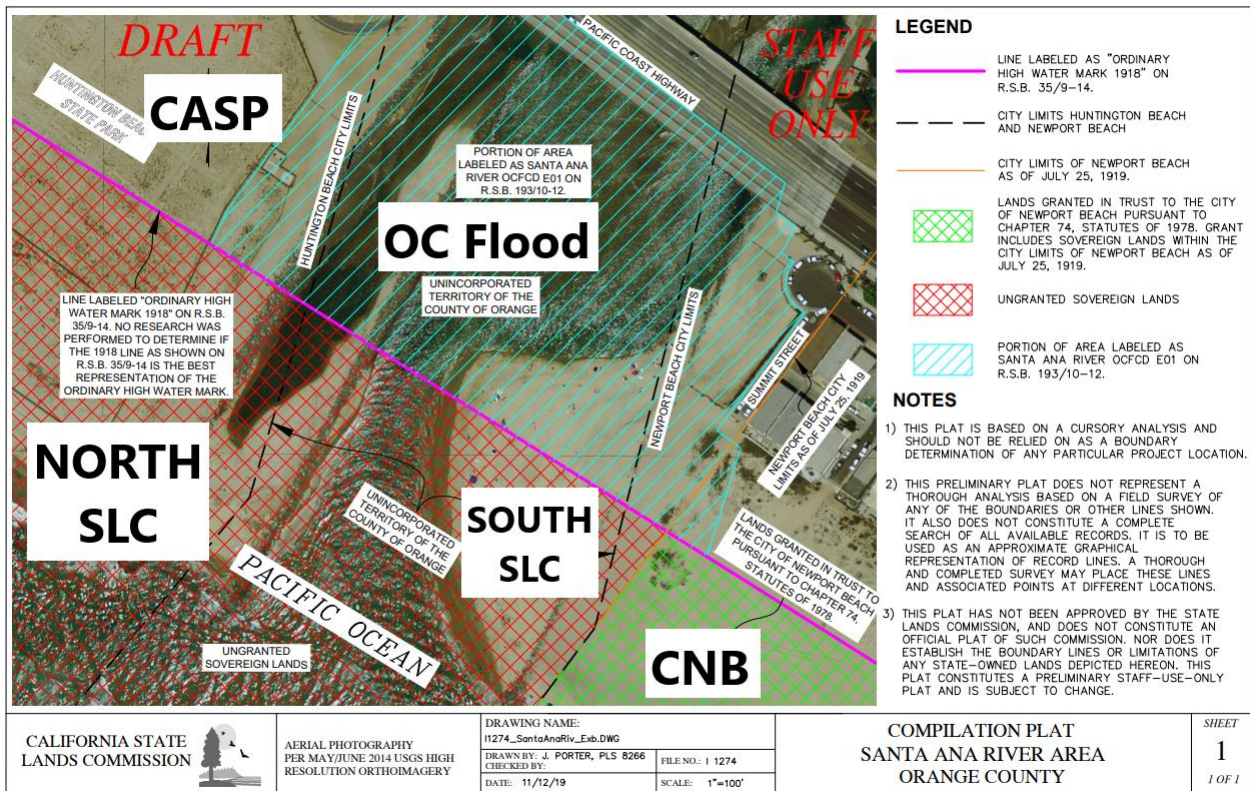
## **Executive Summary**

After the initial program development of the pilot study, monitoring of the area began on February 9th, 2021. Final revisions of the study protocol were completed by March 23rd, 2021 and all subsequent surveys followed a standard protocol that is used for all surveys.

As of December 31st 2021, 63 surveys at the Santa Ana River Mouth were completed by 36 trained volunteers. In the 63 surveys collected, 1,506 people and 273 dogs were observed. Of the dogs 194 were off-leash and 79 on-leash. Dogs off-leash accounted for 71 percent the dogs observed. Law Enforcement Officers were present 7 times throughout all 63 surveys completed in this time period. No citations were observed to be issued.

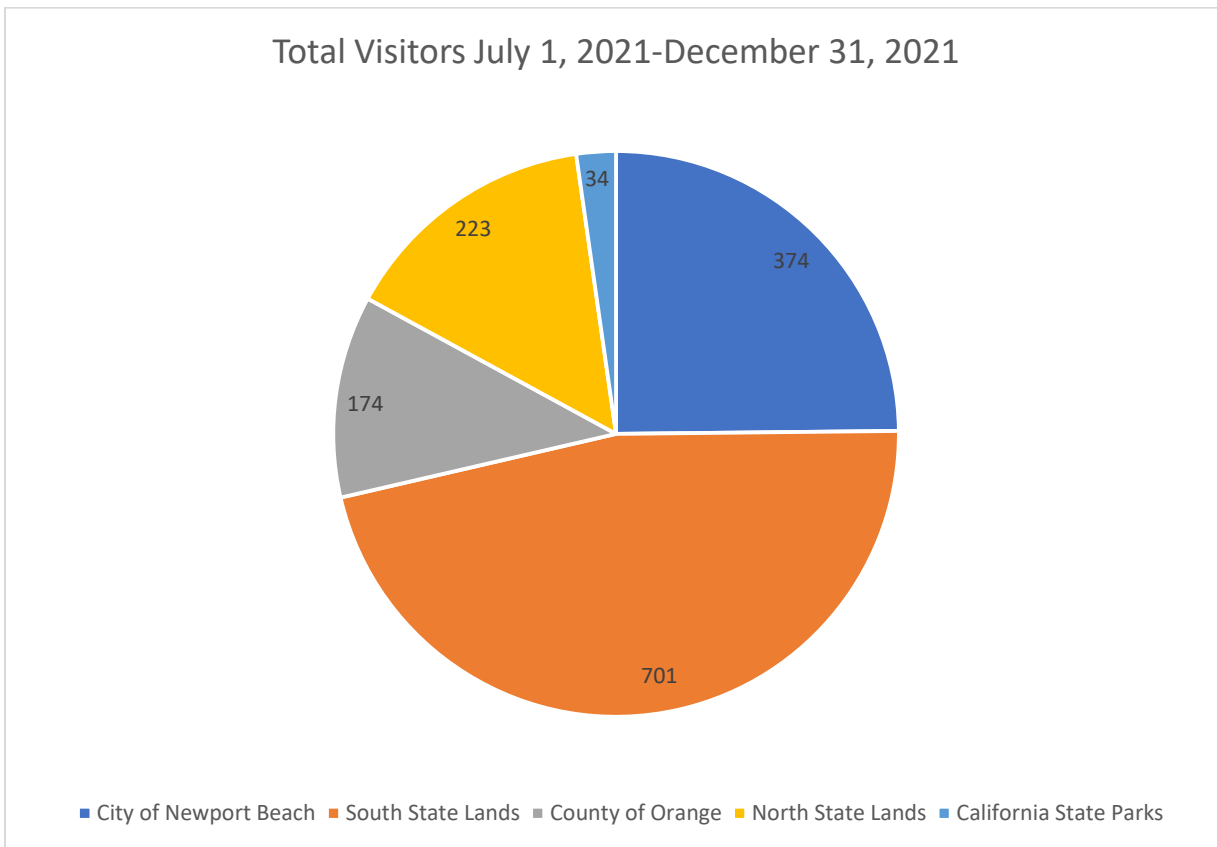
On 12/19/2021, according to a volunteer, "...a law enforcement officer came down to the flood area and said something over the loudspeaker but no one could hear him. There were 18 dogs off leash during the 30 minutes I was there, and at least half of them were still there when the officer arrived. A couple of people went over to ask him what he said and then left. There were still at least 6 dogs still off leash when the officer drove away, and he was too far away for people to hear what he said. Today there were only 3 surfers out in the water when I arrived and I was delighted to see many shorebirds had returned to the south end of the beach, which was devoid of birds with dogs present. After 17 minutes a dog chased the entire flock off and only one gull returned within the next 15 minute period. I approached the couple and asked them if they knew that this beach had a requirement for their dogs to be on a leash. They said they knew, and that they come out there twice per day. I asked them if they had been issued any tickets and they said no. I called animal control to report the incident and took pictures of the couple and the dog for future reference. They left before animal control could arrive, within 10 minutes of the flushing incident and the birds still had not returned with over 5 minutes after the dog had left the area." Reports like this are common from volunteers, interns, and staff who spend time completing surveys.

# GRAPHS AND MAP

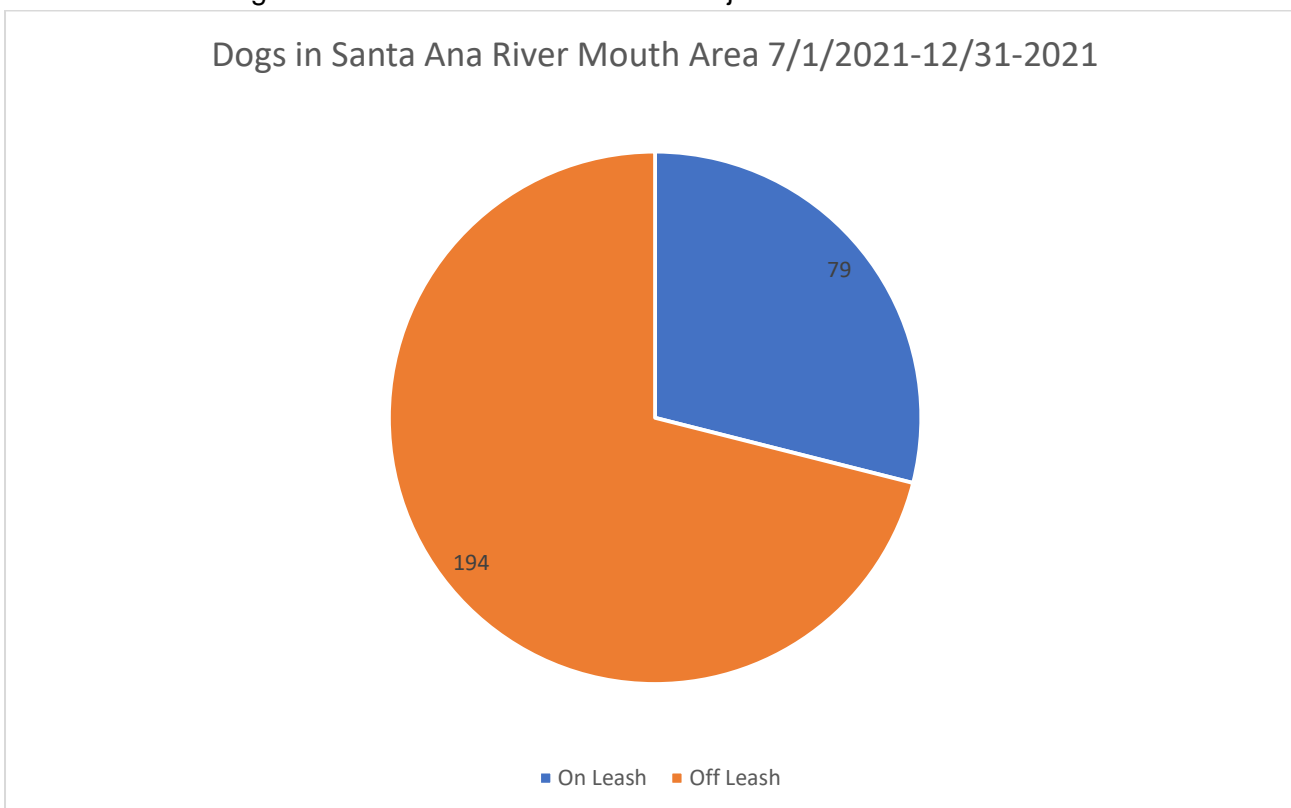


(Map of Santa Ana River Mouth with property names overlaid to correlate with data sheets. California State Lands Commission property was split into North and South portions, divided by the location of the river mouth during surveys, to improve our ability to understand access use in the area better. **CASP**=California State Parks; **OC Flood**: Orange County Flood Control Channel; **CNB**= City of Newport Beach; **NORTH SLC**= North State Lands Commission; **SOUTH SLC**= South State Lands Commission)

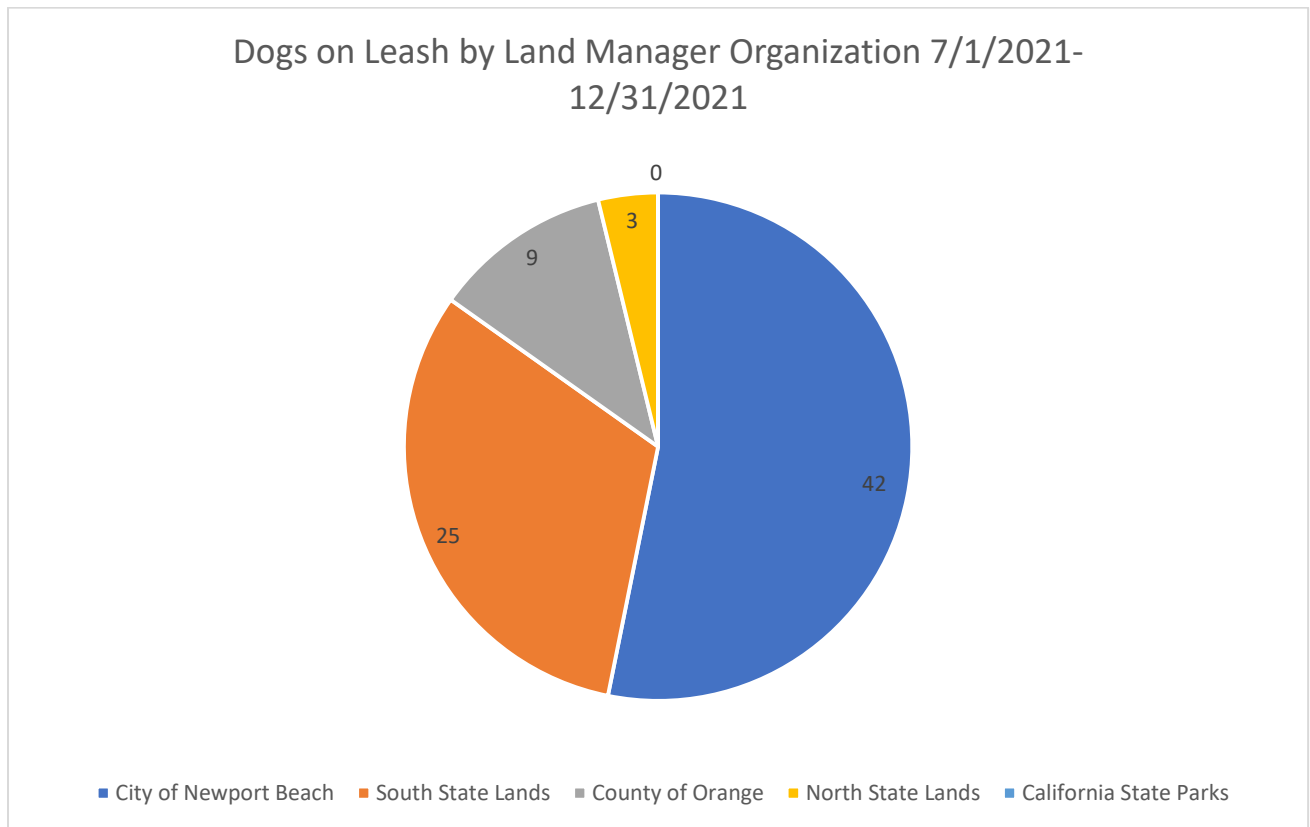
Total number of visitors based on location:



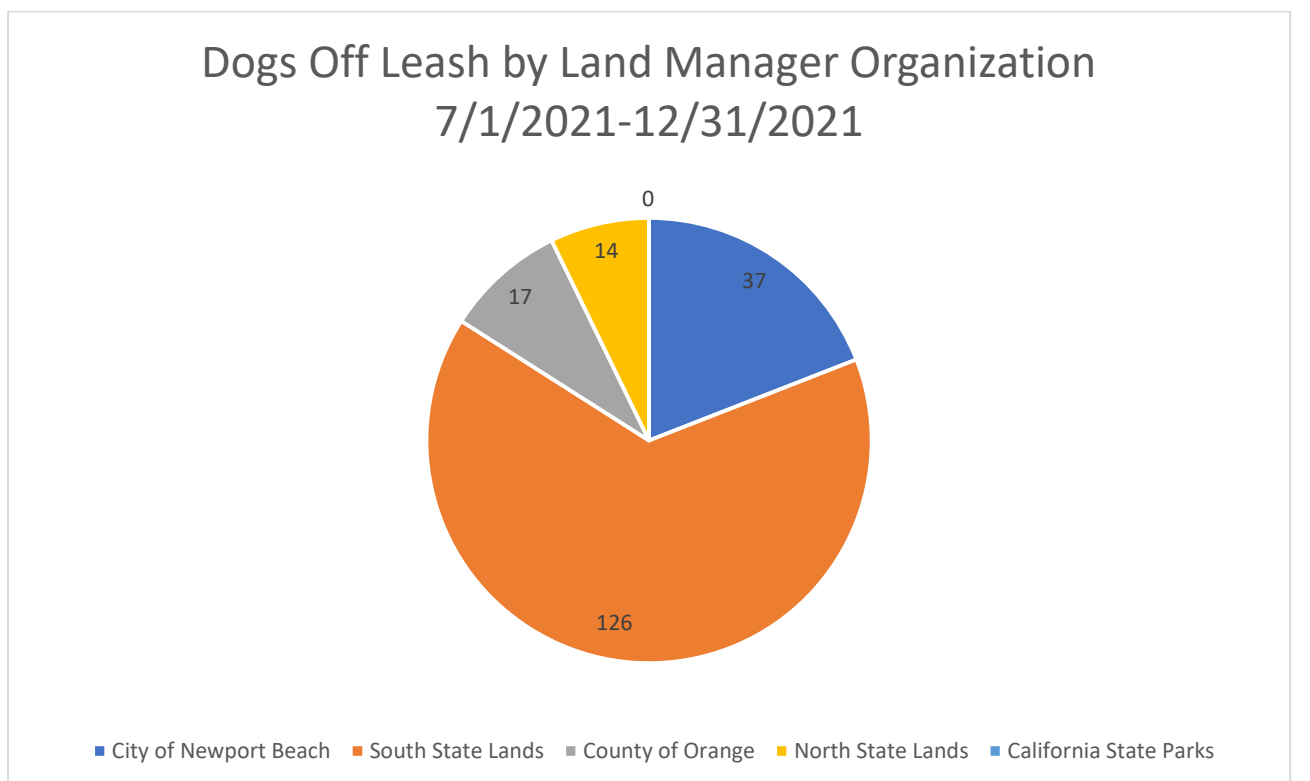
Total number of dogs in the Santa Ana River Mouth Project Area:



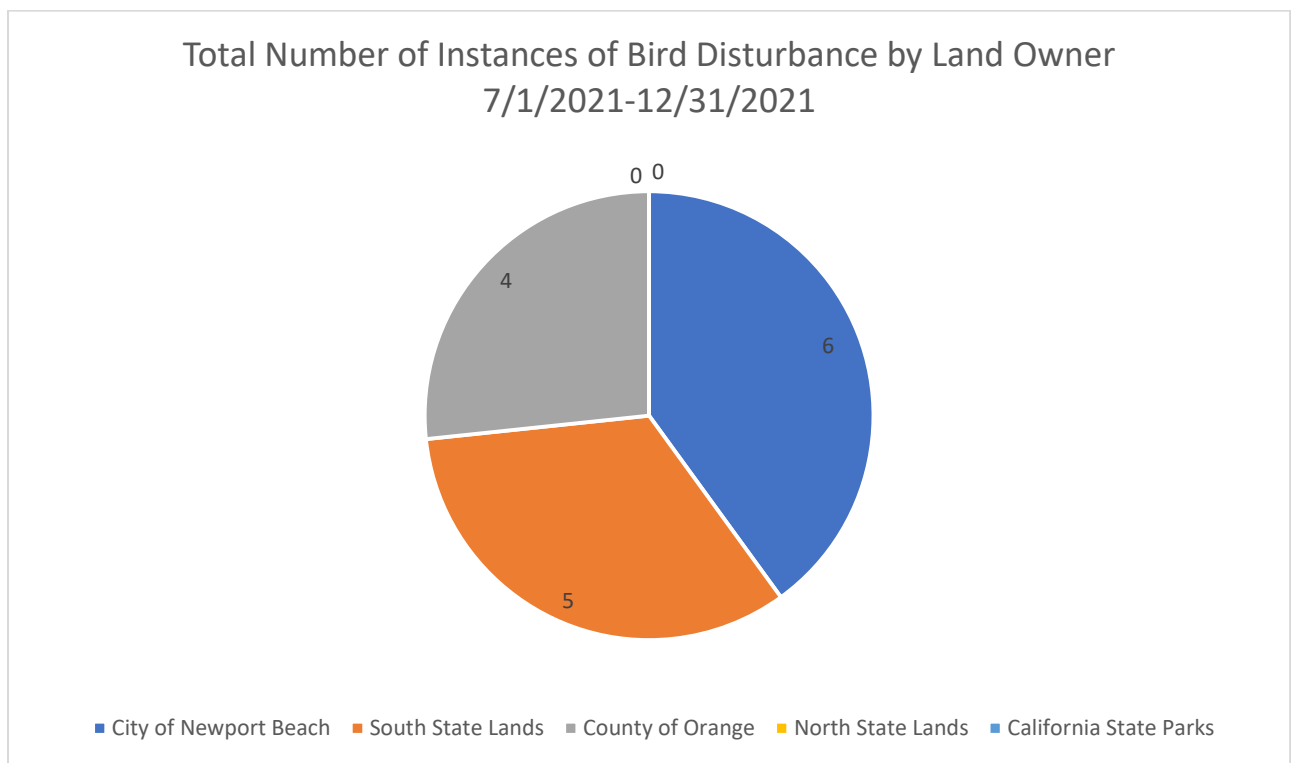
Locations of dogs recorded on leash:



Locations of dogs recorded off leash:

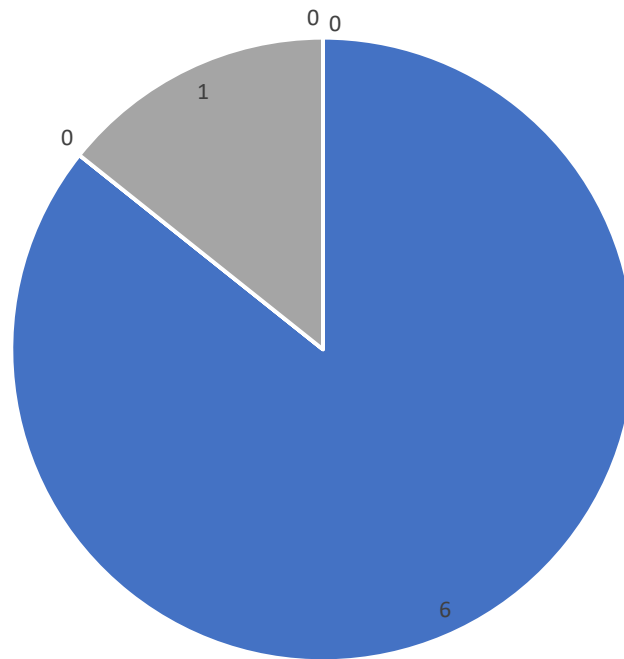


Recorded disturbances:



(Bird disturbance defined as when birds are present on a part of the beach and are approached by humans and/or dogs and they depart the beach.)

Law Enforcement Officers Present by Land Area



■ City of Newport Beach ■ South State Lands ■ County of Orange ■ North State Lands ■ California State Parks

## Training

Training took place with two components, an online one hour Zoom training that took place in February 2021 was recorded and distributed to new volunteers along with training documents. Volunteers then met with Volunteer Coordinator Suzanne Welsh at the Santa Ana River Mouth to go over the monitoring protocol and the property map in person. Volunteers were trained to monitor human recreation use, dog use, and were instructed how to fill out the data sheet to track other uses like drones, disturbances to birds (where birds are approached by humans or dogs and leave the area), and to denote law enforcement officer presence.



## Outreach Table



During this project Orange County Coastkeeper was able to conduct an outreach table for beach visitors. Visitors were given pamphlets detailing information about California Least Terns and Western Snowy Plovers. Additional information about the laws regarding dogs in the area and free biodegradable waste bags were provided to visitors as well. Between July 1, 2021 and December 31, 2021 the outreach table was set up three times. Challenges for our public outreach included issues with volunteer recruitment and retention, lack of funding for staff presence, the October 2021 oil spill, and a sand nourishment project that resulted in heavy machinery being used in the survey and outreach area from October through the end of the year. Overall OC Coastkeeper has engaged over 533 visitors with our outreach table (5 in person outreach events) and virtual outreach events in 2021. OC Coastkeeper participated in a virtual outreach event with California Surf Anglers in May of 2021 that has gained 393 views to date ( <https://www.facebook.com/726138938/videos/10159755567818939/> ) and in a segment produced by NBTV (Newport Beach TV) for local broadcast that's also available on the City of Newport Beach's website and YouTube pages ( <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CF8svp1-r60> ).

## COVID-19 Impacts

Due to the fluctuating nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been ongoing issues with volunteer retention as public crowds grow and decline with the weather, especially in regards to staffing the outreach table with volunteers.



### **Other Impacts**

On October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021 approximately 24,000 gallons of oil was released into the ocean off of Huntington Beach, just north of the Santa Ana River Mouth area. While a natural sand bar had closed off the river mouth just the week prior, preventative booming was put in place by the Office of Spill Prevention as a protective measure in addition to the creation of 6 foot tall sand berms along the shore in order to protect the sensitive wetland habitat from potential oil spill impacts. Cleanup efforts in the area were centered at Talbert Marsh, the wetland just north of the survey area, and heavy machinery and cleanup efforts were common in the Santa Ana River Mouth area throughout the month of October.

In November 2021 the County of Orange began a dredging project in the Santa Ana River Mouth to transport sand to the beach adjacent to the San Clemente Pier and to the Newport Peninsula between 40<sup>th</sup> and 52<sup>nd</sup> Streets. Heavy machinery is operating on the beach Monday-Friday from 8 AM to 5 PM, preventing weekday outreach table events from occurring, and is ongoing through March 2022.

### **Next Steps**

Our next steps in this project include additional volunteer recruitment from the local community, continuation of the outreach table, and continuing to gather surveys. OC Coastkeeper was awarded a grant by the California Coastal Conservancy in October 2021, effective January 2022, that will allow us to substantially increase our ability to complete surveys and outreach in the Santa Ana River Mouth.