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Sand's up

Sandboarders are drawn to West Texas dunes

By Aline McKenzie
KRT CAMPUS

MONAHANS, Texas — In the early morning, it's as if humans had never set foot here. Pristine sand dunes rise to 70 feet high amid the scrubby West Texas vegetation. Damp with dew, they're marked with the tracks of nightly visitors—insects, birds of various sizes, the resident mammals: skunks, jackrabbits, coyotes, deer.

But new tracks are about to take over.

Every day, the dunes at Monahans Sandhills State Park, near Midland, Texas, are open as a playground for people. Both locals and out-of-towners come to "sandboard" down their slopes, riding rented plastic disks, wheelless skateboards, and sandboards both homemade and professionally constructed.

The first people arrive shortly after the park opens at 8 a.m., to enjoy the cool before the afternoon heat strikes.

The Massey family, from Bangs in Brown County, Texas, is enjoying the chance for its three children to frolic in the sand. Brandon, 8, and Keelan, 3, are riding disks, leaving long gouges down the dune.

Logan, 18 months, is doing things his own way. He crawls down the dune backward, leaving a smooth track punctuated with handprints.

"I think we've got a big problem," said Brandon, who's down the dune with Logan.

"I think you've got a big problem," said his father, Chad, 30, a lead operator for 3M. Chad is enjoying his spot at the top of the dune.

One of the downsides of the sport is that for every slip-sliding trip down a dune, which



Jennifer Jimenez, 18, of Odessa, Texas, surfs the sand at Monahans Sandhills State Park in West Texas. Boarding on the sand dunes is a popular pastime sport in the deserts of West Texas.

takes only a few seconds, there's a slogging, slippery hike back up. Over a stay of a few hours, that can add up to a lot of strain on the legs.

"This is really fun except when you come back up," said Rebecca Anderholm, 15, a ninth-grader from College Station, Texas, who is visiting with her Girl Scout troop.

"I think you notice it more as an adult than as a kid, the going-uphill part," said Duane McVay, 45, associate professor of petroleum engineering at Texas A&M, whose wife is the troop leader.

As the morning progresses, the sands are showing the wear. Dunes that are farther from the parking lot are still relatively pristine, but the ones nearby are

pockmarked with footprints and gouged with the marks of disks.

There are pits where children have dug holes and finger-shaped trenches where people have taken breaks, stretching out their legs and scooping sand over them.

By early afternoon, the sand is hot and dry, with a texture like flour, and the dozens of people who were on the slopes have largely thinned out.

It's more difficult to slide when the sand's like this. The visitor center even has posted a notice that it's not responsible for sliding conditions after 1 p.m.

Tanner Cash and Craig Shelton, both 13 and visiting with a Boy Scout troop from Lone Oak, Texas, take a break from sliding, instead digging

holes 2 to 3 feet deep, into the layer where the sand is cool, and burying themselves to their waists.

Finally, sunset approaches. People have almost abandoned the dunes, either leaving the park or following other people at the edge of the sand-kites, barbecuing.

Suddenly, the wind picks up and nature begins to take its own. The strong wind blows sheets of sand that bury the surface, erasing the footprints and filling the pits that people have dug.

Make a new footprint within a minute it vanishes. The leeward side, a thumb-beetle emerges and the walking around, leaving a perlike track.

Cigarette tax increase eyed for school mon

By Kelley Shannon
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

AUSTIN — It takes smoker Linda Martinez only a split second to voice her opinion about the governor's proposed \$1-per-pack cigarette tax increase.

"I'll pay it," said Martinez, a 54-year-old Austin woman who has smoked for 35 years. "Plain and simple — nicotine is an addictive drug, and just like any addict on the street, we are addicted."

"I'd rather pay it on the cigarettes than on the house taxes," Martinez added.

Those views may resonate with some Texas legislators who returned to the Capitol last week for a special legislative session. Republican Gov. Rick Perry called the ses-

sion, he said, to reduce Texans' property taxes while eliminating the state's share-the-wealth education funding system, known to some as Robin Hood.

One Perry proposal to replace lost property tax revenue is a \$1 increase in the state's cigarette tax, to \$1.41 per pack.

Health advocates applaud the plan. Along with generating revenue, they say, it could help control health care costs by reducing smoking.

"People don't like taxes, but this is one that does have a good public health benefit and certainly fits with some of the state's goals, certainly on education and on health," said Kelly Headrick, a lobbyist for the American Cancer Society's Texas division.

But the tobacco industry claims raising

the tax would send smokers to neighboring states, Mexico or onto the Internet, to illegal cigarette smuggling.

"That obviously threatens legitimate retailers and wholesalers in the state of Texas," said Jamie Drogin, spokesman for Philip Morris USA.

"As the cigarettes get more expensive, consumers seek out alternative venues, which to buy cigarettes."

Opponents say the increase would impose a larger burden on the poor, also say it would be a dwindling and predictable revenue source because of ongoing declines in the number of smokers, as education costs rise.

Perry estimates his cigarette tax would generate \$2.4 billion over the next three fiscal years.

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