

Assessment Type 3: Investigation

Should cars be allowed on Aldinga Beach/Silver Sands?

Introduction - the issue.

Currently vehicle access is permitted on Sellicks, Silver Sands, Aldinga and Moana beaches (see Fig.1), although cars are banned from between midnight and 5.30am and each year from May 1st to September 30th. Restriction signs are highly visible and a \$185 fine applies if these restrictions are broken¹ (see Fig.2). The move to ban cars totally has caused great division in the community, with the organisation in power, the Onkaparinga City Council trying to find a compromise solution. Even elected members on the council are divided on the issue.

Vehicle access Aldinga and Sellicks beaches

Fig.1. This map displays the vehicle access areas on Aldinga, Silver Sands and Sellicks Beaches
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Fig.2. This photo shows the winter restrictions and penalties at Aldinga Beach vehicle access point.
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In November of 2011 the Onkaparinga Council voted to ban cars from 110m in front of the Aldinga Bay Surf Life Saving Club. As shown in fig. 3 below, a line of posts excludes drivers from the beach in front of the Aldinga Bay Surf Life Saving Club (ABSLC). There is however an access gate for authorised Surf Life Saving vehicles.

Fig.3. Photo showing the posts that restrict access to the 110m zone in front of the ABSLSC.
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Although this ban is a safety measure for volunteers and the public and provides easier access to and from the water, and a better view of the water being patrolled, other people are worried that this is only the start of a larger ban on the Aldinga coast. Onkaparinga Mayor ***** re-assured this was only for safety and was a once off.²

1.) Arguments for allowing car access on Aldinga/Silver Sands beaches.

Not only does driving on the beach provide car spaces, but also easier access for the elderly and people with disabilities. The positive of the accessibility provided by driving/parking on the beach was a given answer by 59% of the local people I surveyed. In 2008 Councillor ***** said "Why should you penalise others, like the elderly or handicapped, who couldn't get to the beach unless they drive?"³ This issue concerns many Australians with medical conditions that restrict them from access to the beach. For people on wheelchairs driving on the beach is their only option at Aldinga/Silver Sands, as it would be nearly impossible to push someone in a wheelchair through the soft dune sand that separates bituminised areas such as the car parks from the beach itself. Car parks provided for beach users cannot fit as much traffic as the beach line itself, and on a day like Australia Day when these beaches are packed the beach provides

the space for everyone to enjoy. If cars were banned from the beach it may result in traffic and parking congestion through the residential areas along Aldinga/Silver Sands.

The Aldinga/Silver Sands beaches have had vehicle access for many decades, so it is a tradition which a lot of people now see as a right. In addition a ban will disrupt smooth traffic flow in the community. Many people travel from far way, so they can enjoy being able to drive on the sand, unload and relax. The broader community is also connected to this issue because driving on the beach brings tourism for shops along the esplanade, and the Aldinga Shopping Centre. Businesses boom in summer with many people travelling down south, just to drive on our beaches. This means customers are keeping these important parts of the economy alive. *The **** *** believes that the tourism from driving on the beach is very profitable for their business. This is supported by the popular ***** Pizza and Takeaway who believe if cars were banned from the beach people would spend a lot less time on the esplanade "which would affect the business a lot." (Pers. Comm. 5th September)

2.) Arguments against allowing cars on the beach.

The tourism that driving on the beach brings to the local area and economy, also brings pollution. Littering, solid waste, noise, exhaust fumes, oils/chemical and sewage releases, all effect the natural environment. The growing number of people who drive and park or even walk on these beaches spoil it by leaving their rubbish or their pets faeces on the sand that eventually gets washed into the water. This doesn't just affect sea creatures, but the water and soil.

88% of people I surveyed said they care about the environment but 76% of people said nevertheless they agree with driving on the beach. This means although the majority of people are taking the environment into account, they consider driving on the beach does not cause significant damage. However, hoon drivers do damage sand dunes and pollute the beach, home to significant biodiversity. A three year study by Flinders University showed that sections of the beach open to vehicle access had fewer varied organisms, such as small invertebrates, insects and beach hoppers.⁴ If people didn't drive on the beach these creatures would be less affected and biodiversity would be better protected.

Another negative that cars bring when driven on the beach is that the sand is disturbed and compacted, and the natural landscape is negatively affected. A comment such as, "using a beach as street and car park is ridiculous" demonstrates that this person is completely against beach driving and cares about the aesthetics (Survey 1.Pers. Comm. August). A few of the people included in the same survey strongly agreed with this statement, however this was a minority view in my surveys.

3.) What should those in power (Onkaparinga Council) do?

If cars are banned from the beach then car parks surrounding beach access points along the Onkaparinga beaches need to be upgraded with a larger capacity to hold more cars that would have once driven on the beach. 44% of people surveyed said they would like more allocated car parks made for beach users. The current car parks at Aldinga and Silver Sands beaches (Fig. 4 and 5.) are small and neglected (e.g. faded lines and pot holes). It's time for the car parks to be improved, as they are much less pleasant to park on than the beach. If they were more attractive and cared for, more people would use them, resulting in less cars on the beach.

Fig.4. Aldinga Beach bituminised, but this parking area is small compared to the beach area.
Photo removed for copyright reasons.

Fig.5. Silver Sands car park (Aldinga Bay Surf Life Saving Club)-not bituminised.
Photo removed for copyright reasons.

64% of people said they drive on the beach, whereas 36% said they don't. While only 17% of people were against driving on the beach, 10% had mixed feelings. More importantly 73% of people said they agree with driving on the beach, even if they didn't do it themselves. This compares well with the Flinders University survey results that showed 80% wanted vehicle access on the beach retained.⁵ I have assumed they surveyed locals from the Aldinga/Silver Sands area as I did. The 7% difference between these two surveys could possibly be because from this ongoing feud about driving on the beach in the past decade, evidence about the environmental factors has been more widely publicised which could change public opinion about driving cars on the beach. Nevertheless, overall there is majority support (three quarters of those surveyed) for vehicle access being maintained. Therefore the council needs to continue to allow beach access in some form.

Conclusion

Although many members of the public have a strong opinion on whether cars should be allowed on the beach or not, it still comes down to the people with the power meeting the needs of the local and wider community. The Onkaparinga Council has the power to remove bans or put bans in place. Either option they choose one part of the public will be very unhappy and continue to be angry about the matter.

As a part of my research I conducted two surveys, the first being more general views about the concept of driving on the beach and the other more specific about Aldinga/ Silver Sands. I conducted the surveys on location at the local Aldinga shopping centre, along the esplanade and on the actual beach. I also interviewed three local businesses about the tourism from driving cars on the beach and the effects it has on them.

Unfortunately during this investigative assignment the winter weather was mostly cold, windy and rainy, therefore not a lot of cars and people were on or around the beach when I was there to conduct primary research. Therefore if it had been summer, there would have been more people and I would have

had a larger range of people surveyed with more opinions of people who actually drive on the beach.

The issue of whether driving on the beach should be banned or not could potentially divide the community. In a connected community like this where people have strong views on an issue emotions and threats result. I experienced this abrupt behaviour when in Aldinga surveying locals. By the sometimes strong reaction of people, it was clear to me that some people see this issue as very black and white, with no shades of grey.

64% of people said they would not pay more to drive onto the beach. Which could mean people who don't need to drive on the beach (unlike people in wheelchairs) wouldn't pay more which could potentially help protect our beach and keep residents who do not agree with vehicle access happy. To take away the accessibility that driving on to the beach provides for the elderly and handicapped would be devastating.

72% of people I surveyed said they were happy with the current beach laws, with 16% saying they were unsure of the laws. It would be therefore beneficial to make these laws clearer to the public who use the beach. One of these laws includes the winter ban. Unfortunately I was unable to find any information on whether creatures such as the beach hoppers regenerate during winter when the beach is not used by cars.

Another consideration is the 'tradition' of driving on the beach, with people who would have grown up with their parents and grandparents driving on the beach. People who feel strongly about it will be less likely to agree with banning all vehicle access on the beach. With reasons like tourism from driving on the beach, local businesses are also against the ban. Information about long term damage to the beach environment caused by cars driving was difficult to find. Even if the cars were parked in the allocated car parks chemicals/oils could still be washed off of them and run onto the sand. With no evident extreme damage from cars driving on the beach it makes it hard to argue that they are ruining the natural landscape or causing environment degradation. With 73% of people I surveyed strongly in favour of driving on the beach I can image a massive uproar if total a ban was put in place. Only 12% said they think there should be a complete ban on beach driving.

In answer to my question, the research, both primary and secondary, points to continuing to allow cars on Aldinga/Silvers. The current restrictions and regulations put in place by the Onkaparinga Council (winter ban, night curfew, car free areas) are actually a good comprise between environmental issues, and the needs of beach users, local businesses and the community. However they need to also upgrade the car parks to provide better alternatives to driving on the beach, and publicise the restrictions more widely.

Reference list

¹ http://www.onkaparingacity.com/onka/discover/beaches/vehicles_on_beaches.jsp (viewed 05/08/12)

² "New Car Ban", *Southern Times Messenger*, 23/11/11, page 14 +15 (viewed 02/08/12)

³ <http://www.adelaidenow.com.au/news/south-australia/beach-battleground-for-rights-safety/story-e6frea83-1111118152050> (viewed 14/06/12)

⁴ <http://www.adelaidenow.com.au/news/south-australia/beach-battleground-for-rights-safety/story-e6frea83-1111118152050> (viewed 14/06/12)

⁵ <http://www.adelaidenow.com.au/news/south-australia/beach-battleground-for-rights-safety/story-e6frea83-1111118152050> (viewed 14/06/12)

Survey 1. 'Cars on the Onkaparinga Beaches' -22 participants (conducted 08/08/12)

Survey 2. 'Cars on Aldinga/ Silver Sands Beaches' -25 participants (conducted 22/08/12)

Interviews. 'Tourism from driving Cars on Aldinga/ Silver Sands Beaches' -Aldinga Bay *****;
Aldinga *****. (conducted 05/09/12)