

# Marine Protected Area (MPA) Watch Regional Report

San Diego County

January 1, 2026 - June 30, 2026

## Map of Region's MPAs



Figure 1

MPA Watch is a statewide collaborative effort to collect critical human use data to enhance the management and conservation of California's marine protected areas (MPAs). MPA Watch collects data inside and outside of MPAs along California's coast and data is compiled in a statewide database that allows us insight on how human uses change over time. MPA Watch trains volunteers to observe and collect unbiased data on coastal and marine resource use through standardized survey techniques. By involving local communities in this important work, MPA Watch programs inspire and empower stewardship, educate California communities about ocean ecosystems, and increase awareness of marine conservation.

## Executive Summary

- **Land-Based Surveys:** From January 1 to June 30, 2026, in San Diego County, eight volunteers conducted 103 land-based surveys and observed 12,929 activities. Surveys were distributed across the Swami's SMCA (70 surveys), South La Jolla SMR (15 surveys), San Diego-Scripps Coastal SMCA (9 surveys), and Matlahuayl SMR (9 surveys) (Figure 9).
- **Boat-Based Surveys:** The WILDCOAST Oceans Team conducted 11 boat-based surveys, observing a total of 91 vessels.

- Potential Violations: Notably, 4 potential violations were observed during boat-based surveys across all monitored sites specifically, 0 at Swami's, 0 at Scripps, 1 at Matlahuayl, and 3 at South La Jolla. (Figure 13) No potential violations were observed during land-based surveys (Figure 11).
- Non-Consumptive Activities: Non-consumptive activities (on and offshore) account for 99.6% (12,872 / 12,929) of observations in the four MPAs listed above. (Figure 4) Top activities include beach recreation (sandy), surfing, offshore recreation, board sports (other), and animals on leash (sandy).
- Consumptive Activities: Consumptive activities (on and offshore) account for 0.4% (57/12,929) of observations in the four MPAs listed above. Top activities include hook fishing (sandy) at Swami's SMCA. (Figure 3)
- Ecological Observations: Increased white shark sightings because of super El Niño hitting San Diego, which is expected to continue through the rest of 2026 at least. Increased sightings of bird mortality and injuries on and offshore in months between March-May. Recorded ocean temperatures reaching 71° F (normally seen in August) seen in March 2026 which could have impacted activity.

## HUMAN USE OF MPAS, January 1, 2026 - June 30, 2026

### OVERVIEW

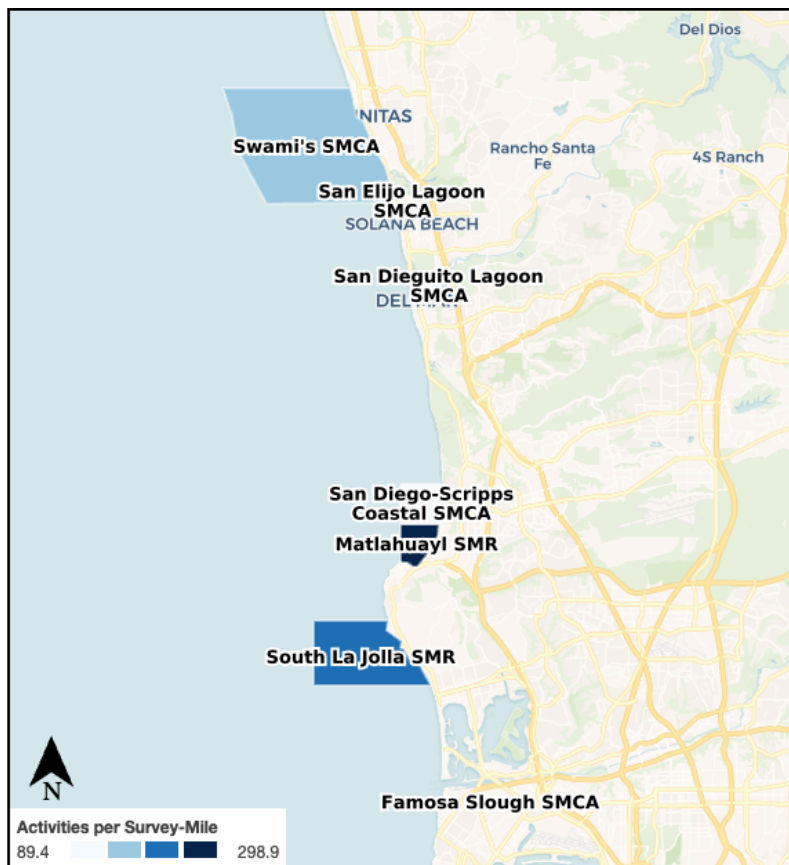


Figure 2

Caption: Map of MPAs in the region colored by activities per survey-mile for January 1, 2026 - June 30, 2026. Swami's SMCA, 185.9; San Diego-Scripps Coastal SMCA, 89.4; Matlahuayl SMR, 298.9; South La Jolla SMR, 196.4

## CONSUMPTIVE VS. NON-CONSUMPTIVE ACTIVITY BY MPA, THREE YEAR COMPARISON

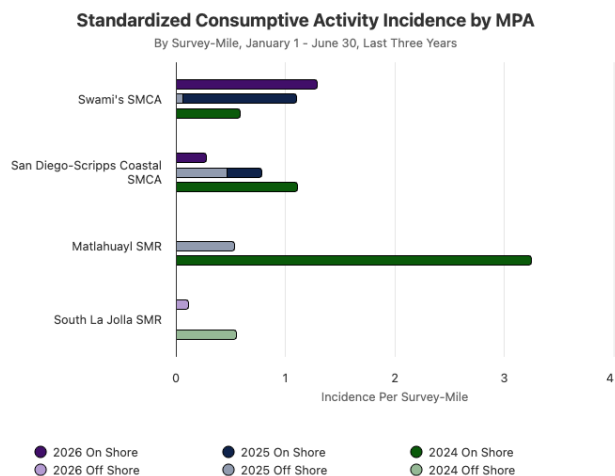


Figure 3

Caption: Standardized Consumptive Activity Incidence by MPA, By Survey-Mile, Last Three Years.

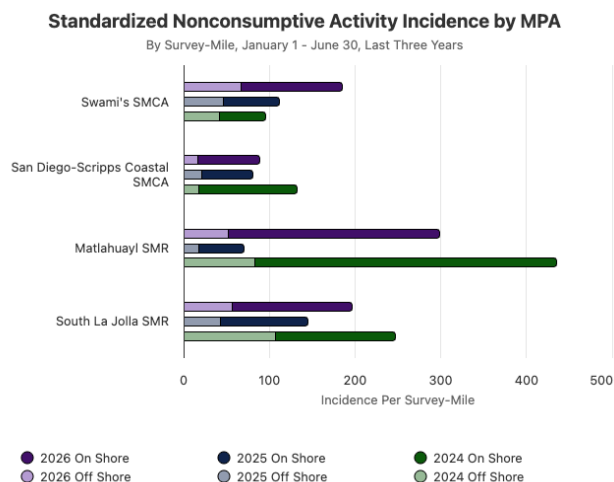


Figure 4

Caption: Standardized Nonconsumptive Activity Incidence by MPA, By Survey-Mile, Last Three Years.

## ACTIVITY CLASSIFICATIONS

**On-Shore** - Activities that take place on a sandy or rocky beach. Excludes bluffs, trails, sea walls, parking lots, or other man-made structures. Includes recreation, tidepooling, shore-based fishing, etc.

**Off-Shore** - Activities that take place offshore, typically in knee-deep water or deeper. Includes surfing, SCUBA diving, kayaking, boat fishing, etc.

**Consumptive** - An activity in which a natural resource (i.e. fish, kelp, shells) is being collected.

**Non-Consumptive** - An activity in which a natural resource is not collected.

## ACTIVITY BY MPA

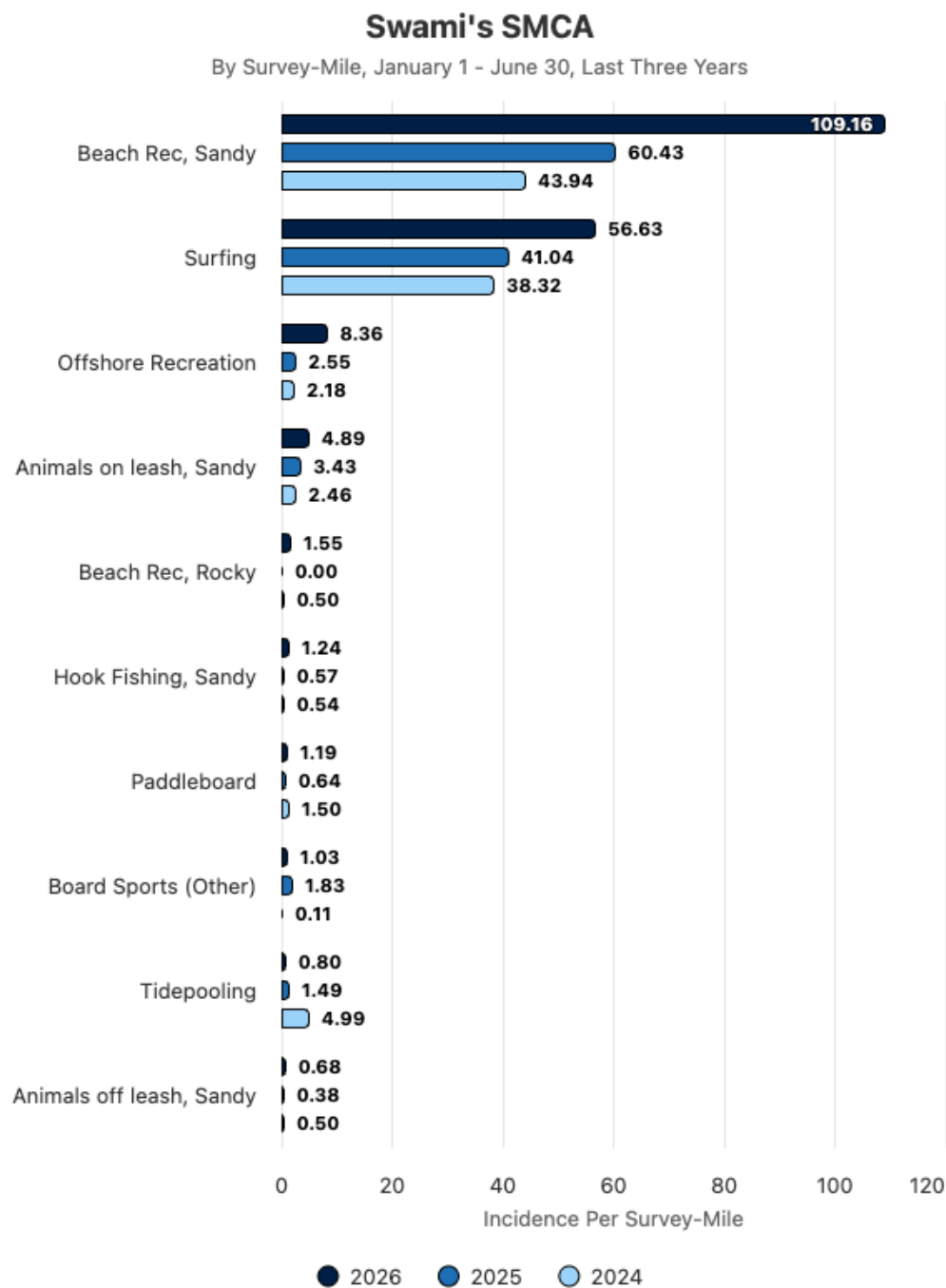


Figure 5

Caption: Top 10 Activities for Swami's SMCA By Survey-Mile, Last Three Years.

## San Diego-Scripps Coastal SMCA

By Survey-Mile, January 1 - June 30, Last Three Years

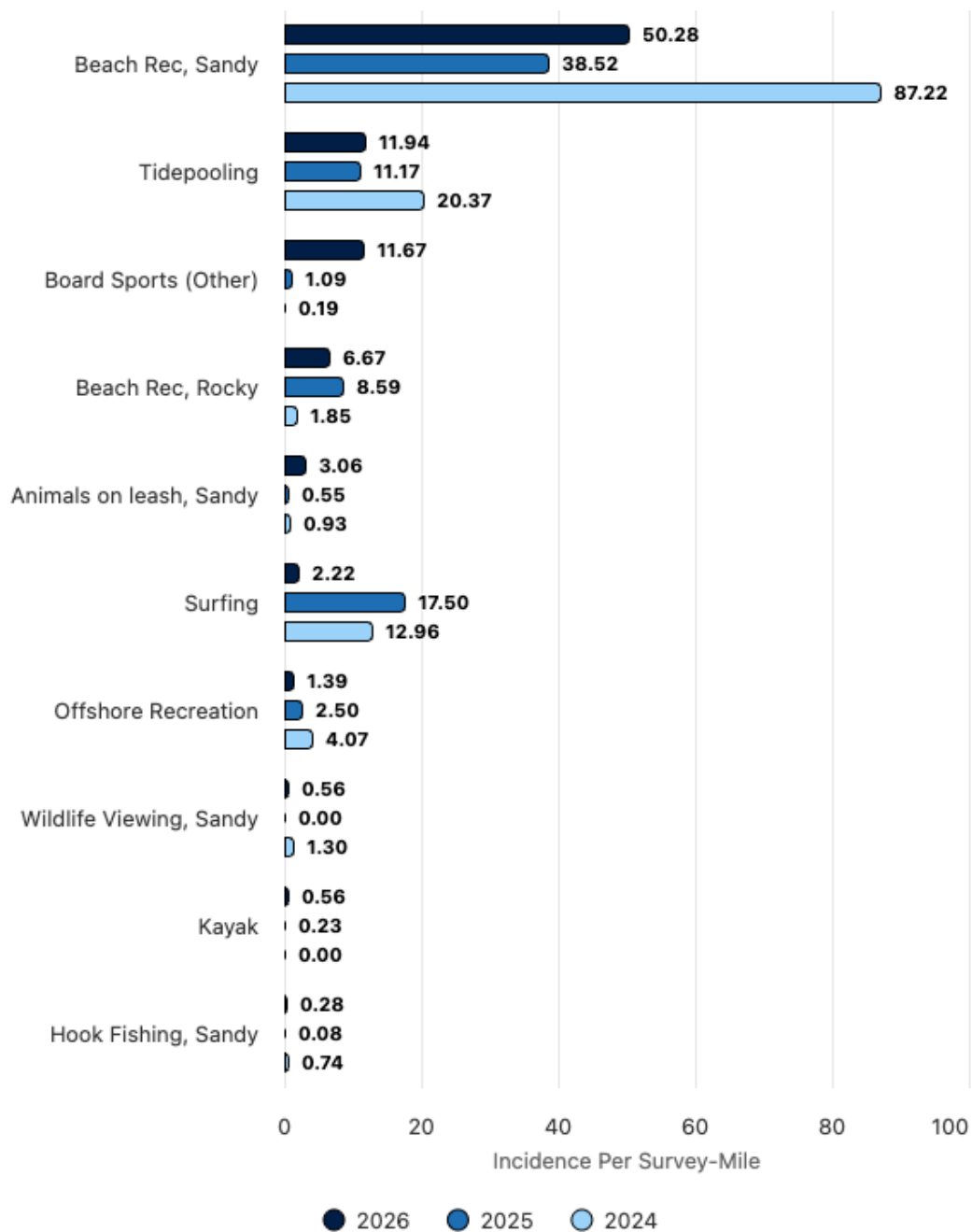


Figure 6

Caption: Top 10 Activities for San Diego-Scripps Coastal SMCA, By Survey-Mile, Last Three Years.

## Matlahuayl SMR

By Survey-Mile, January 1 - June 30, Last Three Years

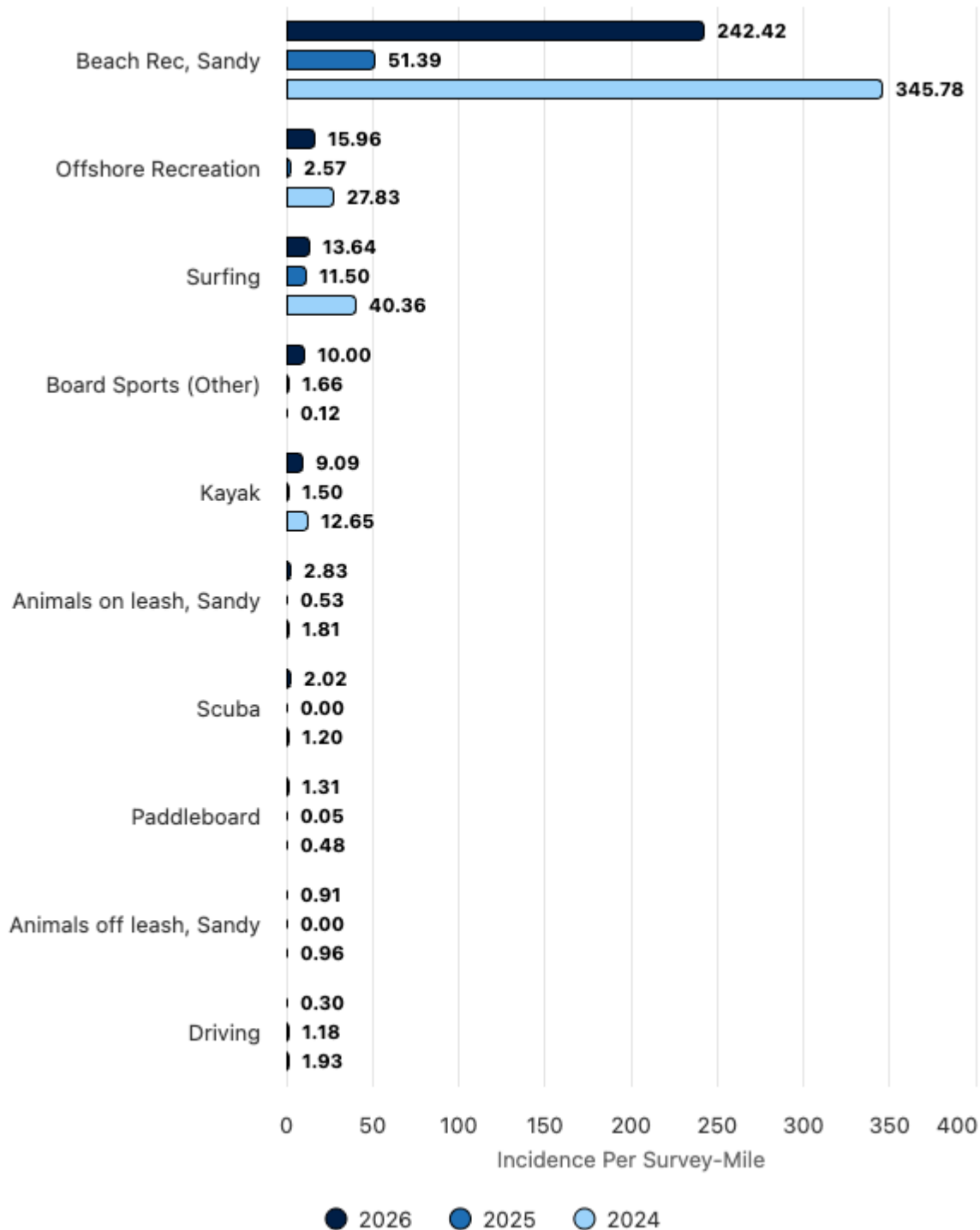


Figure 7

Caption: Top 10 Activities for Matlahuayl SMR, By Survey-Mile, Last Three Years.

## South La Jolla SMR

By Survey-Mile, January 1 - June 30, Last Three Years

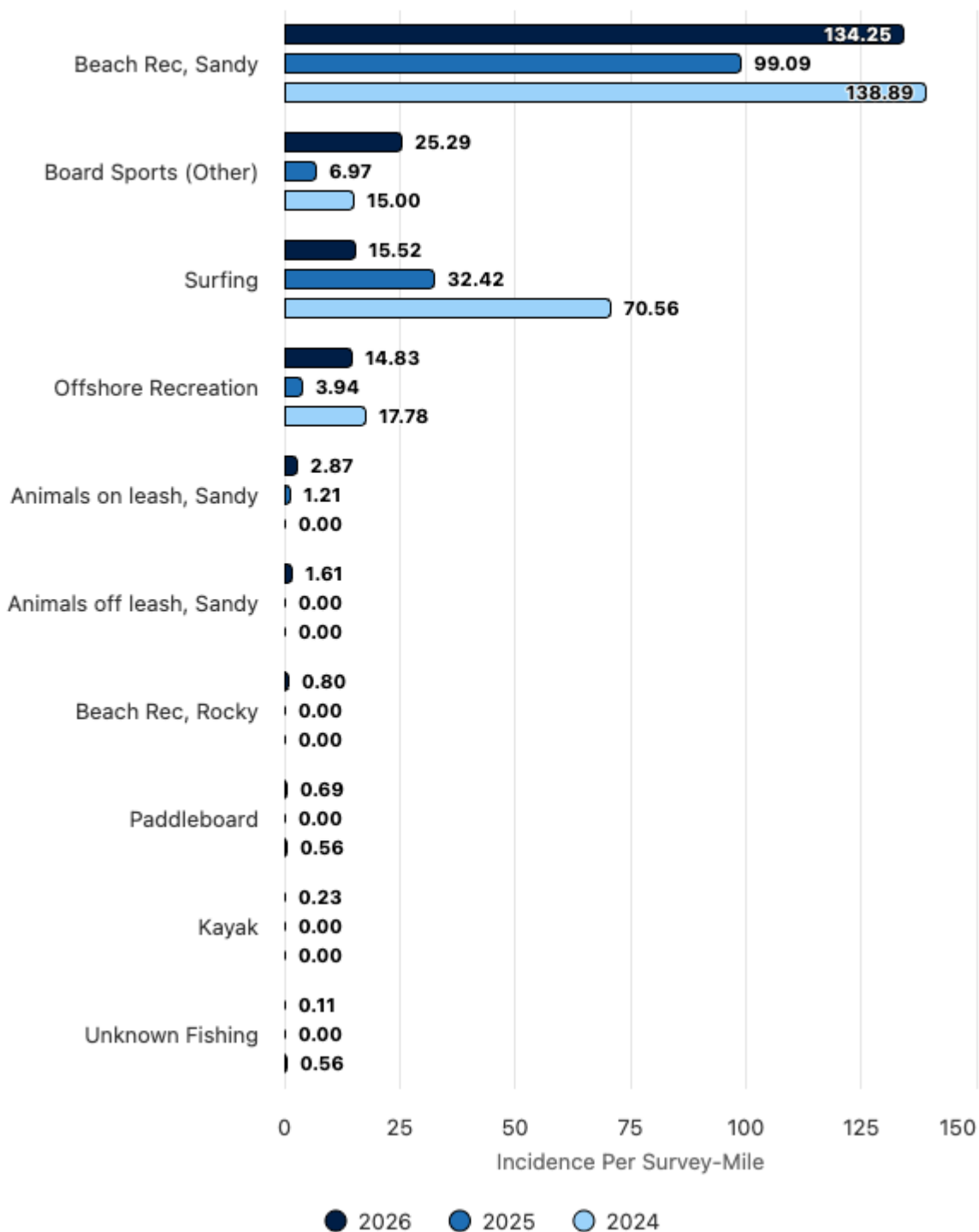


Figure 8

Caption: Top 10 Activities for South La Jolla SMR, By Survey-Mile, Last Three Years.

## BREAKDOWN BY MPA

| MPA                            | Number of Surveys<br>January 1, 2026 - June<br>30, 2026 | Activities Observed<br>January 1, 2026 - June<br>30, 2026 |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| Swami's SMCA                   | 70                                                      | 7,939                                                     |
| San Diego-Scripps Coastal SMCA | 9                                                       | 322                                                       |
| Matlahuayl SMR                 | 9                                                       | 2,959                                                     |
| South La Jolla SMR             | 15                                                      | 1,709                                                     |
| <b>All MPAs Combined</b>       | <b>103</b>                                              | <b>12,929</b>                                             |

Figure 9

### Swami's SMCA

- Volunteers completed 70 land surveys here, capturing large increases in sandy beach recreation and surfing rates compared to prior years (Figure 5, Figure 9).
- It was the coastal MPA with the highest onshore consumptive activity recorded, with an onshore consumptive incidence rate of 1.3 per survey-mile (Figure 3, Figure 5).
- State Parks witnessed Potential Violations: We witnessed 10 instances of dogs off leash throughout all three transects which violates State Parks' regulations but is not a MPA violation. All were informed of local State Parks' enforcement rules and were compliant.
- State Parks witnessed during tidepool "king tide" dates a few instances of animals being placed in buckets, and mostly these families were unaware of tide-pool etiquette and best practices. They were being educated.

### San Diego-Scripps Coastal SMCA

- This site maintained the lowest human use density in the region, with 89.4 activities per survey-mile across 9 land surveys so far in 2026 (Figure 2, Figure 9).
- Surfing rates dropped significantly compared to 2024 and 2025, while alternative uses like board sports (other) and tidepooling saw increases (Figure 6).

### Matlahuayl SMR

- This Marine Reserve recorded exceptionally high non-consumptive activity, driven by an onshore beach recreation rate of 242.42 per survey-mile (Figure 4, Figure 7).
- Despite crowds and constant recreational kayaking, compliance was excellent with no potential violations and 1 boat-based violation reported (Figure 11, Figure 13).

### South La Jolla SMR

- Non-consumptive beach use increased at this site, jumping from an onshore rate of 99.09 activities per survey-mile in 2025 to 134.25 in 2026 (Figure 4).
- The area faced the highest potential violations in the county thus far in 2026, accounting for 3 out of the 4 total potential illegal fishing incidents observed during boat-based surveys. (Figure 13).

## POTENTIAL VIOLATIONS



Figure 10

Caption: Potential Violations Observed - All MPAs. Incidence per survey-mile across all survey sites, January 1 - June 30 of each year. 2013, 0.176; 2014, 2.026; 2015, 0.307; 2016, 0.113; 2017, 0.000; 2018, 0.068; 2019, 0.189; 2020, 0.169; 2021, 0.049; 2022, 0.147; 2023, 0.102; 2024, 0.489; 2025, 0.318; 2026, 0.000;

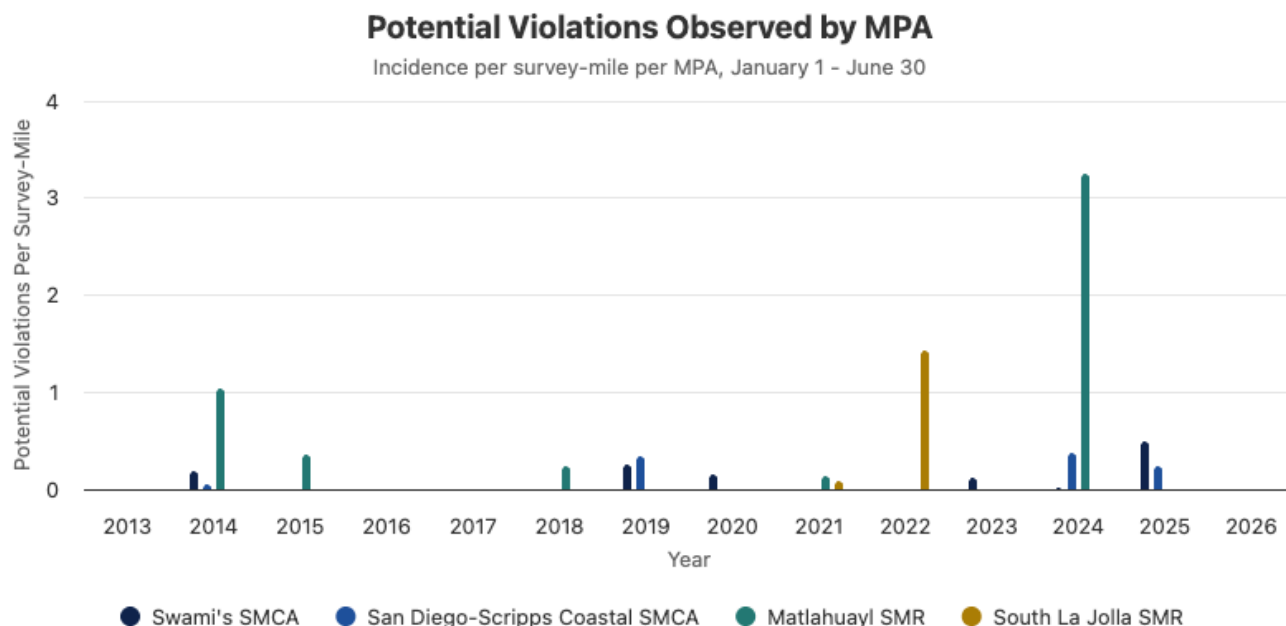


Figure 11

Caption: Potential Violations Observed by MPA. Incidence per survey-mile per MPA.

## San Diego County MPAs Boat-based Surveys

January – June 2026

In addition to the shore-based MPA Watch surveys, WILDCOAST staff conducts offshore surveys from the Research Vessel *Under-See* of South La Jolla SMR, Matlahuayl SMR, and Scripps SMCA. As conditions permit, surveys are also conducted at the Swami's SMCA.

During boat MPA Watch surveys WILDCOAST documents all consumptive and non-consumptive boating activity, as well as all fishing and other consumptive activities observed taking place on or in the water, as well as all onshore fishing and any other consumptive activity occurring in and around the MPA's, including control areas, when visible. WILDCOAST staff are present and conduct all surveys.

From January to June 2026, WILDCOAST completed 11 coastal boat MPA Watch surveys of South La Jolla SMR, Matlahuayl SMR, and Scripps SMCA - observing 91 vessels.

Along the transects (including MPAs and non-MPAs), recreational activity was the most common activity observed (86.81%), with the remaining activities being commercial: commercial fishing (8.79%), commercial net boat (1=0%), and commercial work boat (3.3%).

The most common vessels observed were sport fishing vessels (61.54%), followed by kayaks (16.48%), dive boats (6.59%), commercial lobster boats (3.3%), commercial party fishing vessels (4.4%), research/military/enforcement (3.3%), jet skis (1.1%), purse seiners (0%), and other (1.1%).

Note that in the Matlahuayl SMR, recreational kayakers are a constant and are not counted in the MPA Watch survey as it would skew vessel counts. Thousands of kayakers recreate in the La Jolla Cove yearly, and while conditions allow for MPA Watch surveys, it is almost guaranteed conditions allow for kayaking.

There were four potential violations observed during the coastal boat-based surveys conducted during January to June 2026 time period, all of which were reported to CalTIP.

- 5/22: 3 individuals aboard a recreational fishing vessel were fishing in Matlahuayl SMR, reported to CalTip via phone call
- 6/24: 2 passengers aboard the "White Knuckles" sailboat were fishing in South La Jolla SMR, reported via CalTip app
- 6/26: During one survey, 2 recreational fishing vessels were observed fishing in South La Jolla SMR (one boat with 1 passenger, 1 skiff with 3 passengers fishing right next to each other), reported via the CalTip app. The third boat (called "Les is More") was fishing in South La Jolla SMR on our way back from the survey, so it was not recorded on MPA Watch

## Jan - Jun 2026 All Fishing Activity San Diego

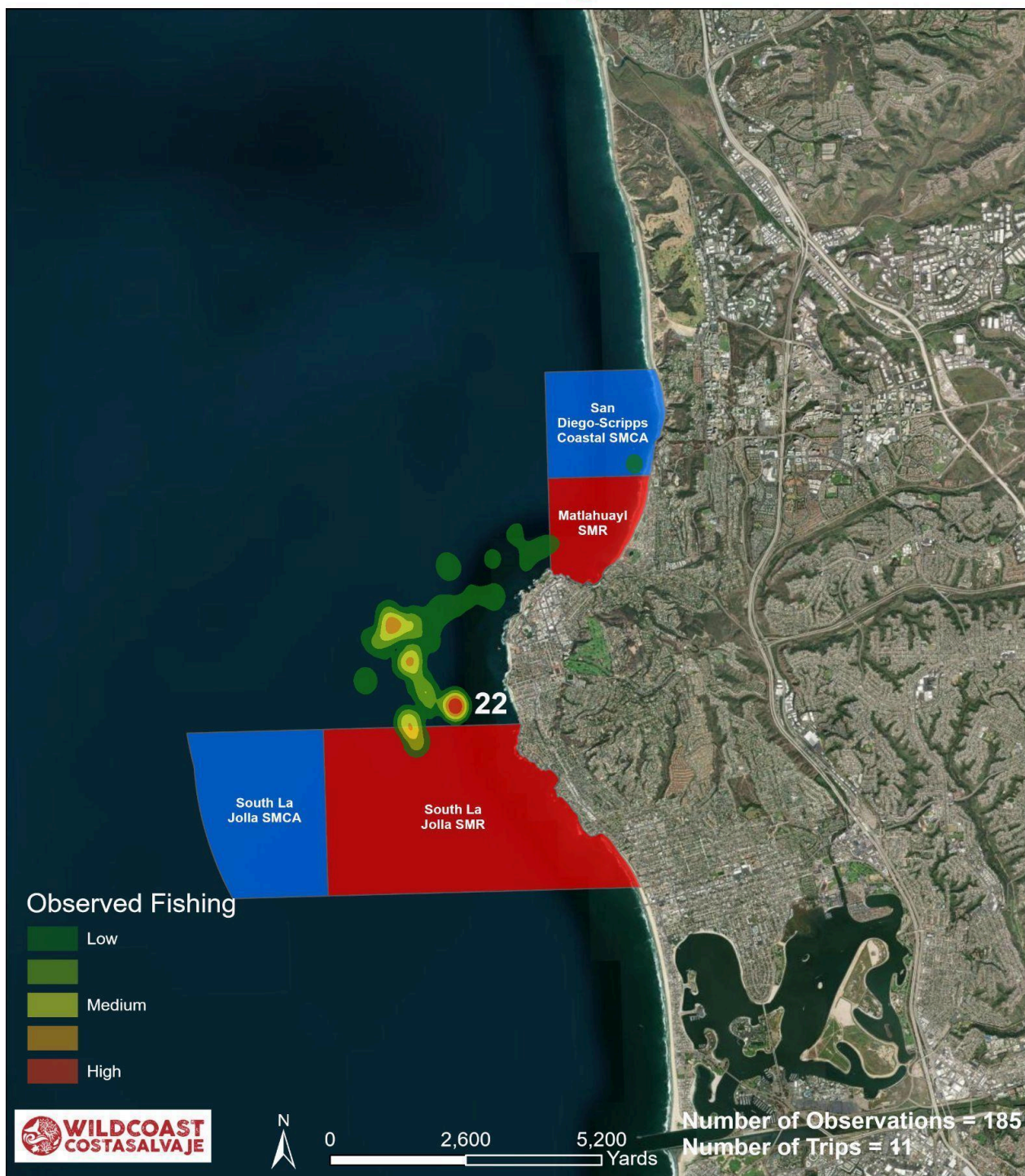


Figure 12

## Jan - Jun 2026 Reported Violations San Diego



Figure 13

## Marine Monitor (M2) RADARs

It is important to note that San Diego currently has several Marine Monitor (M2) RADARs overlooking MPAs in San Diego county, recording vessel activity 24/7. The data from the RADARs suggest that weekends are the most common time to see potential violations, so WILDCOAST makes an effort to conduct surveys at this time. Please contact [lillie@wildcoast.org](mailto:lillie@wildcoast.org) with questions regarding these RADARs and the compliance issues they have recorded.

## NEXT STEPS

### WILDCOAST

In San Diego County, WILDCOAST worked with a cohort of interns to increase the frequency and accuracy of our surveys. Throughout the latter half of 2026, we prioritized diversifying survey locations to capture a more comprehensive view of activity across all San Diego transects, an initiative that will remain a priority for the second half of 2026.

In the second half of 2026, WILDCOAST is excited to expand our reach by opening our community science initiatives to a wider network of volunteers beyond our intern cohort. We recognize that engaging the broader public in hands-on conservation is more vital now than ever, fostering a deeper community connection to our coastal resources. As we grow, we remain committed to maintaining the highest rigorous data standards; this includes implementing standardized protocols and refined statewide training modules designed to prevent "data drift" and ensure every observation is accurate, consistent, and scientifically sound.

Throughout 2026, WILDCOAST successfully continued the second stage of the pilot project to implement intercept surveys in partnership with UC Davis. These surveys complement the existing MPA Watch protocol by providing deeper insights into beach-user demographics and their baseline understanding of MPAs. Moving into 2026, WILDCOAST and Orange County Coastkeeper (OCCCK) transitioned this initiative from a seasonal pilot to a permanent, year-round program in a second pilot of the study. This sustained monitoring will allow for the collection of critical data across all seasons, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of coastal activity in Southern California.

WILDCOAST has been conducting public outreach to spread awareness surrounding tide pools that fall under MPA protections. These efforts are focused primarily on the tide pools located within MPA boundaries located at San Diego-Scripps SMCA and Swami's SMCA. WILDCOAST's Tidepool Ambassador program will continue outreach in tidepools through 2026, including the distribution of an English/Spanish tidepool pocket guide that is a tool to encourage best tidepool practices while providing identifications of important critters found statewide. The expansion of the Tidepool Ambassador program includes having State Parks and the UC Nature Reserve attend a tidepool compliance meeting to discuss the tidepool season and how to mitigate tidepool disruptions and poaching activity.

MPA Watch will continue to collaborate with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) by distributing MPA Watch reports to regional managers in order to improve the management and compliance of MPAs. MPA Watch is always looking to expand its network of partner organizations to enhance the scale and scope of MPA monitoring across California whenever possible. MPA Watch's

human use data is available on our website to make it accessible to partners, resource agencies, municipalities, and other interested parties. One of the hopes of MPA Watch is that volunteers and community members help spread knowledge and awareness of MPAs to the communities that surround them, inspiring marine stewardship in our populations.

## STATE PARKS

In the second half of 2026, CA State Parks MPA Watch surveyors will attend Tidepool Ambassador Meetings to secure volunteer help for the next King Tide Season. Place more signage around the tidepool area to inform the public about tidepool rules. Also, CA State Parks will utilize the CalTip hotline to bring these issues to the Citing agency.

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

For additional information on MPA Watch, including survey sites, participating organizations, protocols and datasheets, media kit, and how to get involved, please visit [mpawatch.org](http://mpawatch.org). For additional information regarding MPAs and regulations specific to the various classifications of MPAs please visit [wildlife.ca.gov/MPAs](http://wildlife.ca.gov/MPAs). If you see an activity that violates MPA regulations, please call CalTip to report the violation at (888) 334-2258.

To contact WILDCOAST about the MPA Watch program contact [mpawatch@wildcoast.org](mailto:mpawatch@wildcoast.org)

## PHOTOS



Photo 1: WILDCOAST crew aboard "Under-See" research vessel on a boat based MPA Watch survey.

Photo 2: WILDCOAST Staff doing an informational session on MPA Watch to college program students.



Photos 3 and 4: Jan 1, 2026, Polar Plunge was a big hit with the locals even with a super rainy day.



Photo 5: King Tides in January produced massive crowds on our small Seaside Reef in Cardiff.

Photo 6: In March this year the San Elijo Lagoon mouth needed to be dredged as the mouth of the lagoon was completely shut off. Sand replenishment went to the Living Dune to re-fortify it.



Photo 7: Block Fall at Swamis 3A in March was significant. No one was injured.