

# executive summary

new area study of alternatives  
may 1979

*File:*  
*NPS*  
*Inactive*  
*Proposed*

## IRVINE COAST / LAGUNA

CALIFORNIA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY  
STUDY OF ALTERNATIVES  
NEW AREA

IRVINE COAST / LAGUNA  
CALIFORNIA

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### BACKGROUND

The Irvine Coast/Laguna study area encompasses approximately 24,000 acres of largely undeveloped agricultural land in Orange County, California, approximately 50 miles south of downtown Los Angeles. The terrain includes steep-walled canyons, ridges, marine terraces, sea cliffs, beaches, and two inland lakes and offers vistas of both the ocean and inland portions of Orange County.

The Irvine Coast/Laguna study area is one of three major open space areas remaining along the southern California coast; the others are the Santa Monica Mountains and Camp Pendleton.

Interest in the study has been generated from a number of sources. The Irvine Company and the Aliso Viejo Company, who own approximately 80 percent of the land within the study area, are planning major developments and have expressed the need for a decision as to whether or not federal involvement is likely. The Orange County Master Plan of Regional Parks indicates that approximately 1,215 acres within the study area are to be preserved in parkland. However, the county has indicated that because of the financial constrictions of Proposition 13, it is not in a position to acquire any of this open space or to manage it even if the land is donated. Other regional and local agencies are faced with the same financial problem, creating additional public interest in federal involvement.

The California Department of Parks and Recreation has been interested in parts of the study area since the late 1960s, when the state approached the Irvine Company concerning possible acquisition of portions of the Irvine Coast. In the early 1970s an area of 1,364 acres was agreed upon and money appropriated for the purchase, but a 1974 lawsuit by stockholders stopped the sale. Since that time the state has appropriated additional funds and increased the size of the proposed park to approximately 3,210 acres, including Moro Canyon and the 3.5 miles of Irvine coastline. However, it appears that the \$22.6 million appropriated will not be sufficient to acquire the entire coastline and canyon.

The California Coastal Commission is interested in preserving as much open space in the area as possible under the mandate of the California Coastal Act of 1976. The commission and Orange County are currently reviewing development plans prepared by the Irvine and Aliso Viejo companies.

Debate over preservation and management of the study area lands has continued for years. In an effort to seek resolution of the problem, the area was included in the 1978 Omnibus Parks Bill,

which resulted in section 608 of the 1978 National Parks and Recreation Act (see Appendix A). The act requires the National Park Service (NPS) to determine the feasibility and desirability of establishing the Irvine Coast/Laguna area as a unit of the National Park System. It further states that the study will determine

- (1) the scenic, scientific, natural, and outdoor recreation values of the Irvine Coast-Laguna area;
- (2) the type of Federal, State, and local programs that are feasible and desirable in the public interest to preserve, develop, and make accessible for public use the values identified; and
- (3) the relationship of any recommended national park, recreation area, or seashore area to existing or proposed Federal, State, and local programs to manage in the public interest the natural resources of the entire Irvine Coast-Laguna area.

In accomplishing the above tasks, the NPS study team has worked since December 1978 with state, local, and private groups to define the study area, gather and evaluate resource information, and define and review management alternatives. Therefore the goal of this report is to assess feasible alternatives for protection and management of the study area's resources and to assess the impacts and implications of each alternative. This document will provide information that will enable the Department of the Interior to submit to Congress at the end of May a recommendation on whether this area has potential for inclusion in the National Park System.

## SIGNIFICANT RESOURCES

Based on NPS criteria, the following natural resources in the study area have been identified as significant:

undeveloped seacoast and marine resources cited in the National Park System Plan as being of prime significance in the South Pacific Border Region;

fossil records representing one of the most significant Middle Miocene to Lower Pliocene stratigraphic sections in North America;

lower Aliso Canyon, which is being considered for national natural landmark status because of the coastal scrub/chaparral vegetative association, which is considered unique for its location and diversity and includes two federally listed endangered plants;

facilities to be developed in Laguna Canyon and the Bommer Canyon/Shady Canyon areas, where they would not adversely impact the marine environment or local beach communities. Management options would be the same as for Alternative 2.

#### Alternative 4 - Maximum Open Space

The intent of this alternative is to protect the maximum amount of open space and those resources that have national and/or local and regional importance. An Irvine Coast/Laguna Area of National Concern would provide a framework for cooperative planning where these significant resources would be protected and agricultural uses and other activities could be continued, including commercial, residential, and recreation development. To accomplish this, either the California Coastal Commission's authority would be expanded to include the entire study area or a new commission would be established, comprising agencies with land use regulatory powers. The commission would develop a management plan for the entire 24,000 acre area with management responsibility remaining with administering agencies or groups. Acquisition of lands would be based on a determination of whether they are critical to fulfilling the area's purpose. Tentatively, approximately 12,500 acres have been identified as being critical. The federal government could provide financial and/or technical assistance for acquisition, resource protection, and development.

a natural spring-fed lake and associated lakeside habitat; and five rare and endangered species of birds whose range may include portions of the study area.

Significant cultural resources include

Crystal Cove residential area, a unique collection of California vernacular beach architecture, which is being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places as a historic district; and

approximately 150 recorded archeological sites, many virtually undisturbed. These sites have not been evaluated according to NPS criteria, but they could contain important information pertinent to the earliest periods of occupation in the area (aboriginal man has been established in the area as early as 17,000 years ago).

Other significant elements are the area's

proximity to major urban populations,

potential recreational opportunities, and

ability of the beach and marine resources to draw regional and national visitation.

#### PROPOSED LAND USE

Orange County, specifically its southeastern portion which includes the study area, is one of the fastest growing urban areas in California; plans are being prepared for development of approximately 17,500 acres of the study area. If these plans are approved, 5,725 acres would be developed for urban uses. In the Irvine Coast area, general plan amendments have been approved for development to accommodate a population of over 12,000 persons. Long-term planning documents propose residential development for the Irvine inland hills, with a north-south San Joaquin freeway bisecting that area. The Sycamore Hills/Laguna Lakes area is slated for a regional park, intensive commercial/recreation development, and residential development. The Laguna Canyon area is proposed for development by two major landowners. The Aliso Viejo area is proposed for a community development that would ultimately support 50,000 to 60,000 residents, an industrial park, and a commercial town center. The proposed San Joaquin freeway would run through this area, as would a number of arterial highways. Additional residential and commercial development to support 1,500 people is planned on 285 acres in Aliso Canyon and South Laguna Hills.

## ALTERNATIVES

Four alternatives have been identified as feasible ways to preserve the area's significant resources and provide for their use.

### Alternative 1 - Existing Open Space Programs

In this alternative, urban growth and development pressures would continue to force land out of open space and agricultural uses. Management of the study area would continue under direction of present landowners; agencies with regulatory land use powers would continue to review development proposals; and the state would continue its efforts to acquire portions of the coast and Moro Canyon with the appropriated \$22.6 million. County, local, and private programs propose to keep portions of the study area in open space, but basic financial and management questions have not been resolved. In addition, there are no assurances that any of these proposals will become viable programs.

### Alternative 2 - Irvine Coast Open Space

The primary objective of this alternative is to protect the study area's most significant resources and to provide recreational, interpretive, and educational opportunities for the public. Acquisition of this 9,000 acre area would protect the seacoast/marine environment along with the coastal drainages originating in the San Joaquin Hills.

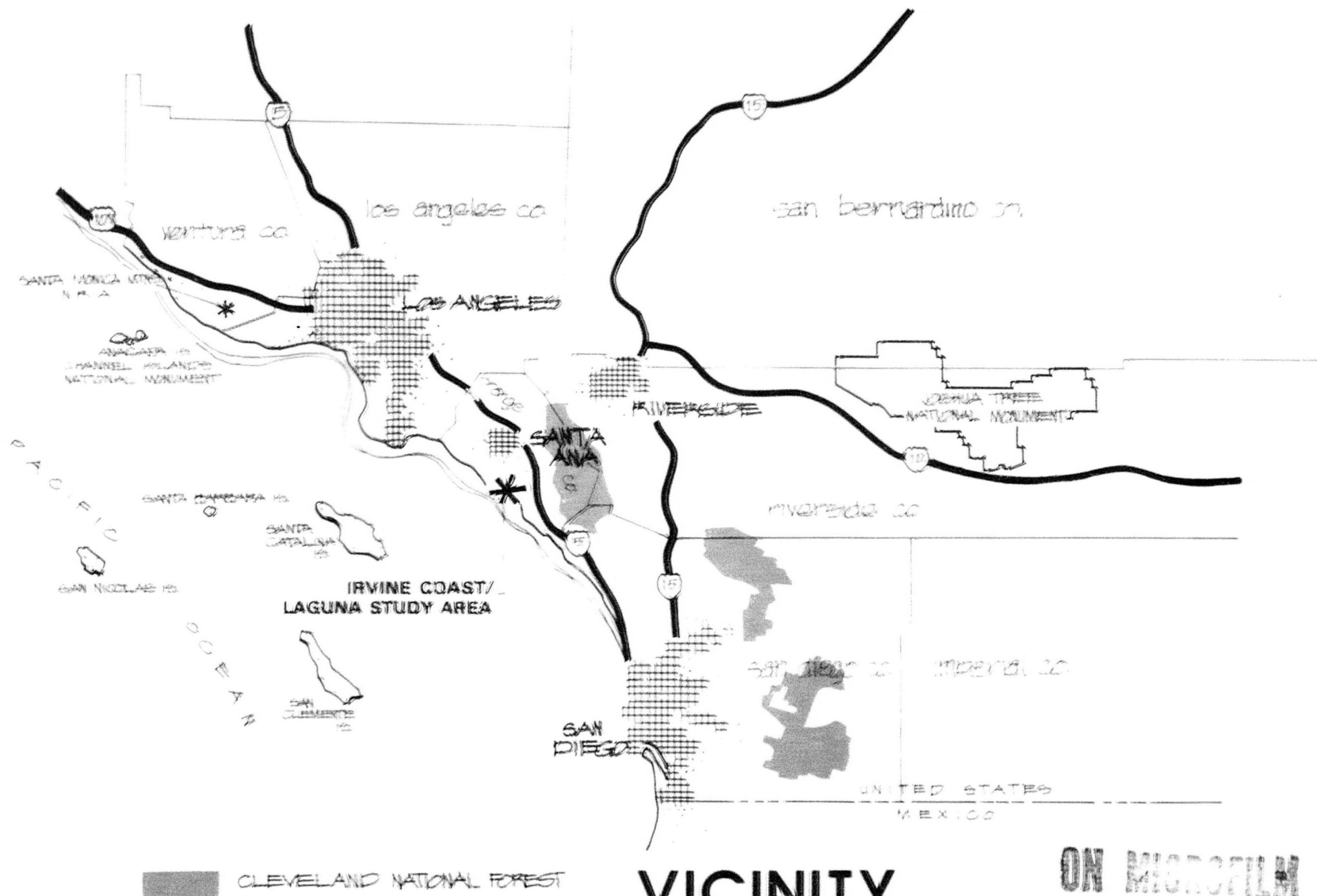
Approximately 1,000 acres of Los Trancos Canyon (not included in the study area) should be protected, since the canyon plays an important role in preserving the coastal environment. Visitor programs and facilities would be developed along the beach, and the marine terrace, frontal slopes, and several canyon mouths would include facilities for picnicking, camping, and parking. An integrated trail system would link inland and coastal visitor programs.

The two management options for the area involve federal participation because of the national significance of the seacoast/marine environment. One option would establish an urban recreation area managed by the National Park Service; the second option would provide for management by the California Department of Parks and Recreation, with financial and technical assistance from the Department of the Interior.

### Alternative 3 - Irvine Coast/San Joaquin Hills Open Space

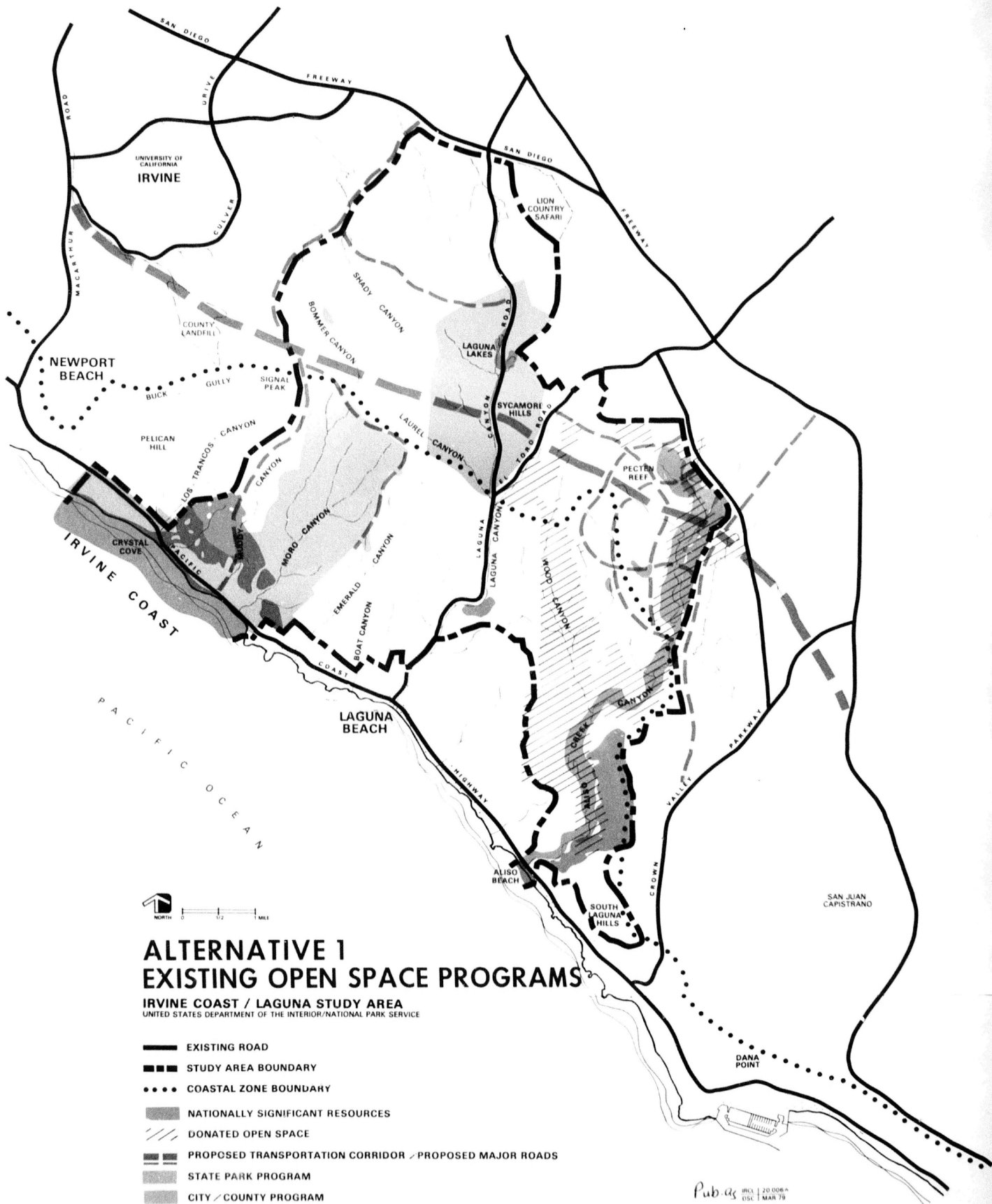
This alternative would expand the 9,000-acre management area of Alternative 2 to 14,500 acres. This would allow visitor support





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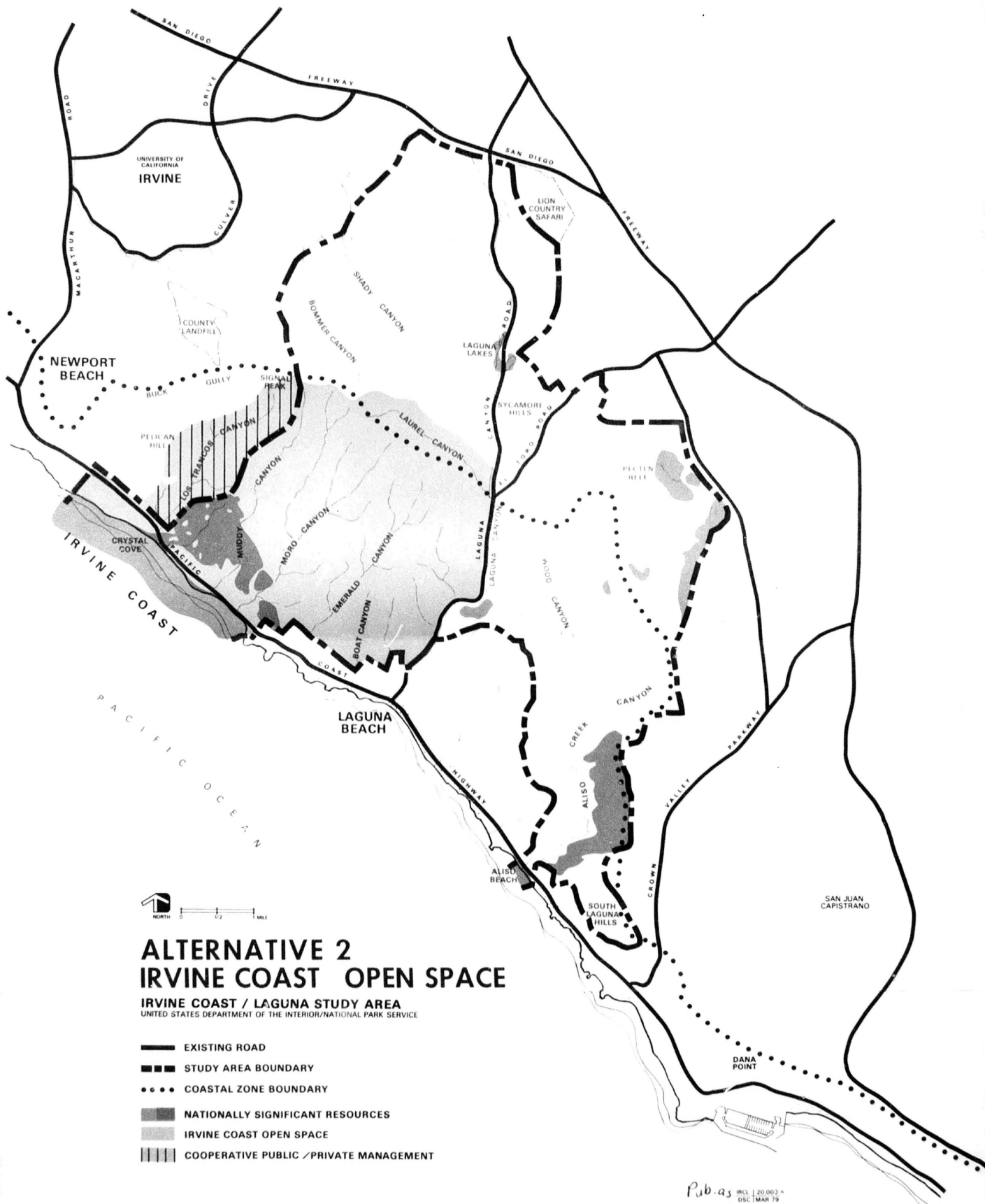
IRVINE COAST/LAGUNA STUDY AREA  
 UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR/  
 NATIONAL PARK SERVICE



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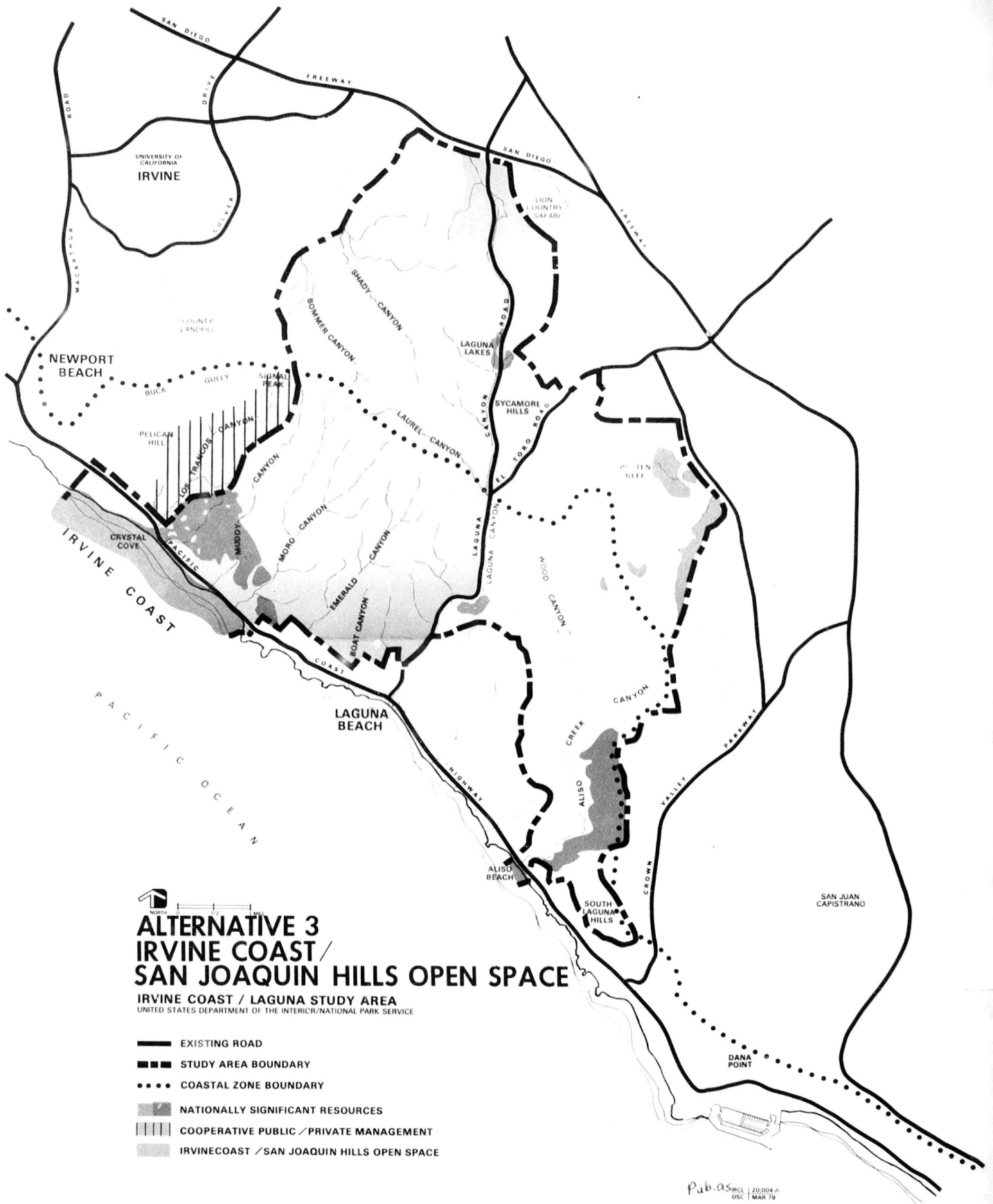


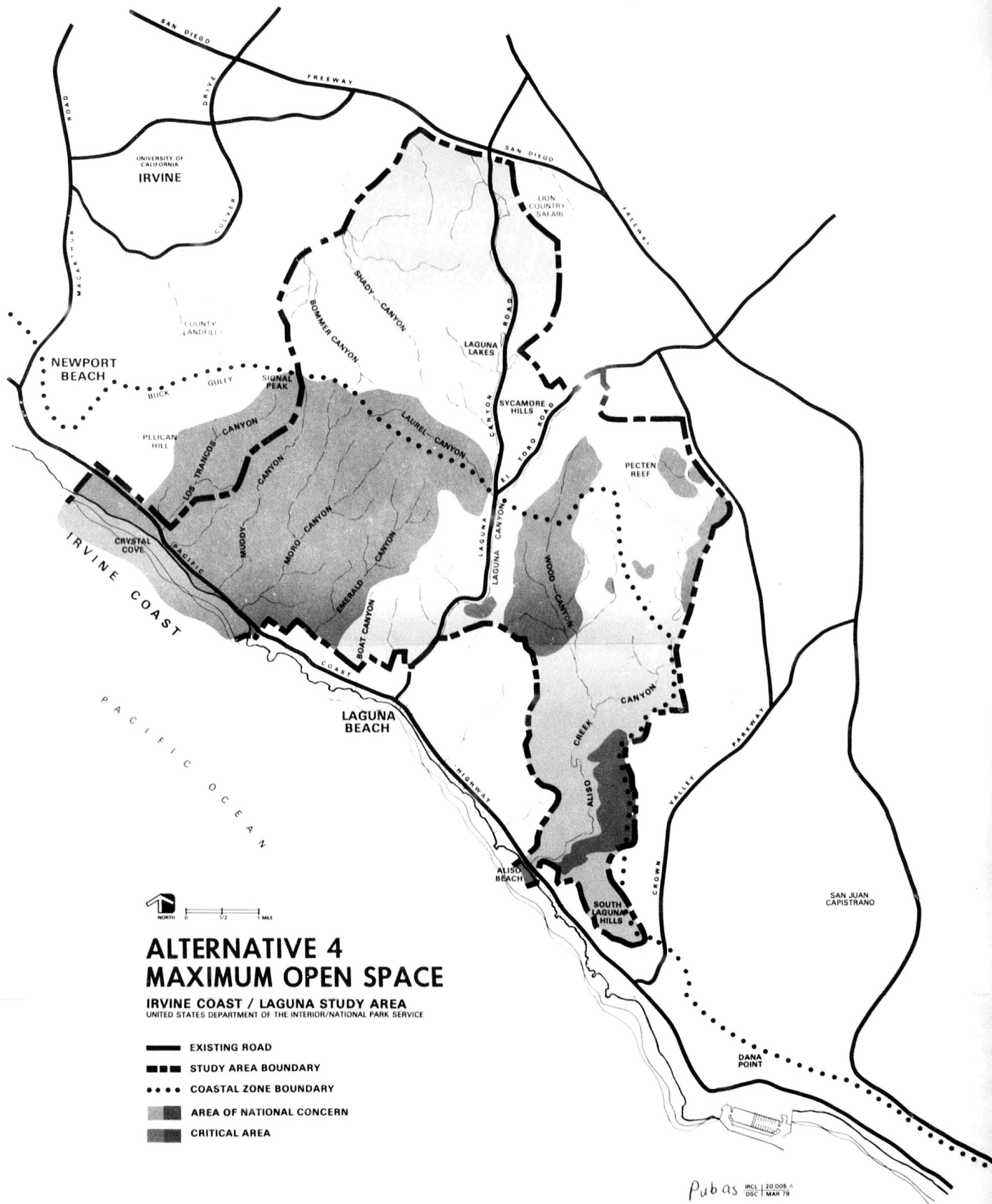
## ALTERNATIVE 2 IRVINE COAST OPEN SPACE

IRVINE COAST / LAGUNA STUDY AREA  
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR/NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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