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# San Diego's Yoga Crackdown Leaves Yogis Bent Out of Shape

By [James Fanelli](#) [Follow](#)

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San Diego has turned yoga on its head—recasting instructors into outlaws, park rangers into yoga police and pushing the practice from serenity into war.

Park rangers arrived unannounced at Sunset Cliffs Natural Park on a recent day to keep instructors and students from taking their familiar pose atop the bluffs overlooking the Pacific.

Naturally, yoga enthusiasts are bent out of shape, the good vibes disrupted by the threat of tickets and fines.

“San Diego is the mecca of yoga, it’s the reason people move here,” said yoga instructor Kody Hetherington. “If you don’t allow people to take care of themselves in this healthy way outside, then what are people going to do?”

City officials this year revised a sidewalk-vendor ordinance, and as part of that, clarified that fitness classes, including yoga, held in public parks and beaches require proper permitting—and are restricted to certain spaces.

That led to the park rangers’ crackdown in May, and San Diego’s yoga crowd has been in warrior pose ever since. Local yogis accuse city officials of being inflexible and bending over backward to soothe affluent NIMBY homeowners who live nearby.

“Honestly, it seems like a wealthy, privileged few are trying to keep their ocean view clear of other folks,” said Amy Baack, who has been teaching yoga class at Sunset Cliffs since 2021.



Amy Baack's bluff-top yoga class in San Diego. PHOTO: THE LIVEWELL MEDIA

## **A karma-geddon?**

Yoga instructors said the city pulled their mats out from under them, giving no warning that their yoga classes would be banned from longtime locales. Park rangers were surreptitiously dispatched, they said.

Baack and another instructor filed a lawsuit against the city, alleging violations of their First Amendment rights. Free yoga classes are protected speech, they say, because the classes are open to anyone who wants to listen. Students can choose to make donations, the suit said.

A spokesperson for the San Diego mayor declined to comment, citing the litigation. City officials have said yoga classes can be a safety risk or crowd out other activities in public spaces. Individuals are allowed to practice yoga on San Diego beaches.

For years, Hetherington taught a weekly evening yoga class on a grassy bluff overlooking the ocean at the city's Palisades Park. Students could watch the sunset over the ocean. Class sizes reach 50 students in the spring and summer and dip to about 20 people in the winter, she said.

When Hetherington arrived for her class last month, park rangers were already in position. Any planking, meditating or downward dogging with students would get her a ticket, she learned.

“It’s kinda creepy they knew exactly who I was,” Hetherington said. “They pretty much stalked our social media and Instagram to figure out the teachers who were guiding the classes.”



Sunset yoga at Sunset Cliffs Natural Park. PHOTO: AMY BAACK



Park Rangers gathering. PHOTO: AMY BAACK

## Twist and shout

Outdoor fitness classes, including yoga, boomed in San Diego during the pandemic. Some residents complained to the city that classes got so big that they clogged popular ocean-view spots for others. Park visitors overloaded parking lots, the residents said, looked for spaces on nearby streets, sometimes blocking driveways. Others complained of noise.

San Diego City Councilmember Jennifer Campbell, who spearheaded the ordinance revisions, said her constituents demanded city enforcement because they worried about the wear and tear on the cliffs.

“The city must ensure public safety and accessibility for all residents in public spaces,” Campbell said.

Sue Martin, an officer of the Sunset Cliffs Natural Park Council and nearby resident, said the yoga classes were often conducted at a prime viewing spot, obstructing views and passersby.

On a couple of occasions, Martin said, she saw people in yoga classes posing near the edge of the cliff. The chances of falling are low, she said, but “you make a sudden move and you might go over the edge.”

Jackie Kowalik, a yoga instructor who also taught at Sunset Cliffs, said she and her students respected local residents and picked up litter. “We’re not out there like, ‘This is our space, you can’t be here while we are doing this,’ ” Kowalik said.

The city-designated public spaces for yoga classes are far from serene, she said. Some are next to a freeway or under the airport flight path. “It is supposed to be relaxing and peaceful,” Kowalik said.

Steven Hubbard, a plaintiff in the lawsuit, said he has taught classes on a grassy bluff in Palisades Park for 17 years. As many as 250 students have attended his sessions.

Since May, Hubbard has received two tickets, he said, but hasn’t given up.

Hubbard, who lives near Palisades Park, broadcasts his classes while posing in his backyard. His students gather at the bluff and listen through their smartphones.

“I wouldn’t say I feel like an outlaw,” he said. “I am a stubborn person. It’s kind of natural for me to find a workaround, especially for something I believe in.”



Yoga at Palisades Park in San Diego. PHOTO: KODY HETHERINGTON

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