

AÑO NUEVO STATE NATURAL RESERVE'S FUTURE FOCUSES ON KIDS AND EXPANSION

Plotting Park's Path



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Kids on a field trip from the Central Valley take in the beach scene of elephant seals at Año Nuevo State Natural Reserve Monday.

By **SHANNA McCORD**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

AÑO NUEVO — The future of Año Nuevo State Reserve, the state land famous for its northern elephant seals breeding ground, depends on educating the public about its proposed expansion.

State Parks officials, considering how Año Nuevo will look and feel 20 years down the road, have assembled a preliminary blueprint for the future, known as a general plan, that serves as a guide for use and development of the park.

The general plan calls for combining the natural reserve where

the elephant seals breed and the nearly 3,000 acres of park land on the other side of Highway 1, which is part of the Santa Cruz Mountains.

The park land, which connects with Butano and Big Basin state parks, has grown in size during the past 49 years due to various acquisitions by the state.

The goal is to create new hiking trails and camp sites in the inland areas of Año Nuevo where formal park access and facilities have not yet been established. The plan includes creating a trailhead and day use parking at Lake Elizabeth to help establish visitor access to the inland areas.

Weigh in on general plan

WHAT: Año Nuevo State Natural Reserve and State Park preliminary general plan.

WHO: California Department of Parks and Recreation.

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"It's all about nature here," said Gary Strachan, supervising ranger of Año Nuevo State Reserve. "Our vision is to make sure this area stays open space."

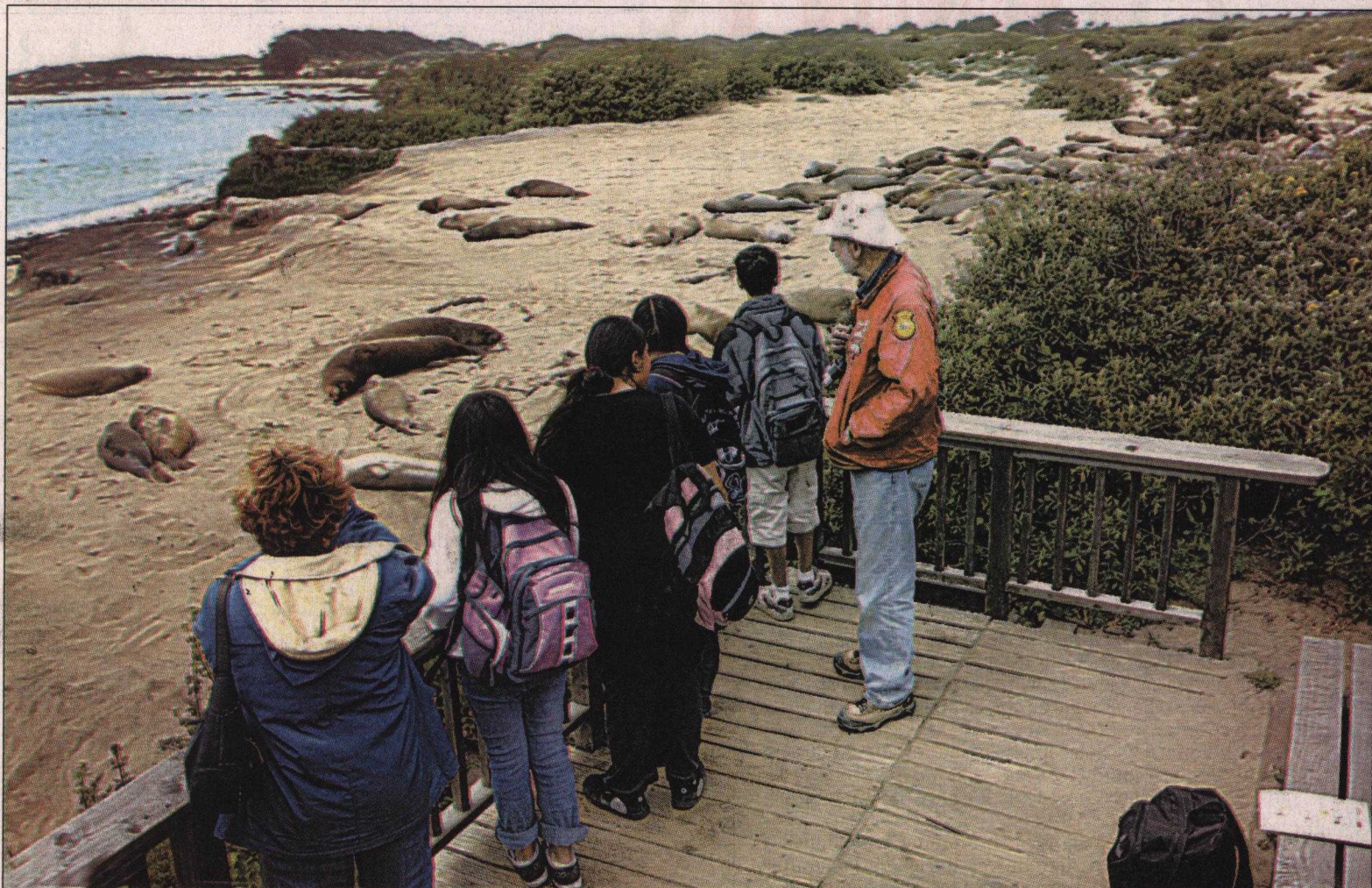
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Anthony L. Solis/Sentinel graphic

'Año Nuevo is bigger than just the elephant seals. What we plan to do is ensure that people who visit the park are educated.'

GARY STRACHAN, SUPERVISING RANGER OF AÑO NUEVO STATE RESERVE



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

A volunteer docent explains the beach scene to an excited bunch of schoolchildren from the Central Valley watching elephant seals for the first time at Año Nuevo State Natural Reserve on Monday.

Año Nuevo

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General plans are also under way for Butano and Big Basin state parks.

"The plans give general direction for the kind of facilities we would allow for future generations," State Parks spokesman Roy Stearns said.

One of the key factors for the park's future is turning more young people on to Año Nuevo's historical, cultural and recreational assets, according to the draft general plan.

"When we talk about our future, we mean our children and the school program," Strachan said. "Año Nuevo is bigger than just the elephant seals. What we plan to do is ensure that people who visit the park are educated."

The 1,300-acre natural reserve on the coastal side of Highway 1 draws about 200,000 people each year to hike nearly 2 miles each way across the sandy dunes, often windy and chilly, to check out the elephant seals while they flop on the sand to shed their top layer of fur or mate, depending on the season.

More than 230 volunteers are trained to guide



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

With her snout buried in the sand, a female elephant seal snoozes on the beach at Año Nuevo State Natural Reserve on Monday.

the walks and talk authoritatively about the seals and surrounding terrain.

But Año Nuevo rangers and volunteers struggle to keep up with demand. At least half of the schools who want to take a field trip to the park are turned away each year, Strachan said.

Roughly 13,000 school children visited Año Nue-

vo last year, he said.

About 600,000 children visit state parks across California each year, from Anza-Borrego Desert State Park east of San Diego to Humboldt Redwoods State Park.

"We're booked an hour after the school reservation system opens online," Strachan said. "We don't have enough volunteers and staff to provide what we need now. The general plan talks about ways of getting there and how to partner with other organizations like some of the local nonprofits."

Rangers hope to expand park services by recruiting more volunteers like Peter Bohacek of La Honda, who's been talking about the seals to visitors for six years.

"It's really great to be here listening to the animals and the surf," Bohacek said. "I really like to talk to visitors and get them turned on to what the seals are doing. I point out how to tell which ones are male."

Monday is the deadline for the public to comment on the plan, which will be sent to the state Parks Commission this summer for approval.

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