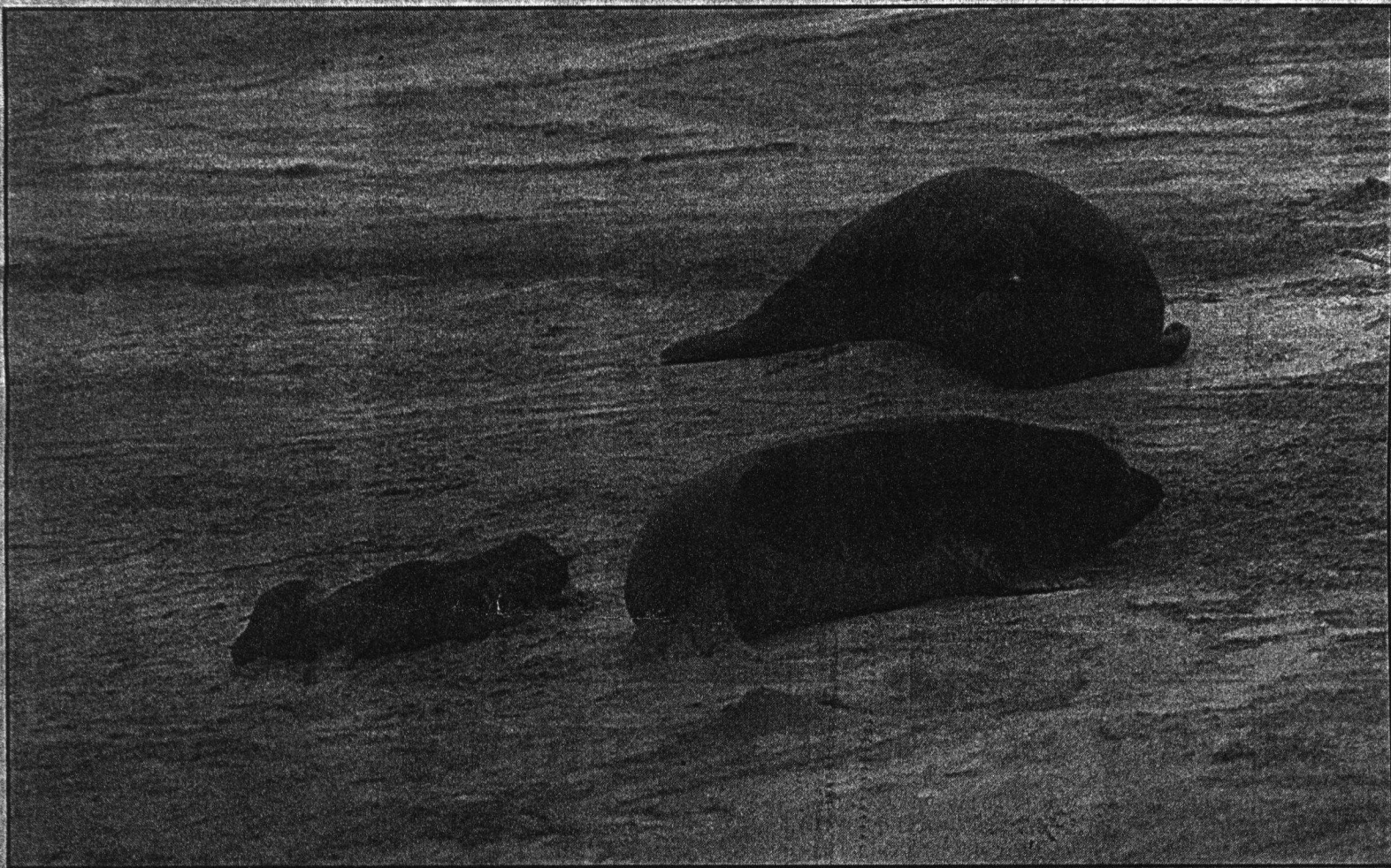


# El Nino takes toll on pups



Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

At top, a healthy young elephant seal pup scratches his nose Friday at Ano Nuevo. Park officials estimate that a quarter of all pups born this year will die from El Nino storms. Above, a pup crawls past the carcass of one that didn't make it.

## Young elephant seals drown in high waves

By **DONNA KIMURA**  
Sentinel staff writer

### AÑO NUEVO

**A**N ESTIMATED 25 to 30 percent of the elephant seal pups born this winter at Ano Nuevo State Reserve have died in the recent storms.

As many as 500 may have been lost this year, largely from being swept out to sea by high waves reaching into the rookery, said state parks Ranger Kevin Williams on Friday.

"El Nino hit in the peak pup season," he said.

Only weeks old, the pups have not yet learned to swim. The ones caught in the waves get battered in the rough waters and drown.

All along the coast, the ocean has been reaching areas not normally exposed to waves, according to Williams, a ranger at Ano Nuevo for 16 years.

On Friday, during a walking tour of the reserve, several sleepy-looking pups, about six weeks old, and sub-adults sat high on the sand dunes.

One state parks official said she had never observed elephant seals that far back on the beach.

The miserable recent weather also caused lots of shuffling to take place, which resulted in some pups being separated from their mothers and then starving to death, said Williams.

Because so many mothers have lost their young this year, some may be adopting pups that aren't their own, according to park personnel.

Researchers probably will be looking to see if that has happened, said Fay Levinson, docent naturalist.

The adult elephant seals do not seem to be affected by the bad weather. A number of pups that survived are fat and healthy.

Located north of Santa Cruz, Ano Nuevo boasts the largest accessible colony of northern elephant seals. These bellowing giants and their babies are the reserve's most popular attraction.

About 1,800 pups were born during this year's pupping season, which lasts from mid-December to mid-February. In March, researchers will be able to see how many have been successfully weaned and better count how many were lost.

The storms brought an even higher mortality rate to the young born at Point Reyes National Seashore, a smaller elephant seal colony located north of San Francisco. The majority of pups there were battered against the rocks by strong waves and killed. As many as 260 of the 300 pups are estimated to have been lost.

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## Pups drown in high waves

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In 1982, another El Niño year, as many as 70 percent of the pups born at Ano Nuevo were lost. The El Nino weather pattern is marked by a dramatic warming of the ocean, which can lead to powerful storms and unusual ocean conditions.

The park policy is to let the natural ecosystem balance itself out, Williams said. As a result, rescue attempts are rare.

"It's hard to see any animals being harmed," Williams said. "It's hard not to want to do something, but it's best to do what nature has always done."

This year's loss will cause a blip in the elephant seal population, but there shouldn't be any long-term damage to the species, according to Williams.

Between 150,000 and 170,000 elephant seals live along the Pacific coast.

This El Niño season seems to have affected other marine life.

"It has been a rough year with the severity of the storms," said Margaret Burks, executive director of The Marine Mammal Center in Sausalito.

Her center is rehabilitating 58 sea lions and elephant seal pups, when last year at this time it had

about 10. The animals have been rescued from beaches between San Luis Obispo and Mendocino.

Many were separated from their mothers during the storms.

Typically, Santa Cruz County has the second highest number of rescues behind Monterey County.

The center tries to help the animals because it makes up for those that are impacted by man, Burks said.

In addition, the center learns from each animal it rehabilitates, she said.

For more information about Año Nuevo State Reserve, call 1-800-444-4445 or (650) 879-0227.