

Parks + Beaches - Staff Managing Big Basin Park Is Like Running A City

By DENISE SIEBENTHAL
Sentinel Staff Writer

Ken Morris has one of the greatest working offices of them all.

The four claustrophobic walls of most offices are, for Morris, replaced by the towering redwoods of Big Basin State Park.

He had the more-than-enviable job for the past two years of supervising ranger of these 15,000 acres he calls "the Yosemite of the state park system."

Located 20 miles from Santa Cruz at its Big Basin Highway entrance in the Santa Cruz Mountains and 15 miles from Santa Cruz at its Waddell Beach entrance on Highway 1, Big Basin is one of those places you visit and then wonder why you haven't gone more often.

With the high price and scarcity of gasoline now, it's easier and more economical just to take your camping and backpacking gear up the road to Big Basin.

Morris doesn't have to drive anywhere to get to his place of employment because he lives in a ranchstyle home on park property, along with many of the other 40 park employees.

For him, managing Big Basin is like running a city.

"A park like this is really like a small city. We have our own sewer system, water system and police and fire protection. We have it all. We don't have as much as a city, granted, but we have it. We have to have road maintenance and everything else associated with 900,000 "people days" a year.

Park use, he explained, is measured in "people days" — meaning that each day a visitor stays at the park is counted as one "people day."

As he drives around the main park on its narrow, paved roads, Morris talks more as if he's describing his own backyard rather than his place of employment.

Big Basin has grown close to Morris' heart, as it has a tendency to do to most who visit here.

The entry fee is \$1.50 for day use and \$4 a night for camping with a maximum of 15 days, so Big Basin is affordable to most every citizen.

"I call it the 'Yosemite of the state park system' because it's the most popular state park and has the most available," Morris says.

Camping is the most popular activity, he points out, with everything from pup tents to roomy recreational vehicles found beneath the trees.

But even with 190 campsites, reservations should be made at least eight weeks in advance for individual sites and 12 weeks in advance for one of the two large group sites, Morris says.

All campsites can be reserved through Ticketron or by calling the park at 338-6132.

Because of the popularity of camping, sleeping bags and recreational vehicles most often are occupied by San Francisco Bay Area residents rather than by locals.

"The long reservation period is one reason we don't get a lot of local people," says secretary Julie English, who takes many of the calls for reservations.

"The locals want to come up at the spur of the moment and then they are disappointed when we're all booked up for the weekend."

One good way to enjoy the peace and beauty of Big Basin is to make reservations for Sunday through Thursday nights, Morris suggests. These nights usually aren't booked, and people can almost have their choice of campsites.

"A lot of people say we should build more campsites. I say we should spread people around. We're usually not full Sunday through Thursday."

The different camping areas each have their own personality. Some, like Blooms Creek and Sempervirens, are located near the main road and appear more like little, busy tent and camper cities under the trees than campgrounds.

Then there's the more tranquil and out-of-the-way Huckleberry which is a new campground with more trees than Blooms Creek and Sempervirens.

It has some particularly quaint campsites at the tips of small points of land, overlooking a gurgling creek below.

While cars and campers can be driven right into these campsites, it is necessary to walk to Wastahi — the most remote campground. Cars are parked in a lot, and campers walk a short distance to the campsites.

There also are campsites that are useable by the handicapped.

The campsites have all the amenities needed in the woods — a table, stove and foot locker and nearby restrooms and hot showers. Although there aren't any trailer hookups, a trailer sanitation station is located in the Huckleberry campground.

But Morris' place of business has more to offer than just sleeping under the trees.

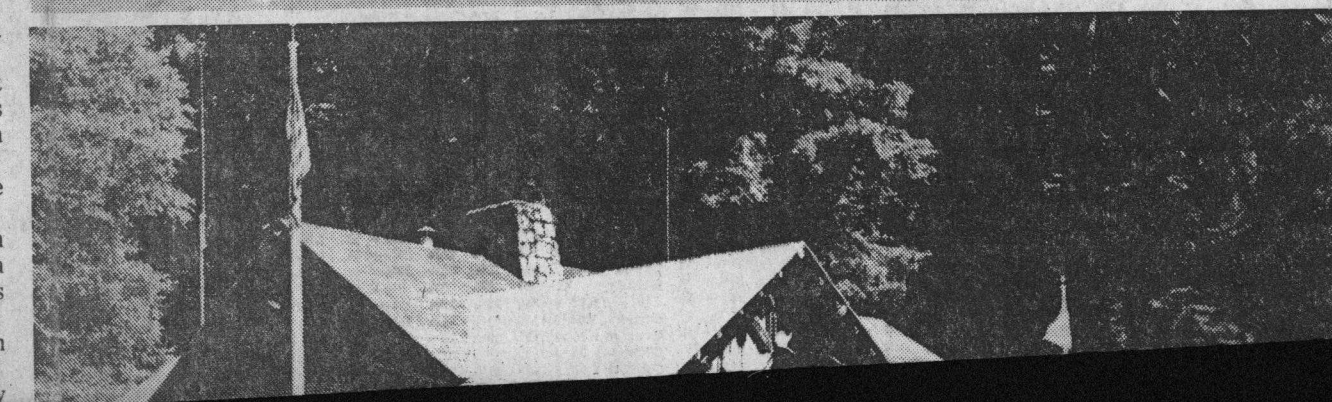
There are more than 40 miles of hiking trails, from the short jaunt from the campsites to the swimming hole at Sempervirens Falls to the recently opened 12-mile trek to the ocean through Rancho del Oso.

One of the most popular hikes, Morris says, is the 10-mile round trip Berry Falls.

There's also the 15-mile riding trail, 158 picnic sites — each equipped with a stove, trail camps for backpackers and a museum and short nature walk near the park's center for the less enthusiastic.

Although mainly known for its giant redwoods, Big Basin should be known as a land of variety.

Redwoods and Douglas fir grow in the canyons, nestled by



LEFT — All kinds of visitors — driving all kinds of vehicles — come to see the giant redwoods at Big Basin Park.

BELOW — Park headquarters is the hub of activities at Big Basin, the most popular park in the state system.

Sentinel Photos
By Pete Amos

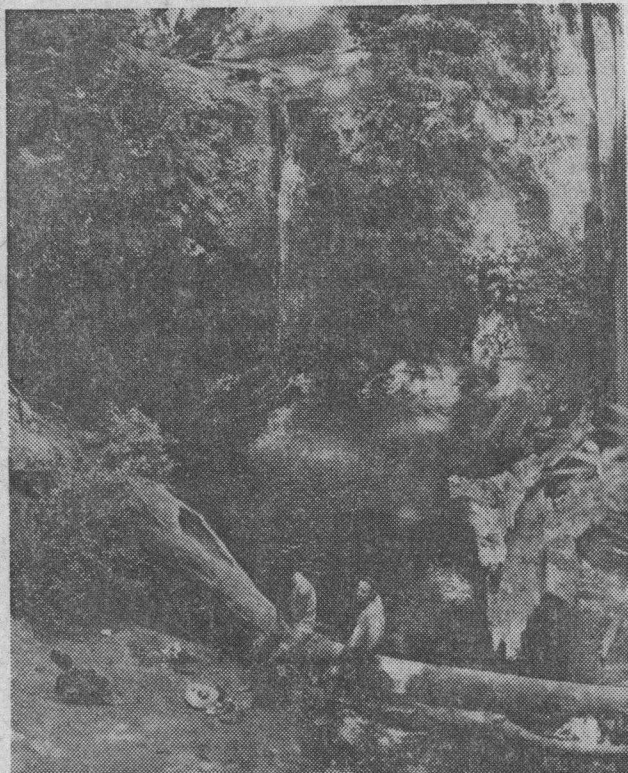
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Ken Morris in his "office under the trees."



Hikers cool off at Sempervirens Falls.

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Redwoods and Douglas fir grow in the canyons, nestled by shrubs such as huckleberry and wild lilac and by ferns which thrive in the cool forest.

Open sunny areas are spots for madrone, California nutmeg, was myrtle and oak hung with lacy moss.

On the hike through Rancho del Oso are huge, golden meadows.

And with this variety of plant life also comes a plethora of animal and bird life. One of the special treats of visiting Big Basin is to have a tame deer come calling for a tidbit.

A group of turn-of-the-century nature lovers is responsible for the existence of this protected wonderland today. Big Basin has the esteem of being the first state-authorized park, born with the signing of the Redwood Park Bill in 1901.

Photographer Andrew Putman Hill realized the need to preserve this area when he and a group of friends hiked into the remote forest in May 1900.

In his account of the exploration, Hill wrote of the group's impression when it reached the Automobile Tree, with its distinctive hollow base and impressive 300-foot height.

"As we emerged into the opening before this tree, I noticed the members of our party all looking at this giant with open mouths and suddenly I became aware of being in the same condition. Our awe increased as we further explored this wonderful forest."

Realizing the danger of approaching logging interests, the group formed the Sempervirens Club just days after their hike with the explicit purpose of saving Big Basin. They were successful with the signing of the bill in 1901.

The love for this area has continued throughout the years. It can be seen in the eyes of its ranger as he shows visitors around, and it can be seen in the tranquil faces of those enjoying the beauty of Big Basin.

