

A rare unfettered look at seals

Año Nuevo
Fundraiser designed to help offset state cuts

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PESCADERO — From December through February, the shores of Año Nuevo State Reserve and the nearby island are filled with the massive, mottled brown and gray elephant seals.

Harems, large groups of female elephant seals, lie in the midmorning sun as visitors to the park stand off in the distance, snapping photos and chattering happily about the behaviors of the pinnipeds.

Saturday, however, marked a rare occurrence at the state reserve: visitors were allowed to wander at their own pace and leisure through the natural reserve and seal viewing points, rather than restricted by guided walks. Known as Seal Adventure Day, a limited 200 visitors came to the park, which normally sees about 500 a day.

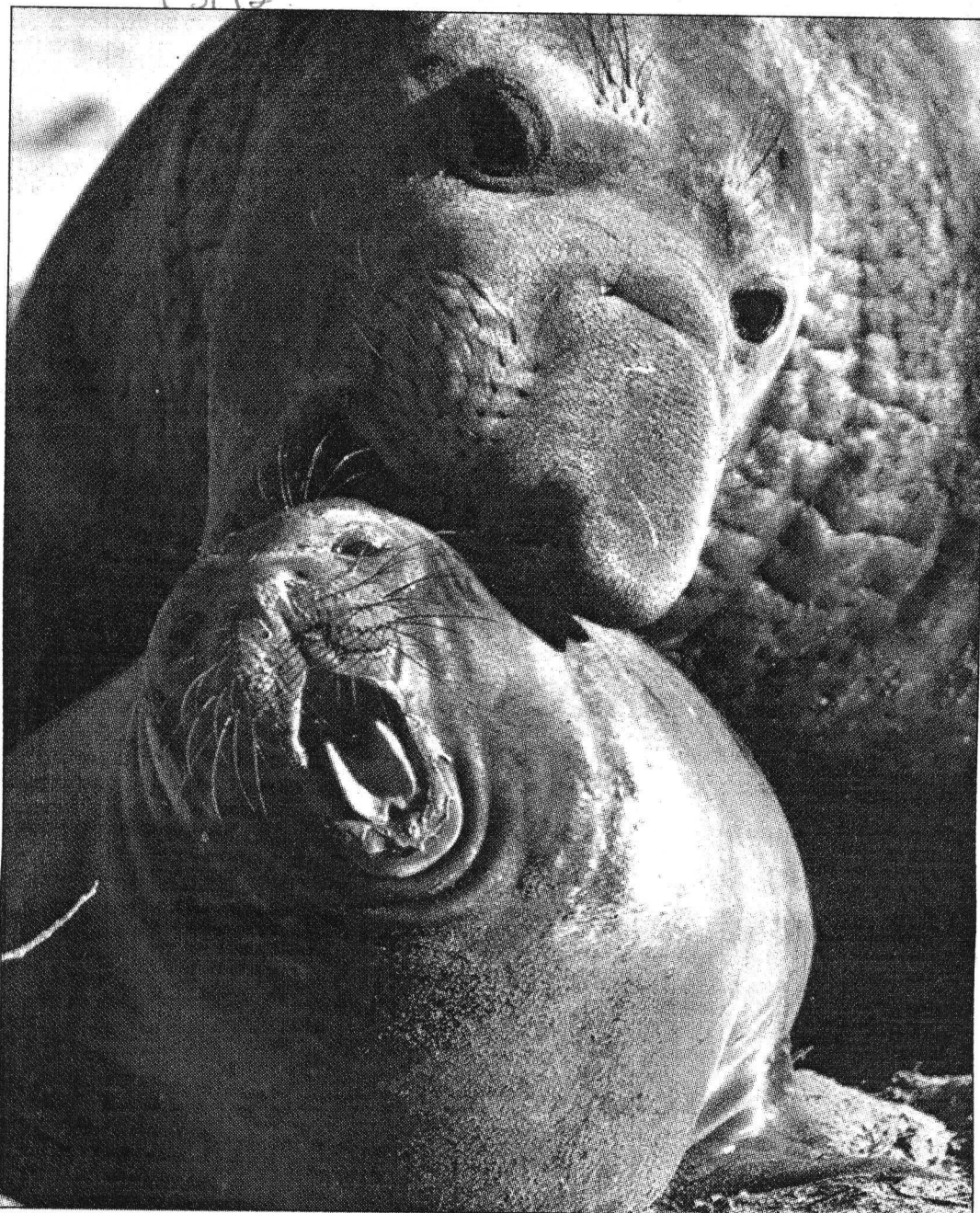
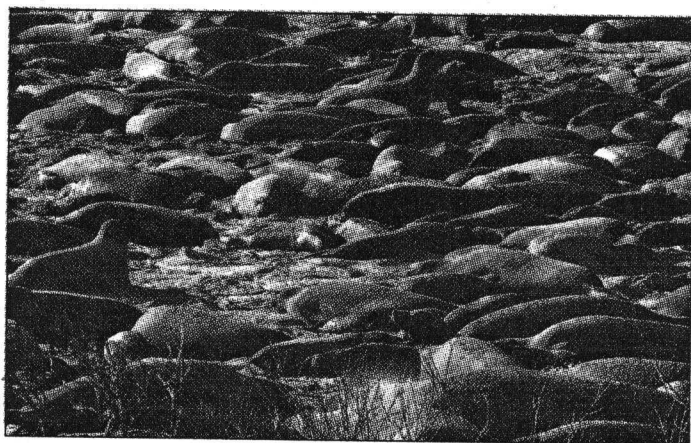
Seal Adventure Day was a fundraiser for the park's interpretative programs in cooperation with the San Mateo Coast Natural History Association. With the state's support for state parks dwindling, it's important that places like Año Nuevo find alternative ways to garner funds, Supervising Ranger Terry Kiser said.

"I wouldn't say it's a solution to our financial issues. I'd say we're trying to be creative to help sustain our programs here," Kiser said. "We all work for parks because we love parks, and we want to ensure that we can still provide the same level of program to our visitors. And if we aren't trying to find these kinds of solutions, there may be a chance we can't keep these kinds of programs going."

Kiser said the intention is not to make visiting Año Nuevo more difficult or less affordable, but this one day — in which ticket prices are \$50 and entry is limited — can keep costs down for guided walks, which cost \$7.

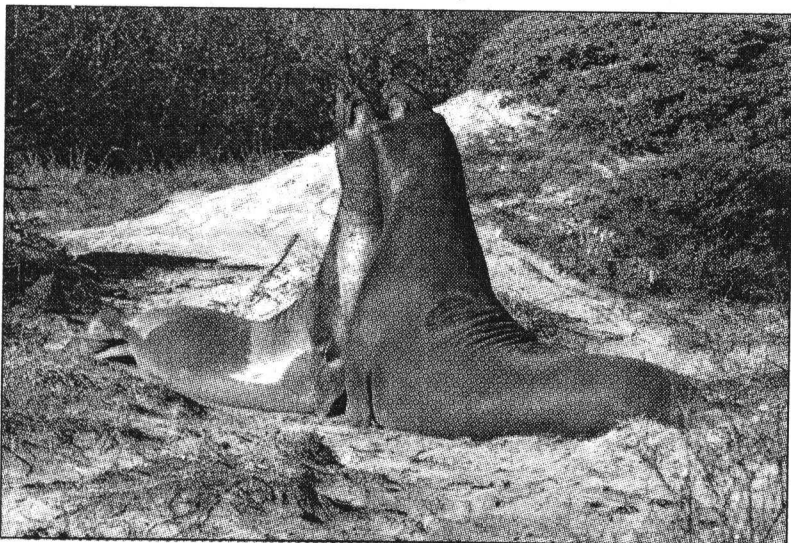
"There are not many places you can get a high-quality interpretative program and high-quality viewing," he said.

SEE SEALS ON A2



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ABOVE: A male elephant seal picks on a younger male at Año Nuevo State Reserve on Saturday, when visitors were allowed to wander through the reserve at their own pace. TOP: Elephant seals gather in the masses at the beach each year during the breeding season to fight, give birth and mate.



Two male elephant seals clash Saturday at Año Nuevo State Reserve. A fundraiser for the reserve allowed visitors to get up close and personal with the notoriously violent seals.

SEALS

Continued from A1

Richard Condit, a Smithsonian researcher affiliated with UC Santa Cruz who has been studying elephant seals for 32 years, said Saturday saw one of the largest numbers of females ashore.

Female seals spend only specific times ashore while subsisting largely in deep waters, similar to whales, Condit said.

"The female will wean her pup, mate, travel about 3,000 miles (into the ocean), feed for two months, turn around and come back to molt in May, and then do the whole thing again," he said. "And during

that entire period, during that double migration, she's gestating."

Condit said visitors Saturday could see a large number of females ashore, many still in the last stages of their pregnancy, as well as many newly born pups.

"The very first birth this year was Dec. 15, and the very last birth will be around Feb.

5," he said.

Walking through the park, visitors Saturday heard the ominous, throaty calls from one young male to another, a confrontation likely to lead into aggression. But volunteers and staff kept an eye on participants and the animals, leading guests to places where they could safely observe the animals.