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— Jan Shirlan, Fresno resident



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

The Cement Ship Palo Alto at Seacliff State Beach may be beyond repair after winter storm damage.

Future of Cement Ship uncertain after damage

Cement Ship

By BENNETT BEACH
Sentinel correspondent

SEACLIFF — The landmark Cement Ship Palo Alto, closed to the public since February, was so severely damaged by winter storms that state parks officials can't say when, if ever, access will be restored.

Damage to the concrete World War I-era tanker is still being assessed, and the sunken ship's fate will be determined in Sacramento as state parks officials assemble the system's budget, rangers said.

Meanwhile, repairs are under way to a mudslide-damaged staircase that connects the upper parking lot to Seacliff State Beach and to a failed sewage system.

Local residents and out-of-town visitors have expressed disappointment at the continued closure of the ship.

"It's too bad. We used to take our grandkids (on the ship). Everything we used to do in the past 25 years is going away," Fresno resident Jan Shirlan said.

State park officials to decide fate of World War 1-era tanker at Seacliff State Beach

But not everyone thinks the ship is worth saving. "I think it's kind of ugly so it might as well sink," said local resident Sandra Corrigan.

The Palo Alto, completed in 1919, was intended for use in World War I, but the conflict ended before the tanker saw active duty.

The ship was brought to Seacliff in 1929 by a group of investors who planned to use it for an amusement pier, and it became a popular party spot in the early 1930s. But then the Depression struck, and the state bought the ship for \$1 in the mid-1930s after the owners went bankrupt.

Storms damaged the vessel in 1982 and again in 1998,

and despite doubts about its future the ship was patched up both times.

But the pounding the tanker received from storm-generated waves in February left the ship in worse shape than ever, park maintenance worker Bob Silva said in March.

Chief Ranger Bob Culbertson said he accompanied Ruth Coleman, a state parks deputy director, on a recent tour of the ship. She will take findings back to Sacramento, where the ship's future will be settled, he said.

Work has started on two other repair projects near the beach.

With the tourism season approaching, repairs to the wooden staircase are a priority, supervising Ranger Tina Williams said. Visitors have come to rely upon that access to the beach and have had difficulty adjusting to the more circuitous route of the sidewalk that descends onto the esplanade.

Construction also is under way on a damaged sewage system, which failed and spilled raw sewage into Monterey Bay, effectively shutting down the beach to swimmers and surfers this year.

Santa Cruz County's Public Works Department hired a contractor to lay new pipe from the front of Seacliff visitors center to Aptos Creek, near Rio del Mar Beach.

Construction on the sewer lines is a county project while repairs to the staircase fall under state jurisdiction, Williams said.

And while the Palo Alto's future remains unclear, the annual Cement Ship Festival is on course for June 5.

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