

Ano Nuevo Humans battle over seal turf

Volunteers ask to keep control

By CLAY EVANS
Sentinel correspondent

ANO NUEVO — As Northern Elephant Seals scatter to the ocean in their mid-summer exodus from Ano Nuevo State Reserve, their human stewards are landlocked in a dispute over the management of the popular tours conducted through the seals' habitat.

The association of volunteers that has been in charge of the nature program is angry that the state Department of Parks and Recreation wants to take over management at Ano Nuevo, and says it will disband rather than give up the reins. The Ano Nuevo Interpretive Association (ANIA), which has managed the volunteer guided tour program since 1987, voted to dissolve by Sept. 2 unless the Parks Department agrees to alter its plan to assume management of the program.

The year-long dispute began with the retirement of a Parks Department administrator. His retirement in 1987 opened the door for ANIA management of the docent tour program.

Since ANIA Chairwoman Janet Prochazka assumed administration of the Ano Nuevo project, the ANIA has run the docent tours with little state interference. Docents are volunteers who lead tours for seal watchers during the seasons when elephant seal activity is at its peak. Northern Elephant Seals were seldom seen at the coastal area north of Santa Cruz until the mid-'70s, but their increasing numbers in recent years have made them a popular visitor attraction.

Now both the ANIA and the Parks Department claim responsibility for the program, resulting in tension between the previously cooperative organizations. The doors of negotiation are still open, with the department seeking the association's approval of a memorandum of understanding, but the ANIA is pushing for unequivocal control. State parks is forging ahead with its plan to take over.

"There has never been a framework that defined the roles and responsibilities for the department staff and the association staff," said Parks and Recreation District Superintendent Carol Nelson. "People have been stepping on each other's toes quite a bit."

The ANIA was formed in 1981 to



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Elephant Seal tours are at the heart of controversy between state Parks Department and volunteers.

provide assistance with the interpretive programs at Ano Nuevo, according to Nelson, but has always operated under the auspices of the state Parks Department. Nelson said the ANIA's demand for administrative control is essentially mutiny, and that the relationship should clearly be one of state management of the volunteer association. The ANIA says it is not seeking changes.

"We are not asking for more independence. We are asking to continue the status quo that we have had for 7 years," said ANIA Executive Director Bonnie Merkin-Wilson. According to Merkin-Wilson, a Parks Department takeover at Ano Nuevo will cost taxpayers money.

"I was told by the department that I was thinking in the old way. If the new way involves the use of tax dollars to have the department in charge, then our way will save money," said Merkin-Wilson. The ANIA currently receives its funding through ticket sales for the elephant seal tours, some 50 percent of which goes to staff salaries.

But according to Nelson, the agree-

ment the Parks and Recreation Department is seeking will simply define the hierarchy at Ano Nuevo, which will help make needed changes to ensure safety for both the public and the animals as the seal population increases.

"There haven't been problems over the past few years, but we are concerned. The seal population has grown significantly (since the ANIA's formation) from 80 animals to 2,000. We have had recent experiences with aggressive bulls, and there is a real possibility of safety problems," said Nelson.

But ANIA representatives point to commendations and awards from the Parks Department and other organizations such as the Sequoia Audubon Society as evidence of the competence of the program. Some ANIA staff members see the controversy as unrelated to issues of management.

"I think it's a power play, not a question of mismanagement. They feel they are on the back of an elephant they can't control, and they are willing to do anything to get control of it," said ANIA

Docent Coordinator Michael Putman. Putman confirmed that all docents in the program must sign papers identifying them as "unpaid state employees," but said that was only to ensure workman's compensation insurance for volunteers. The Parks Department, however, says that part of the contract puts the docents within its jurisdiction.

"The department doesn't have to pull a power play because the responsibility is always there. The association is contracted as a cooperative effort to work with the department," said Nelson. "The ANIA is just off course on this. They had freedom for a while, and it felt good."

Despite the difficulties at Ano Nuevo, Nelson said both docents and those interested in taking a seal tour have no more reason to worry than the seals themselves.

"The tours will go on this year," said Nelson, denying that the dispute would have an effect on seal watchers. "The last thing people want is office politics in a place they go to get away from that," she said.