

A New Life for the Old Cement Ship

Have You Been to the Seacliff State Beach Visitor Center lately?

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Aptos Times 6.15.13

Cement Ship
Have you ever wondered what's happening with the cement ship jutting off the fishing pier at Seacliff State Beach in Aptos? A sign at the entrance to the Visitor Center says that the S.S. Palo Alto is ending its nearly 100-year life having become a habitat for wildlife. Barnacles and other crustaceans have attached themselves to the old barge – an oasis in the water for creatures that like to inhabit shallow, tidal waters. Giant starfish, sea anemones, and kelp bass have also found a refuge inside the enclosed "rooms" of the old ship where predators have trouble reaching them.

One might say a fitting and not inglorious end to this ship that was built as an oil tanker too late for WWI, later became a short-lived hotel/ballroom/gambling palace, and wound up being an adjunct fishing pier. Oklahoman Huell Howser, who fell in love with California and created the PBS "California's Gold" series, documented his visit while it was still accessible with a 7-minute segment which can be viewed in the Visitor Center's media room. It evoked fond memories to an older woman visiting from Utah of fishing on the ship when she was a child before it was cordoned off as unsafe.

As is usual in a lot of California's state parks, the Visitor Center is a combination souvenir shop/historical- educational site. The store sells t-shirts, calendars, hats,



scarves, socks, costume jewelry, postcards and has a small book section. Proceeds from the sales go to "Friends of Santa Cruz State Parks," which helps support the parks in these times of budgetary restraints.

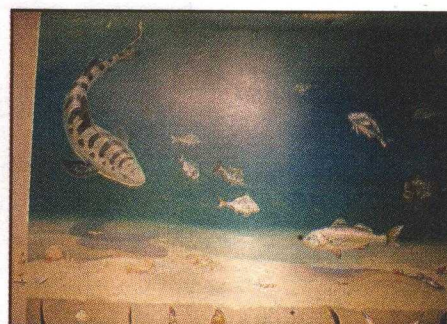
In the exhibit room on the right is a shallow viewing tank, which has starfish, hermit crabs, and sea anemones in their home environment. The same staff person always feeds them once a day so that they do not become overfed. The staff must also provide the hermit crab a new home (shell) every now and again when he outgrows his current one.

A variety of birds and animals make

their home in the area: red throated loon, great egret, Brandt's cormorant, marbled godwit, otter, surf scoter, and brown pelican.

On the wall to the right is a large (approximately 5' by 7") Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary mammal exhibit. More than a dozen different kinds of mammals live here: six types of whales, four types of dolphins, two types of porpoise, harbor seals, California sea lions and the Southern sea otter. For those interested in biology, there is a wonderful exhibit of bones – a rib, vertebrae and jawbone from a whale that were found by a group of kids from an Outdoor Science Exploration field trip in January, 2002.

Oceanographers probing the depths of Monterey Bay Submarine Canyon, also known as "California's Grand Canyon," have discovered that it is 7,000 ft. deep and 10 miles from shore. Larger than Yosemite, it extends from San Francisco to San Simeon and covers 5,000 square miles! If you're into posters, there is a wonderful digital image of the canyon from 500 miles in space that you can buy.



There is a map showing the shallow sea that covered parts of central California inland to Fresno and Bakersfield. If you walk out to the north of the Visitor Center and look at the cliff walls, you can see sea shells fossilized in the cliffs from millions of years ago when the area was covered by the sea. Fossil lovers will like the simulated "fossil bed" wall showing a variety of eight different clams and a sandbox where kids can "discover" fossils by brushing away at the sand.

Opposite this display is a section called "Reconstructing the Past," showing how archeologists, paleontologists, and artists deduce how the sea looked millions of years ago. The painting by Aptos artist/muralist Ann Thiermann depicts life beneath the sea 3 million years ago as revealed by the fossils at Seacliff State each.

If you walk on the pier, you may see fishermen/fisherwomen catching smelt, anchovies, perch or a variety of other fish. Or you may spot a dolphin leaping out of the water near the cement ship – what a thrill!

The California State Park system will be celebrating its 150-year anniversary in 2014. It was instituted in 1864 as "A gift to the people from the people"; you could say it has proven to be worth more than the gold discovered a decade earlier. ■

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The park is open from 8 a.m. to dusk and costs \$10 entrance fee per automobile but if you don't mind a walk (and you're lucky), you may find a parking spot on Santa Cruz Ave. off State Park Drive (in back of Manuel's Restaurant).