

Big feud at Año Nuevo

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ANO NUEVO — A bitter feud between state park rangers and a non-profit corporation that once guided elephant seal tours at the wildlife reserve here has escalated into charges of public wrongdoing.

Rangers have accused the Año Nuevo Interpretive Association of absconding with \$175,000 in public funds, \$30,000 in office equipment and irreplaceable photo files.

Association officials vehemently deny the accusations. Both sides are considering legal action.

"It's flat out wrong," said Robert Eckhardt of San Mateo, chairman of the association. "The allegations that those monies — what is left of it — are properties of the state is simply untrue."

Eckhardt also termed the cash figure as "vastly inflated."

"If we have \$100,000 we'd be damn lucky," he said. "Rangers don't know how to read a balance sheet."

Donald Murphy, president of the California State Park Rangers Association, however, said that the funds belong to the state and that the ranger association will meet this month to decide whether to formally request that charges be filed by the state Attorney General.

"I don't think it is anything criminal," Murphy said of the allegations. "I think it's ongoing stubbornness. A conflict has arisen and both people maintain their point of view is right."

The dispute stems from a two-year battle between park rangers and the interpretive association over who controlled the docent

program at the park, the bookshop and souvenir concession.

The interpretive association was founded in 1979 by volunteers. The group had formed after large numbers of elephant seals began populating the reserve in the mid-70s. At its peak, the association managed a staff of 180 docents.

After acrimonious exchanges by both sides, the interpretive association voted in August to cancel a contract with the state and to dissolve their relationship with Año Nuevo State Park. The association had been guiding tours at the park since 1979.

"Personalities got involved and the rangers and directors (of the interpretive association) got mad at each other," Murphy said. "Relations broke down to the point where neither side could faithfully negotiate."

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The park rangers were happy to see the association leave and quickly started a new docent program under park management. This month, however, they found that the association not only left, but took money and materials that came from revenue raised at the park. Most of the money came from elephant seal tour fees and concession profits.

"They want to take their ball and bat and go home, but legally they can't do that," Murphy said. "They have to return the assets that came from state money."

"They kept acquiring fees and keeping them in a bank account. They are supposed to be returned to the park to enhance programs."

Eckhardt disputed that interpretation, saying that the association has not dissolved and therefore has no obligation to return the

assets.

"The state has not asked for the money back and the rangers as a body do not represent the state," Eckhardt said. "The association is going to continue the sort of environmental programs and things it has done in the past but in different areas. We canceled our contract because it was clear the (State Parks) department didn't want what we had to offer down at Año Nuevo Reserve. We have no intention of disbanding."

Eckhardt also said that once the contract was ended, the association was no longer obligated to spend its funds at Año Nuevo, even though most of the funds were raised there.

Janet Prochazka, association vice president, said that there has been absolutely no wrongdoing by the association and that their books are open to the public.

"Our means of (acquiring funds) and expenditures are open for review," she said. "The funds were earned by us while performing the duties of our contract."

The money was used to pay a staff that employed as many as nine people during peak tour seasons. Two of those employees are still on the payroll.

The association, Eckhardt said, currently runs educational programs and tours of the Pigeon Point Lighthouse. It is also negotiating with the state for a mobile bookshop concession that would sell at area parks, including Año Nuevo.

The rangers are resisting that proposal. Murphy said that not only would it give exclusive concession rights to the association, but that it is wrong for the association to start a separate business with funds raised at Año Nuevo, whether the business was non-profit or not.