Beach Near Capitola Embedded With Fossils

By DON WILSON
Staff Writer

CAPITOLA — Mark Lopez of Santa Cruz leaned against a rock to change clothes so he could go swimming.

As he laid his clothes on the rock, he took a good look at it. It looked like bones. He looked closer. There, apparently embedded in the sandstone chunk were unmistakably the fossilized bones of some ancient animal.

It turned out that Lopez had stumbled onto an area which may be "one of the richest depositories of marine fossils on the California coast."

Paleontologist William Miller said his research in the area has turned up fossil remains of whales, sharks, seals, sea cows and even of an ancient mammal known as a "super seal."

And, said Miller, there is a "tremendous assembly" of fossilized remains of invertebrates such as clams and giant snails, and crustacean fossils such as crabs, sea stars, barnacles and scallops.

In some ancient time — somewhere between 25,000 and 1 million years ago — this particular area was underwater but near a seashore, Miller said. And, he said, there is evidence that it was a favorite breeding ground of all sorts of marine life.

Apparently, Miller said, a warm sea current looped into the area, providing a good feeding ground and conditions suitable for breeding.

It must have provided a comfortable place for dying, too, because the cliffs in the area are packed with the fossil remains of the invertebrates and crustaceans.

An observant visitor also can find other remains, such as a big vertebra from some ancient whale, one fossilized bone being nearly a foot across.

Miller, who teaches science at Soquel High School and San Jose State University and also works for the Santa Cruz Museum, has collected a number of fossils from the area.

It's just south and east of Capitola Beach, between Capitola and New Brighton Beach. Miller said collecting fossils isn't allowed on the state beach part of the area.

Fortunately for the preservation of the area, it's almost inaccessible at any time except precisely at low tide.

"There is a tremendous sanding problem," said Miller, who noted that littoral drift of sand along the coast has a tendency to loop into this area and cover the rocks and fossils. In past years there had been a time when little sand was carried into the area. Then, Miller said, much more of the "bone material" was visible.

In ancient times, he said, this area was under the sea. Then the land was pushed up. Now, erosion of the cliffs is a constant factor. Sections fall off the cliffs onto the beach, leaving a cross section of the old ocean floor exposed.

And the big section of sandstone with its fossilized whale bones discovered by Lopez sits among the rubble on the beach.

"I'd like to get it out of there and donate it to Community Hospital," said Lopez.

"I don't know how it could be done. It would take a crane or something like that to move it."

He said he had been "treated real nice" by everyone at the hospital after an accident recently and "would like to do something for them."

Lopez said he'll try to find someone with the right kind of equipment, then see if he can collect enough money to pay for the salvage job.

"That fossil ought to be somewhere safe," he said. "If it's left down there, it will get all broken up. If the waves don't ruin it, some people will come along and knock it apart.

"I hope we can get it out before that happens."

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