

# Sealed for Your Protection

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"It is a place where black reefs of rock rear their ugly fangs, like wild beasts waiting for their prey," wrote Colonel Albert Evans in 1874. Surprisingly, Evans was describing an area familiar to most Santa Cruzans — the coastal lands of Ano Nuevo.

Punta del Año Nuevo, or New Year's Point, was infamous to sailors as early as the 16th century. Spanish explorers, as well as adventuresome sailors following the California gold rush a few centuries later, learned to avoid the huge breakers which often threatened to dash fragile ships against the jagged rocks.

But not all captains have steered their ships clear of the Ano Nuevo seas — there have been over 100 shipwrecks in the area. One such disaster occurred on November 24, 1866. The *Coya*, a British vessel en route to San Francisco from Australia, was near Ano Nuevo when the early evening fog made its appearance. The coast was quickly obscured from view and soon the boat smashed suddenly against a hidden reef.

Since the *Coya* was made of iron and loaded down with coal, it keeled over and sank into the dark waters. Of the 30 passengers aboard the doomed vessel, only the first mate, a passenger and a young crew member managed to avoid the "ugly fangs" of the nighttime surf and make it to shore alive.

Two other rocky points very close to Ano Nuevo bear the names of the unfortunate vessels which they claimed. On June 6, 1853 the *Carrier Pigeon*, a three-masted medium clipper on its maiden voyage, ran aground at La Punta de la Ballena (Whale Point). No lives were lost, but the new ship was demolished, its 1300 ton cargo given up to the sea. This site became known as Pigeon Point.

Twelve years later, the *Sir John Franklin* got caught in the surf between Pigeon Point and Ano Nuevo and was thrown on the rocks. The tumultuous waves claimed the lives of the captain and 12 seamen at what is now known as Franklin's Point.

After these and other shipwrecks, a lighthouse and fog-whistle were constructed on Ano Nuevo Island. While these warning systems aided the large ships in their foggy-night passage, the 800-meter channel separating the island from the mainland was earning a tragic reputation all its own. Geologists believe that the island was actually part of the point about 360 years ago, but subsequent wave erosion caused the channel to form.

Many lighthouse keepers, fishermen, scientists, Coast Guardsmen and scuba divers have had fatal or near fatal mishaps in this short stretch of water.

"Although no one has ever compiled the grisly statistic of total lives lost, the number would be staggering," said UCSC professor Burney Le Boeuf in *The Natural History of Ano Nuevo*. "One indication of the danger of the area is that nine people drowned in the surf near Ano Nuevo Island in two accidents six days apart!"

In 1948 the federal government decided that the lighthouse station was too difficult and dangerous to operate. It was abandoned, and the Coast Guard placed an automatic, battery-operated "light-buoy" offshore the island. The stately old lightkeeper's house, which had been meticulously maintained, was left to be slowly dismantled by the patient but persistent powers of wind and water.

Today, a few people make the short but challenging trip across the channel on a regular basis. UCSC researcher Sarah Mesnick spends four days a week on this small patch of sand and rock, making two trips every seven days. She is studying the behavior of the female elephant seals which use the island as a breeding ground.

"The ride across can be exciting," said Sarah. "During the winter the seas can get rough. The sets of waves can come around both sides of the island to meet in the middle of the channel." Holding her hands apart and then slowly bringing them back together as she describes the surf, it is easy to imagine two waves converging on her 13-foot Zodiac boat.

"Zodiacs are motor-powered boats which have tubular, inflatable sides and wooden bottoms," continued Sarah. "The inflatable sides of the boat help us bounce across the channel, but also force us to keep a careful watch for seals which are in the water. The seals have bitten Zodiacs in past crossings and have punctured one of the inflatable sides. The researchers have had to finish crossing the channel by pumping air into the tube while steering clear of waves, rocks and seals."

Seals, of course — and elephant seals in particular — are why the Ano Nuevo State Reserve is so well known to folks along the coast. The reserve is frequented by four different types of seals: the harbor seal, the northern elephant seal, the Stellar sea lion and the California

sea lion, these last animals being the familiar occupants of Seal Rock near the Municipal Wharf.

Unfortunately, the stories regarding the systematic hunting of most Pacific marine mammals are as similar as they are sad. The California sea otter was hunted for its thick, rich fur, while the gray whale, elephant seal and sea lion were taken for their oil-producing blubber. During the early part of this century, some hunters would kill breeding sea lion bulls for their genitalia, scalps and whiskers. The genitalia were dried, powdered and shipped to China to be used as a rejuvenating potion. The whiskers were also sent to China where they were used to clean opium pipes.

Fortunately for both these animals and human beings, the Marine Mammals Act of 1972 effectively enforces earlier legislation enacted to stop the hunting. All of these animals have made comebacks to different extents, the elephant seals' being the most dramatic. Pursued relentlessly for the first half of the 19th century, the species was considered extinct by 1869. In 1884 several museum expeditions failed to turn up even a single elephant seal.

In 1892, however, a collecting expedition for the Smithsonian Institution unexpectedly discovered eight of the animals on Isla de Guadalupe, a volcanic island off the Baja California coast. Even though the collectors realized that these eight seals might have represented the last of a dying species, they killed seven of the creatures for use as specimens.

It is estimated that there may have been as few as 20 individuals in the entire northern elephant seal population at that time, and there probably was no more than 100. But by 1922 the population had started increasing after organized hunting ceased and the species was given protected status by the Mexican government. When some of these seals began appearing in their old range off the California coast a few years later, the US government followed suit and also granted the seals immunity. Over the next five decades, northern elephant seals reclaimed their old range, including

Ano Nuevo Island, and greatly increased their population.

Thus the stage was set to make the Ano Nuevo State Reserve one of the most unique and popular tourist attractions along the central California coast. In 1977 the northern elephant seal population was estimated at 60,000 animals — about the same number of people which come to the reserve yearly. Most visitors are interested in viewing some of the few thousands of these seals which breed on both the island and the mainland each winter.

The large numbers of seals which come to breed eventually caused an overcrowding problem. "Reproductive persecution," explained Professor Le Boeuf, "forced the youngest, pregnant females to move to more isolated places like the adjacent mainland. Of course, some males followed." And, of course, interested people followed as well.

To accommodate these spectators, the Park Service began offering guided tours around the reserve. The Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District also caught on and expanded its service to bring people from downtown right to the seals' doorstep.

"The elephant seals never used to breed on the mainland," explained tour guide Diane Bloch. "Before this area was settled by White people, grizzly bears used to wander the beaches at night looking for any food that may have washed up. Small or newborn seals would have been an easy meal for the bears."

The tours at Ano Nuevo are unique in that one may observe the behavior of a 15-foot-long, three-ton elephant seal from as close as 20 feet, and at the same time listen to interesting biological and historical information provided by the tour guides.

While standing on the windy dunes of the point looking across the channel to the island, one listens to the bellowing and wailing of the boisterous seals and gets the satisfying feeling that here is an example of how human beings can correct some of their gravest eco-

logical mistakes. The seal population appears to be doing quite well, and indeed it is steadily increasing. But all of the 60,000 seals living today are descendants of that small remnant herd from Isla de Guadalupe 100 years ago, and this fact, termed a "population bottleneck," has profound implications.

"A species that goes through a population bottleneck is changed," said Professor Le Boeuf. "It comes out with less than it went in with. Genetic variability, the hedge against an uncertain environment, is lost because the few survivors carry only a few of the genes once present in the entire population."

In other words, if the seals' environment were to change in some way, or if a disease were to afflict the population, the species as a whole would now be less able to adapt effectively to these potential changes than it might have been 300 years ago. But these genetic problems are difficult to fathom when one is witnessing a battle of teeth and blubber between two large bulls down on the beach.

After completing a tour of the reserve, one notices that elephant seals are just one integral part of an area which offers wild, rugged beaches, interesting bird and mammal life, and a variety of plants and wildflowers — all just a short ride from Santa Cruz. And although you cross the San Mateo County line on your journey north, it is interesting to note that the entire Ano Nuevo area was originally part of Santa Cruz County.

"Residents in the area couldn't get their horses and buggies past the slide-prone cliffs just north of Big Basin and Waddell Creek," said Park Service employee Janet Kelley. "They complained to the County officials that they couldn't reach the County Seat because of avalanches and mudslides. So in 1868 30 square miles of land were transferred from Santa Cruz County up to San Mateo County."

"But that was over 100 years ago," added Janet, a Santa Cruz resident. "And now that Highway 1 is kept clear, maybe we should annex Ano Nuevo back to our County. What do you think?"

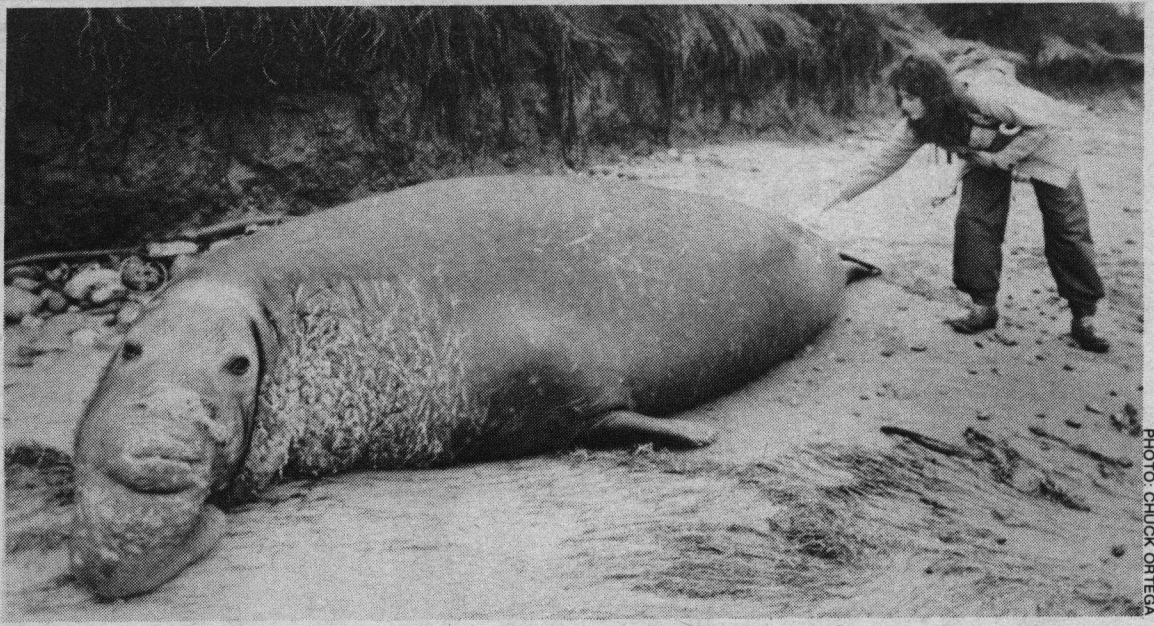


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