

# Trails and tribulations at Gray Whale Park

## Gray Whale Ranch Pathway plan elusive for new wilderness area

By **ROBIN MUSITELLI**  
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — The job seemed pretty simple. A 10-member trail advisory group was asked which of the existing ranch roads should be

opened as trails at Gray Whale State Park, a 2,300-acre park adjacent to Wilder Ranch State Park.

Simple? After 10 months of meetings, after looking at 10 road-trails, the group hasn't reached agreement on a single trail, and probably never will, members say.

"That's Santa Cruz," says Bob Culbertson, chief ranger of state parks in Santa Cruz County. "It's very difficult. You can't just rush in and say, 'Let's do it.'"

Indeed, trails in Santa Cruz County have be-

come a piping hot political stew with lots of players, rare plants, animals and insects in the pot.

Consider the U-Con trail, a new trail which links the UC Santa Cruz campus and Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park through Pogonip Park. The trail is only a half-mile long, but it took a decade of discussion and negotiation to get approved.

And before that, a proposed countywide trail

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## Trails

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master plan exploded in controversy before it was even publicly aired. The county Board of Supervisors dumped the plan and hasn't attempted a revival since.

Given that history, reaching consensus, the goal of the state parks officials, seems impossible, say members of the Gray Whale advisory committee.

"I think what's more likely to come from the Gray Whale committee is a majority and minority opinion. I don't think it's possible for consensus to come from the committee," said Jodi Frediani, a member of the advisory group.

Purchased in 1997, Gray Whale now has only one sanctioned trail, an eight-mile road through the former ranch.

The park, however, is laced with ranch roads, old logging roads and trails which, sans enforcement, are used by mountain bikers, hikers and equestrians. The park is also home to the rare red-legged frog, Santa Cruz cypress, the San Francisco popcorn flower, the Ohlone tiger beetle and other sensitive species.

State parks would like to officially sanction other trails in the park without waiting until the general plan is completed, which will take two to five years.

The state Coastal Commission has agreed, but with the condition that the advisory group reaches consensus on which trails should be opened.

That means getting agreement from gung-ho mountain bikers seeking thrills in the hills, and also from hikers, who seek solitude, not speed, and from equestrians, who are somewhere in the middle, and from those whose priority is to protect the rare habitat and critters.

Mountain bikers quickly came up with a map of 10 existing roads. Of those, they identified six that could be opened fairly easily, Culbertson said.

Three possible trails didn't need bridges or water crossings — a loaded issue because of red-legged frog habitat and other possible sensitive species.

Of the remaining three, bikers picked the trail they nicknamed "Wally's World" as their top priority to open.

"It's the most fun trail in Gray Whale," said Geoffrey Smith of Mountain Bikers of Santa Cruz. The trail, an old logging road, is a two-mile long, winding ride down the side of a canyon just on the inside of the tree line by a long meadow. It's one of several that connects Chiquapin and Engelsman trails.

While overgrown in places, Smith maintained that the brush and trees could be cut back easily, making it a "double-track" trail that would be wide enough to be used by equestrians, hikers and bike riders.

It wasn't quite that easy getting agreement at the table. Resource ecologists and other members of the groups wanted the trail re-routed around sensitive manzanita and a



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Geoffrey Smith, riding the trails at Gray Whale Park, would like to see more multi-use pathways.

mucky area at the top of the trail that could be considered "wetlands." The bottom of the trail came down a fairly steep slope, maybe too steep, according to members who maintained bikes would go too fast.

Emma McCrary, who with her husband Bud, has designed miles of trails in the county, flagged a realigned trail that replaced the steep section with switchbacks. She estimated work to realign the trail would take four, maybe six days, to complete.

The conceptual trail was conditionally approved by the advisory group, unless rare or sensitive plants emerge this spring, Culbertson said.

Then the real debate started and has stalled.

Bikes or no bikes? Horses or not?

An anti-bike contingent argued that bikes have already overwhelmed Wilder Ranch State Park, spooking horses, sending hikers sprawling into the brush and eroding trails. They didn't want the same scene at Gray Whale.

They also maintained that mountain bikers have ignored trail closures and rules that ban them from other areas, and turned some trails into race tracks.

"I've seen 1,200-pound logs moved out of the way two weeks after we've put them there and other logs chainsawed" to open areas, said Grey Hayes, a resource ecologist on the advisory committee.

Smith contends the arguments are bogus.

"I think the group that doesn't want to share the trails has been using any argument possible to get their way. First they argued mountain bikes were causing the erosion. We've shown that's not the case. Then they started arguing we're a safety problem. That has not held up with any

evidence.

"Now the last thing we're fighting is environmental issues," he said.

Despite the number of mountain bikers, estimated to be in the thousands, Smith maintains they are getting the "new kid on the block treatment."

"What's going on here is that people have been in power too long and getting their way too long and not paying attention to what people want.

"They're fighting for their own private little park and don't want to share," Smith said. "We're saying 'enough.'"

Hayes blames state parks officials for much of the conflict.

Parks officials let the fledgling advisory group flounder in disorganization until Assemblyman Fred Keeley, D-Boulder Creek, intervened, Hayes said.

Nor was the advisory group given accurate background material on park resources and sensitive areas so they could make trail decisions, he said.

And while in state parks elsewhere, bikes are not allowed on single track trails, park officials here have refused to abide by the same standard, Hayes said.

"With the lack of oversight, the lack of guidelines and then leaving it up to the users to decide, then it becomes politics," Hayes said. "If we could get guidelines, it would really help clear things up."

State parks' Culbertson responds that the difficulty is a reflection of "the reality of where we are in today's world."

While the group decision-making process is cumbersome, it results in "very ecologically sound trails," Culbertson said.

Some of the members would like to adopt a policy that limits bikes to

double-track trails eight feet or wider, said committee member Frediani.

But, so far, there's not even agreement on whether the trail under consideration is a single or double-track trail, she said.

McCrary argues that the trail is wide enough to be used by everyone — hikers, horses and bikes — and that the trail users should be allowed to work it out on the trail.

"It really is self-regulatory to a certain extent," she said. "The trails that are closer to where people park, hikers are going to use more. The bicycles will use the longer ones and the horses are in between."

"You have to be considerate," McCrary said. "But then that's what life needs to be."