

# Storms close cement ship

## Wave-battered Seacliff pier set to reopen Friday

*Cement ship*  
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✓ APTOS — Seals, pelicans and marine life are the only ones enjoying the cement ship these days.

The pier at Seacliff State Beach is scheduled to reopen Friday, but the concrete tanker remains closed indefinitely.

Winter storms have battered the sunken ship — the tanker Palo Alto — and its attached pier, forcing their closure shortly after Valentine's Day.

"We are at the point where safety is our main concern," supervising ranger Tina Williams said.

This past weekend, big waves engulfed the seaward end of the boat, a local landmark since its arrival in 1929, setting the bow even further askew.

Although rangers plan to reopen the pier Friday, they will wait until winter storms subside before allowing people to walk on the ship itself.

A civil engineer will inspect the ship and decide when to reopen it, Williams said. "All we can do now is gate it off and cross our fingers that the damage can be repaired."

Park maintenance worker Bob Silva said the ship is in worse shape than ever.

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## Cement ship

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"The hull busted in half again," said Silva, pointing to a large crack in the side of the ship. "At the beginning of the year, a man could hardly walk through that gap. Now you could drive a bus through it."

On deck, newly formed cracks snake through the thick layer of asphalt that covers the crumbling concrete and iron frame. One of Silva's jobs is to patch the cracks.

Cracks form when big swells send sea water surging through the hull, sending geysers 30 to 40 feet in the air. Inrushing water drives air into small spaces beneath the deck. The pressure builds until the asphalt patches pop like champagne corks.

"The ship acts like a big bellow," Silva said, adding that the maintenance crew can't keep up with the storms. "I could be out there welding for a week to keep things safe."

But with more storms forecast for the weekend, it would be a losing battle.

"People think the park should do everything we can to save the ship," Williams said. "They don't realize we already are doing that."

The park's general plan calls for an expansion of the pier to eventually surround the crumbling vessel.

On Wednesday, near the 10-foot-high gates that block

pier access, a woman waited with two children to hear if the ship was open. When Williams said it would remain closed, the boy, about 4 years old, burst into tears.

"The closure is really upsetting to people," Williams said.

The park's voice mail is flooded with calls asking about the closure, Williams said. "They love the ship, and I love it, too."

Sam Fierro and his 2-year-old son Brandon were dismayed to find the ship still closed. Fierro, who lives nearby, said his son likes to watch the seals that haul out on the ship's bow.

"It's our walk," Fierro said. "It's everybody's walk."

This year's weather has been tough on Seacliff State Beach. Rangers closed a well-trafficked staircase south of the visitors center after the supports buckled. Orange cones block campers from pulling into several sites along the north end of the park.

Near the visitors center, in a fenced-off section of parking lot, a sewer pipe and portable pump station have been set up to handle sewage overflows. The stop-gap measure was installed after heavy January rains.

Williams said the system has overflowed twice since the temporary station was installed. "The county had to bring in two extra pump trucks to deal with the amount of water and sewage coming down off the hill."

A permanent fix is scheduled for late spring.



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

State Parks ranger Laura Wong secures the gate to the Seacliff pier at the cement ship Wednesday afternoon.