

Gray Whale trails blocked by officials squabbling

Plan to open off-limit lands needs OK of state Coastal Commission

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Gray Whale

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SANTA CRUZ — A network of prime North County trails remains off limits to hikers, bikers and equestrians — stuck in the middle in a land-use dispute between two state departments.

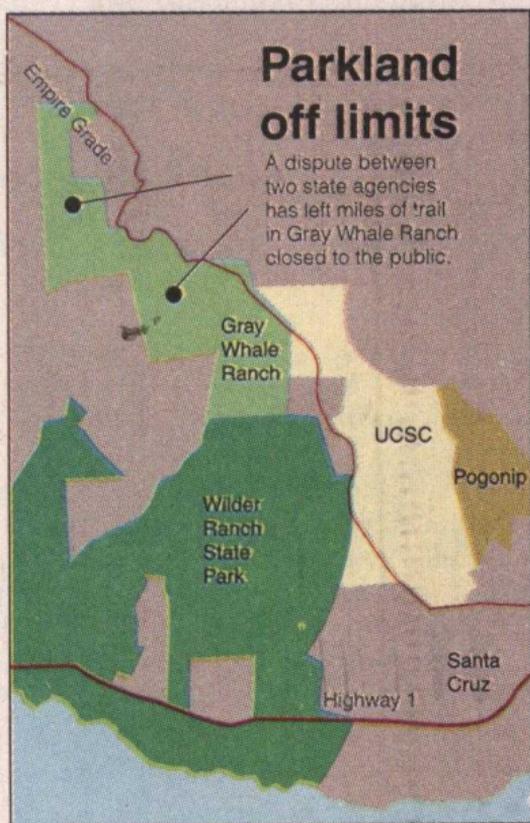
A year ago, the state Parks Department appeared on track to officially open about 10 miles of new trails in the 2,300-

acre Gray Whale Ranch, which is a piece of Wilder Ranch State Park just north of Santa Cruz. A committee of users had just wrapped up 18 months of wrangling over which trails to open and which to leave closed.

But the trails plan quickly hit a snag. The committee plan needs Coastal Commission approval, and commission staffers say the Parks Department needs to do more environmental analysis before any trails

can be opened. Parks officials say they don't have the manpower or resources to produce the information.

"I think we're just kind of at an impasse right now," said Dave Vincent, head of the Park department's Santa Cruz district.



Jo Ann Kolonick/Sentinel graphic

Gray Whale

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History

Gray Whale Ranch was the center of controversy in the mid-1990s when it was still in private hands.

The old logging site, clear-cut between 1910 and 1930, was pegged for another round of timber harvesting in 1996, with the state approving a plan to do so despite opposition from area environmentalists and an appeal by the county.

For years, officials urged the state to buy the land and to fold into Wilder Ranch State Park, which abuts the property. That goal was eventually fulfilled not by the state, but by the San Francisco-based Save the Redwoods League, which bought the property in late 1996 for an estimated \$12 million.

Gray Whale Ranch linked Wilder Ranch and UC Santa Cruz's nature preserve. The acquisition essentially gave trail users the ability to travel from the ocean, where Wilder Ranch starts, up to UCSC, into the city-owned Pogonip and on to Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park.

The Gray Whale Ranch property included second-growth redwoods, sweeping ocean vistas and limestone caves with rare bats, among other natural gems.

But almost as soon as the deal was completed, the sparks began to fly between hikers who didn't want mountain bikers and horses on the trails there, and cyclists who were licking their chops to get to the tasty hillside trails.

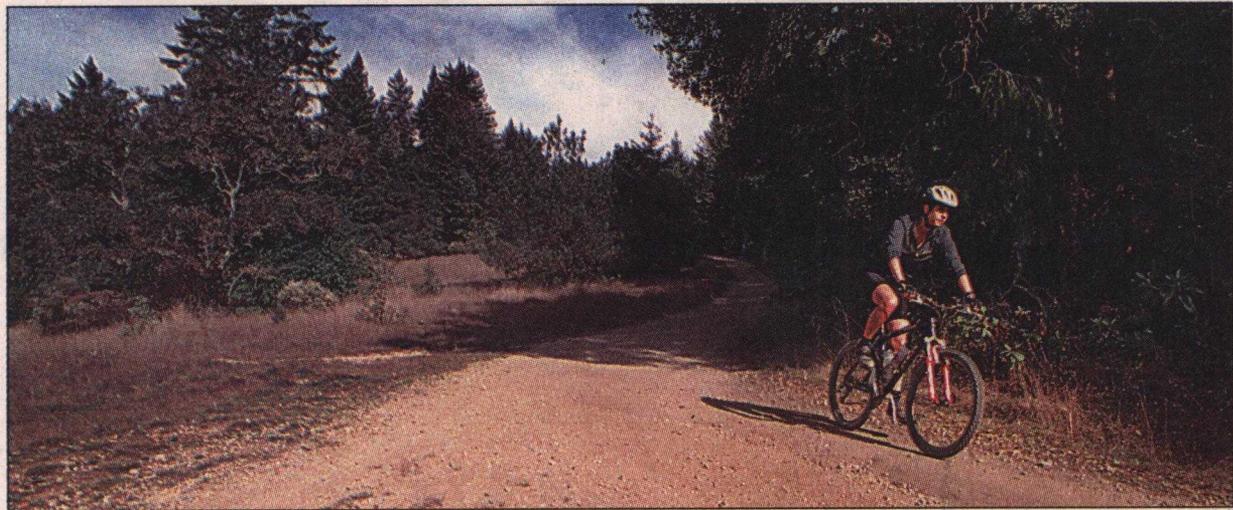
Still, some trails were opened in fairly quick order with eight miles of dirt road trails approved by November 1997.

A group known as the Gray Whale Advisory Committee, consisting of sometimes disparate users, began grappling with the future trail questions.

Conservation complications

The Gray Whale Ranch purchase was the first of some major local land-buys by conservation groups that aimed to then turn the lands over to the state Parks Department for management.

In 1997, the Trust for Public Land bought the 7,000-acre Coast Dairies property, a 7-mile-long stretch that surrounds the North Coast town of Daventport.



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

A mountain biker heads down the Chinaquapin Trail at Gray Whale Ranch.

Three years later, the Sempervirens Fund bought the Waterman Gap property in the San Lorenzo Valley with an eye toward turning it over to the state.

Private groups buying land to turn over to the state is an advantage, but comes with major challenges, said state parks Deputy Commissioner Roy Stearns.

"It's kind of a double-edged sword," Stearns said.

The department needs to secure more space to accommodate an ever-growing California populace seeking outdoor opportunities, he said.

Attendance at state parks has risen 31 percent in the past four years, Stearns added, so acquiring land from private donations and through bond measures certainly appears to be needed.

But then the department has to go to the Legislature to get funding to manage the properties, a difficult task in down economic times such as this year.

Visitation at state parks in Santa Cruz County increased by more than 1 million people between 1998 and 2001 as the staffing for the district remained about the same as it did a decade ago.

Just this past summer the district cut back on summer lifeguards and has been mulling discontinuing beach fires due to thin maintenance staffs, though volunteer groups are stepping in an attempt to fill that void and keep the tradition going.

Problems aside, Stearns said he believes the important thing is to get the land while it's still open space — even if it means it won't be ready for the public until some time later.

"If you don't get the land now, you may never get it," Stearns said. "You may get land and have to put it on the shelf. It's not going anywhere and it's not going to get gobbled up."

The problems

Among the measures Coastal Commission staff is asking for at Gray Whale Ranch is a more detailed mapping of habitats for endangered and threatened species, and a trail-monitoring program.

"Good public policy and planning require a more comprehensive analysis of resource and trail-use issues than that just far developed," commission staff wrote to state parks in response to the plan.

Grey Hayes, a biologist that served on a trail advisory committee, agreed more analysis is needed because of threatened and endangered habitat there.

Gray Whale Ranch is home to state and federally listed animal and plant species like the federally endangered Ohlone tiger beetle and the Ben Lomond spineflower, which Hayes said were mapped in the trail areas by volunteers.

"Parks lacks the resources to maintain current use while ensuring healthy habitats and, as they admit themselves, lack the resources to do the level of planning that would be required to ensure safe recreation while protecting the environment with additional use," Hayes said.

Some groups, though, are eager to use the new trails.

"We're just anxiously awaiting the

process to be completed," said David Baskin of the Mountain Bikers of Santa Cruz. "The purpose of the Coastal Act was to provide access, but now we're being held up by the Coastal Commission."

Trails on the property, left over from logging days, aren't officially open to the public, but it isn't uncommon to find bikers and hikers on the yet-to-be opened routes.

Geoff Smith, president of the mountain bikers group, said the Coastal Commission isn't asking for anything out of the ordinary, but called the delay frustrating.

It's a Catch-22 situation, he said. The trails are closed and aren't being worked on, but meanwhile people are using them illegally, and that can cause more damage.

"The people who are being punished are the people who are following the rules," Smith said.

Smith said his group would be willing to help with trail mapping and habitat inventories.

The state parks plan calls for opening five trails in addition to the nine already legally accessible. Four would be multi-use trails with one limited to walkers.

The user advisory committee had considered 10 additional trails to be opened before deciding on recommending five.

"It's not as though the advisory committee decided all the trails should be open," Baskin said. "Now, it's hung up for years and there is no end in sight."

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