

New chief at helm of Bay watchdog group

Sanctuary offers new challenges to SOS director

By JUDY BRILL STAFF WRITER JAN 16 1993

There's a new skipper at Save Our Shores, the grassroots group formed during the late 1970s under the looming prospect of offshore drilling in the Monterey Bay area.

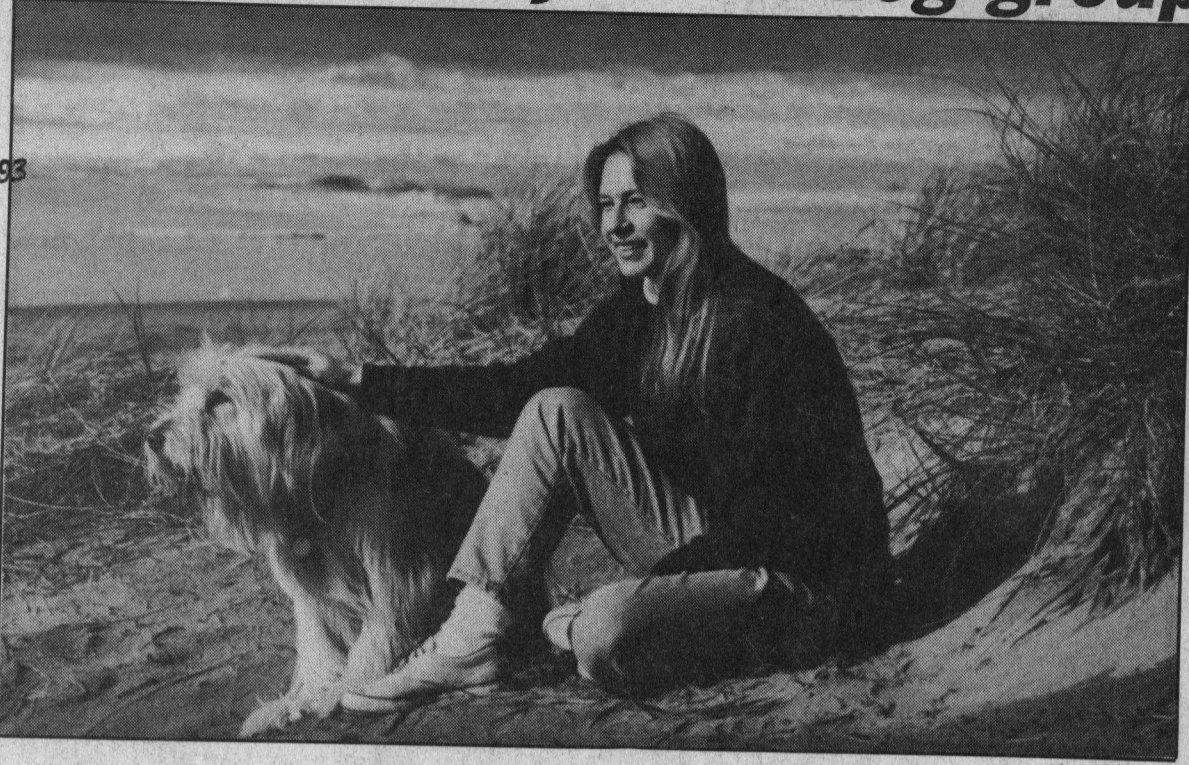
Last Monday, Vicki Nichols took the helm at the Santa Cruz-based operation.

Since 1986, Dan Haifley served as executive director of the group, dedicated to protecting the state's coastline and marine life. As the one-man staff, Haifley was responsible for everything from fund-raising and public outreach to answering the phone.

The job description got longer with the establishment last summer of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, the ninth sanctuary established since the inception in 1972 of the National Marine Sanctuary System.

SOS responded by forming its own Marine Sanctuary Watch Program to assist in monitoring the designated sanctuary area and reporting violations.

Haifley, seeking more opportunity to spend with his family, recently resigned the time-devouring position. On Jan. 11, seven years to the day since joining, he worked his last day at SOS. He will assume a new post next month as legislative aide to state Sen. Henry Mello.



Kurt Ellison

Vicki Nichols, new Save Our Shores executive director, enjoys an afternoon at Palm Beach with sidekick, Hanna.

Nichols, 31, is a New Jersey native who has spent her entire life near the water. She has also spent considerable time over the past few years helping make the Monterey Bay Sanctuary a reality. Nichols helped research, catalogue and compile the 2-inch-thick environmental impact statement and management

plan for the fledgling Monterey Bay Sanctuary program. Her resume includes ecosystem research in Alaska; two years of planning with the Sanctuaries and Reserve Division of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

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See SOS / back of section ▶

SOS

JAN 16 1993

▶ From Page 1

Atmospheric Administration in Washington, D.C.; program manager for the Channel Island National Marine Sanctuary; marine turtle research for use in a coastal protection plan with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; and "hundreds and hundreds" of marine and wildlife presentations for museums, schools and other programs.

Besides hooking the position with SOS, Nichols, 31, who holds a master's degree in environmental studies from Yale, is perhaps most proud of her participation in the development of the computerized Incident Tracking System. Described as "a matrix of components of what to do in the event of ocean oil and gas spills," the ITS would serve as a sort of checklist of how to coordinate cleanup efforts after an accident. A prototype of the system is currently being tested in the Channel Islands off the coast of Southern California.

Besides settling in at the SOS office, Nichols is also in the process of relocating from Berkeley to a house in Santa Cruz. But she took some time out for lunch in Watsonville this week to talk about her new post. She radiated excitement and enthusiasm for the "full-time-plus" pursuit she's taken on.

"I've had a vision for the last 10 years of living on the coast and guiding a non-profit organization based on citizen involvement and advocacy to protect the marine environments" Nichols said.

Thinking back, she said, it seems that every new job, each experience, has moved her ever closer to the SOS Santa Cruz

harbor office — and her first task.

"We've just got to get a bigger place," she said, taking another bite of her — what else — fish sandwich. "We can't do anything where we are. There's not even enough room for all the volunteers to come and work." She said that now, when letters or mailings have to go out, the staff is often forced to use someone's kitchen table.

She said SOS's current estimated \$120,000 budget will cover the move, and that discussions are under way with the eight-member board to relocate to larger quarters, possibly in the same building at Santa Cruz harbor.

Which brought her to her next priority: expand the board to 15 members this year.

"We're developing a packet right now to send out," she said. The new board members will have to believe in marine conservation, she said, but they are also seeking people with expertise in fund-raising, education, media relations, science and general office skills.

The list doubled as a Nichols gave a rundown on how she wants to widen the scope of SOS's current activities.

"We want to expand our educational programs, to train people in giving public presentations" on what SOS is all about, she said.

Nichols is big on that idea — training people, educating the public, involving them in monitoring the new sanctuary and fostering greater awareness of the need for coastline protection.

Congress did come through with the sanctuary designation, passing legislation and regulations designed to protect the 4,024 square nautical miles of Pacific Ocean and 348 miles of

California coast. But developing and implementing an enforcement plan remains unfinished business.

The Monterey Bay Sanctuary falls under the jurisdiction of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration but, Nichols said, NOAA doesn't have the ability to even monitor sanctuary violations, let alone enforce the rules. For instance, Nichols said the situation is "completely a black hole" when it comes to keeping tabs on and regulating the estimated 1,000 commercial vessels, including oil tankers, that pass through the sanctuary.

Other potential violations that need watching are jet-ski use and overflights. She conceded that it's mind-boggling that there's just one person officially assigned to monitor the entire sanctuary.

"We need some presence on the seas," Nichols said, likening the sanctuary to a state park. "There are rangers out there," checking on things, making sure the rules are observed.

Because the sanctuary is so large and the challenge so great, Nichols said simply, "We need a vision." Recalling the mountain of letters she read and responded to while working on the EIR, she expressed confidence that the grassroots spirit, so integral to SOS and environmental protection, is alive and well.

She's also a realist. "Funding will be up in the air for the next few years," she said, "so it will be up to the local person to make it happen."

For now, her gusto appears impervious to doubt. She's calling her new directorship "her dream job" and translates the challenges into the chance to really have an impact.