

Over objections, Big Basin plan OK'd

Environmentalists raise legal concerns over park's first blueprint



Before marking onto the Redwood Loop Trail in Big Basin State Park, hikers take in an informational sign about redwood trees. DAN COYRO/SENTINEL FILE

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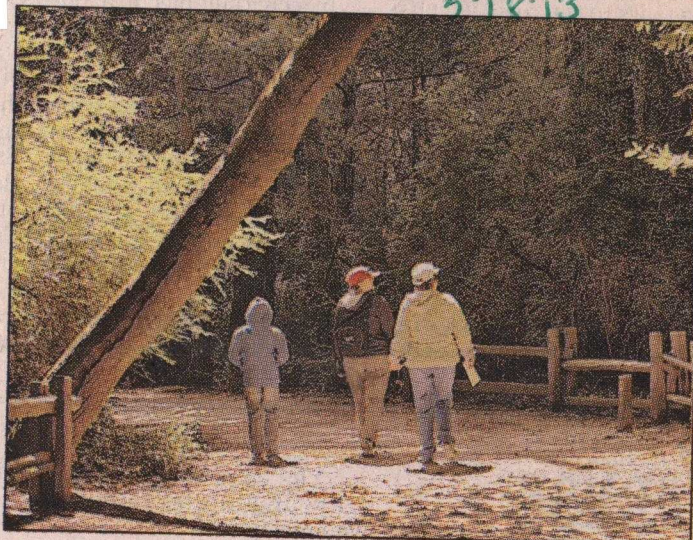
✓ SCOTTS VALLEY — Despite objections from the federal government and environmentalists, the state Park and Recreation Commission on Friday unanimously approved the first planning blueprint in the history of the state's oldest park.

The Big Basin Redwoods State Park general plan calls for new developments and expanded wilderness areas, disperses park administration and overall aims to spread more visitors throughout under-visited areas of the park, such as Waddell Creek and the newly annexed Little Basin area.

"This is a crucial first step to providing extensive guidelines for best management practices and for appropriate changes in the future use of the park," said retired Gen. Anthony Jackson, director of California State Parks.

Jackson's tempered response came after an otherwise enthusiastic commission approved the plan 7-0. That vote came over the objections of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Audubon Society and the Center for Biological Diversity, as well as park neighbors concerned about how the plan would affect them.

Environmental concerns focused on the endangered marbled murrelet, a reclusive sea bird that nests in old-growth redwood trees. With 600



Russian tourists take in the sights along the Redwood Loop Trail in Big Basin State Park. DAN COYRO/SENTINEL FILE

ON THE NET

To view the Big Basin Preliminary General Plan, visit antacruzsentinel.com and click on this story.



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL FILE

Big Basin State Park visitors hike through a large meadow off the Redwood Loop Trail.

PARK

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remaining along the Central Coast and their Big Basin population dwindling to 15 percent of what it was in 1995, many wanted more protections for the birds in the plan.

"The center will evaluate our options for litigation over the plan," said Shay Wolfe, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity.

SOURCE OF CONTROVERSY

The source for the controversy is the main visitor area of Big Basin, the heart of the state's first park and a place of almost spiritual importance for park supporters.

Because that area is sited near a spectacular loop of old-growth trees — the very trees that draw international attention to the park — it is also near the endangered marbled murrelets. Visitors, and their food, draws ravens and blue jays that also prey on marbled murrelet eggs as well. Most agree the predators are a significant threat.

Yet in a report on the plan, State Parks staff did not agree, even though the agency has spent \$1.7 million in the past several years to try to control raven and jay populations in Big Basin and other nearby state parks. Staff reported that it was "unclear" what was causing the birds' decline.

"(I)t cannot be said with certainty that the activity of State Park visitors in the old-grove redwoods is the reason for the dwindling numbers,"

the report said.

The Audubon Society's Anna Weinstein called that a "joke," and numerous advocates wanted more done to reduce impacts to the old-growth areas, especially when it comes to overnight lodging and other facilities.

"We strongly support the relocation and removal of developed recreational facilities" from habitat areas, said Lilian Carswell, representing the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

ADDRESSING CONCERNS

The state did make several changes in response to concerns. Park planners on Friday committed to expanding trash management and signs, to continue to seek funding for bird population studies, and to formalizing existing murrelet support efforts, including coming up with a management plan.

The state also dropped plans for 10 cabins in the Sky Meadow area, also near marbled murrelet habitat. And the general plan calls for greater use of the Saddle Mountain and newly acquired 500-acre Little Basin areas, the latter as both a destination and a staging area for guests venturing farther into the park.

"These guidelines substantially lessen the overall impact on the marbled murrelet while still allowing appropriate use of the park," Jackson said. "I'm happy that it is a good first step that will need more attention as we move forward with all of our partners."

Park neighbors objected

to increasing visitors to Little Basin, now at the end of narrow gravel road. Those private landowners said the road is inadequate — a view shared by a representative of county Supervisor Bruce McPherson — and they already are seeing increased crime and fire concerns.

"All of us in that area have cohabitated with Big Basin quite nicely," said Little Basin Road resident Teri Ellen Westra. "This expansion is absolutely not necessary. And nobody loves marbled murrelets more than I do, but they're not the only consideration."

The commission also added 390 acres to the northern edge of the 5,800-acre West Waddell Creek State Wilderness area, located along Whitehouse Canyon Road and Gazos Creek Road.

Decreasing visitor activity at Big Basin headquarters has precedent. The area was once seen as a multiday family destination, with dances, tennis courts and even a swimming pool.

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