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New message at Gray Whale Ranch: Stay out

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SANTA CRUZ — Mountain bikers, hikers and equestrians take note — you are no longer welcome on the Gray Whale Ranch.

Ranch owners Ron and Linda Yanke say they can no longer risk having hundreds of uninvited visitors play unsupervised on their land.

For several years the owners of the 2,400-acre ranch near UC Santa Cruz have ignored trespassers, or at most ejected them on a sporadic basis. With its miles of scenic trails running from Empire Grade almost to the ocean, the ranch has become a mecca for mountain bikers.

On sunny weekend days dozens of riders could be seen lifting their knob-tired bicycles over the ranch gates and sprinting downhill in a cloud of dust. Area residents rode their horses there daily and UCSC students hiked and explored limestone caves on the property.

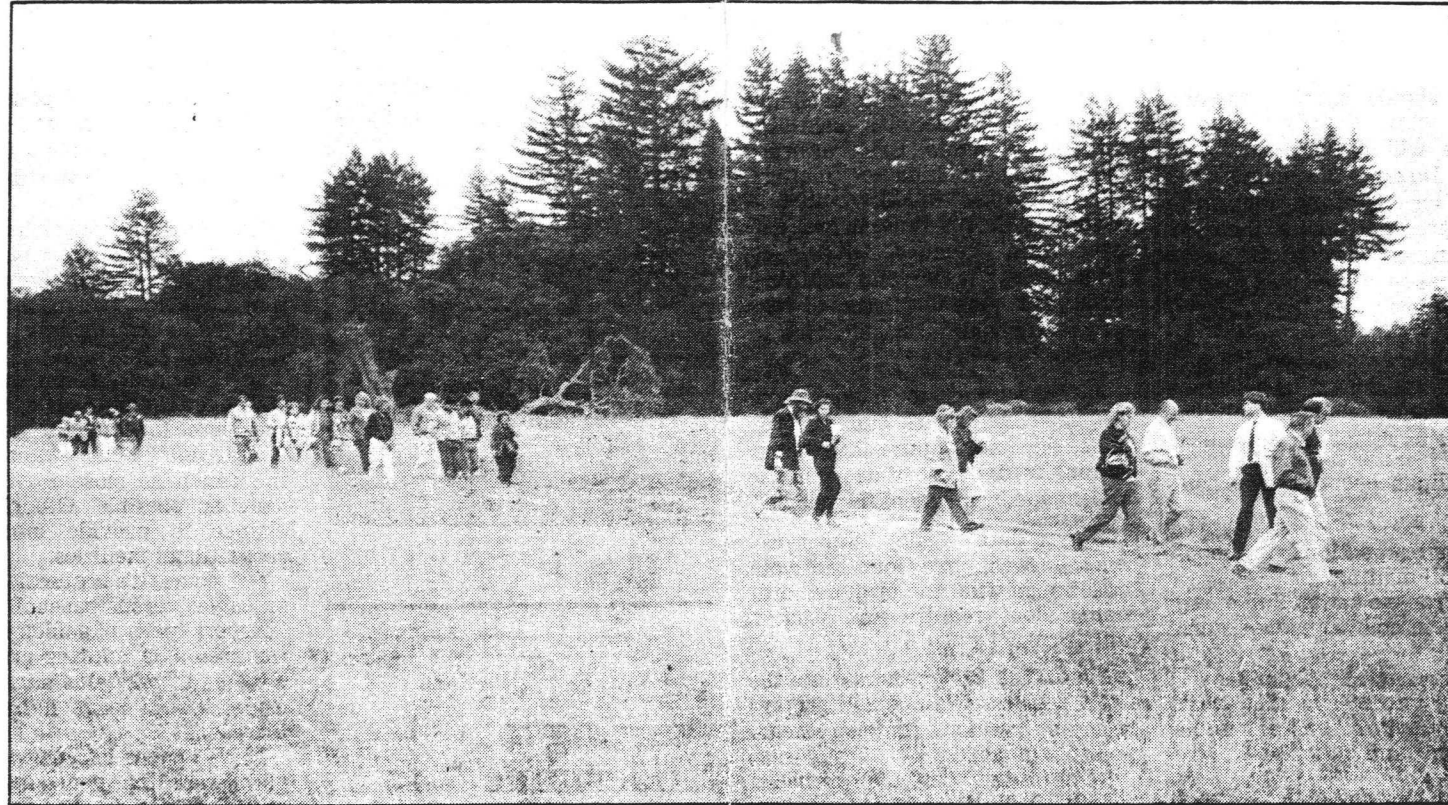
Ironically, visitors on the privately-owned ranch were turned back or ticketed only if they crossed onto the publicly owned Wilder Ranch State Park, which has been almost entirely closed to the public for 16 years.

The closing of the ranch is the latest episode in a continuing saga involving the Yankes and the county of Santa Cruz. The Yankes want to cut timber on the ranch, which is zoned for timber production, while a growing group of activists want the land purchased for use as a state park.

The county has backed the activists, and sued to stop the timber harvest. A hearing on the issue has been set for March 23 in Sacramento Superior Court.

The situation with public access had become an insurance liability nightmare, according to John Steinbacher, spokesman for the Yankes.

"My predecessor didn't keep people off the property, and I inherited a really



Dan Covro/Sentinel file

Assemblyman Sam Farr led a citizen's group on a tour of Gray Whale Ranch in October 1988.

nasty problem," Steinbacher said. "We're trying to be nice about it, we're telling people to turn around and leave the way they came in. We're now giving out hand-outs explaining the situation."

Repeat offenders will be arrested, he said, and those who try to run for it will be chased down.

"If there's a villain here, it's liability," he said. "We're very exposed here, it's a bad legal position."

While many local residents simply ig-

nored the No Trespassing signs posted on the gates and fences, a growing number of visitors apparently had no idea the ranch was private property.

"It is intriguing to note that so many of the bikers are from over the hill," Steinbacher said. "One day I saw a series of vans pull up full of bikers from Los Angeles. So it's not just a local problem."

Bike maps distributed by some local shops show the ranch as a legal place to ride, Steinbacher said, making it impos-

ible to ignore the problem.

While the crackdown has been unpopular with many sports enthusiasts, the nearby landowners are happy with the change, Steinbacher said.

"We've gotten positive feedback from the Wilder Ranch people," he said. "It's almost eliminated their patrol problems. And the other private neighbors say the same thing."

After researching the question of public access, the Yankes decided in January to

aggressively pursue and evict trespassers from the property. A letter to that effect has been filed with the Sheriff's Office, and the mounted patrols that oversee the Pogonip property in Santa Cruz have been contracted to oversee the Gray Whale Ranch as well, Steinbacher said.

Patrols now roam the ranch seven days a week, he said.

The Yankes plan to run cattle on the property, in part to reduce the fire hazard caused by overgrowth of weeds and brush. "One match and you would have a very scary situation," Steinbacher said. The cattle should arrive within two weeks.

"This seems like the best way to preserve the ranch and protect our interests," Steinbacher said. "Erosion has become quite a problem, bikers would ride downhill with their brakes on, which tears the daylight out of the trails. And mountain bikers love to ride in the mud."

One of the points of contention concerning use of the property is an open-space easement granted to the county by previous owners of the ranch in 1972. The 20-year easement strictly limits development of the property, and allows the county to develop trails for public use.

But public use hinged on the county creating a master plan and maintaining trails on the property, which was never done. Now the easement is set to expire in two years, and it is unlikely a trail plan will be undertaken.

The Yankes have estimated the land's value at \$8 million to \$11 million, but backers of a state park have managed to raise only \$300,000 in state funds in the past two years.

Steinbacher says he is now "working quietly" to come up with a land-use plan agreeable to all parties.

"It's probably premature to discuss it," he said. "But we're talking candidly to (county representatives). We'd just like people not to trespass while this is underway."