

# Fight simmers over park plan

Gray Whale 85mn 9-11-98  
Proposal to share 8 miles of trails  
on Gray Whale Ranch gets airing

BY JOHN WOOLFOLK  
Mercury News Staff Writer

State park officials who are preparing to open their largest Santa Cruz addition in decades say hikers, bicyclists and horseback riders ought to be able to share eight miles of trails through spectacular coastal meadows and woodlands.

Not everyone agrees.

At a hearing Friday in Santa Cruz, state parks officials expect to hear from critics of their plan for Gray Whale Ranch who contend that mountain bikes are a menace and shouldn't be allowed.

"The consistent concern has been mountain bikes on the roads and people not wanting to share the roads with bicycles," said Bob Culbertson, chief ranger of the California Department of Parks and Recreation's Santa Cruz district.

"We don't want to create a bik-

er trail, a horse trail and a hiker trail to get to the same place," Culbertson said. "We want to put them on the same road and provide more wildlife habitat."

Friday's hearing in the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors' chambers is the first on the parks departments' plan for the 2,300-acre Gray Whale Ranch, located between the University of California-Santa Cruz and Wilder Ranch State Park.

Local residents have coveted the Gray Whale land for years, battling plans for luxury homes and dreaming of preserving it as natural habitat. Last fall, Save-the-Redwoods League, a San Francisco conservation group, bought the property for an undisclosed sum and turned it over to the state parks in May.

State parks officials had hoped to open the property to the public as part of neighboring Wilder

See RANCH, Page 6B

6B

## Gray Whale hearing Friday

Critics of park plan  
expected to fight  
mountain bike use

### ■ RANCH

from Page 1B

Ranch this summer, but legal technicalities and a multi-jurisdictional approval process resulted in delays.

The parks department plan calls for opening eight miles of existing dirt road to hiking, biking and horseback riding, and setting up a gravel parking area with trash cans and toilets at an entrance off Em-

pire Grade near the university. The trails would connect to Wilder Ranch, whose 34 miles of trails are enormously popular. Rangers counted 24 horses, 100 hikers and 500 bicyclists there one recent weekend, Culbertson said.

The Gray Whale plan contends park activity will not cause any significant environmental harm because it involves existing roads and parking areas, and that no further studies are needed.

Friday's hearing is intended to gather comments for the California Coastal Commission, which must grant approval on the plan. The commission is expected to consider the plan at its November meeting in Agoura Hills, near Los Angeles.

Critics argue that mountain bikers zipping down the trails endanger hikers and horseback riders and contribute to erosion.

"Everyone knows that although the park isn't officially open yet, bikes are all over it, riding in sensitive areas," said Celia Scott, a founder of Save Gray Whale Parklands and a Santa Cruz council member. "I'm concerned about enforcement. I don't think there's adequate analysis in the environmental document."

Mountain bikers say they are being unfairly maligned over the indiscretions of a few renegades.

"I think protection of this land is paramount, but I also truly believe that there is no better protection than to give as many users a feasible stake in its future," said Mark Woodhead, a Santa Cruz mountain biker.

Save-the-Redwoods League and the Santa Cruz County Horsemen's Association also support the park officials' plan for allowing bikes. The league has collected nearly \$200,000 toward the Gray Whale purchase from Santa Cruz area residents and agencies.

### IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

The Department of Parks and Recreation will consider comments on its plan for Gray Whale Ranch from 5 to 8 p.m. Friday in the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors' chambers, 701 Ocean St., Santa Cruz.