

KAREN T. BORCHERS — MERCURY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

### ▲ THE NEW CENTER

Opening today, the marine education center — viewed above by ranger Gary Strachan — will provide classrooms for students and other visitors and a training area for docents.



### ▲ THE UNLIKELY BENEFACTOR

A \$500,000 donation came from retired entrepreneur Steve Blank, 54, who once clashed with environmentalists when he announced plans for a huge home across from Año Nuevo.

# An epiphany for Año Nuevo

*Año Nuevo* 5Jmnl6308  
NEW \$3.3 MILLION EDUCATION CENTER OPENS TODAY

By Paul Rogers  
*Mercury News*

The elephant seals and windswept beaches of Año Nuevo State Reserve on the San Mateo County coast may seem a world away from the cubicles and traffic of Silicon Valley.

But environmentalists are hoping that a gleaming new \$3.3 million marine education center scheduled to open today at the popular park — with a symbolic “kelp cutting” rather than ribbon cutting — will jump-start a new trend in which high-tech money helps beautify

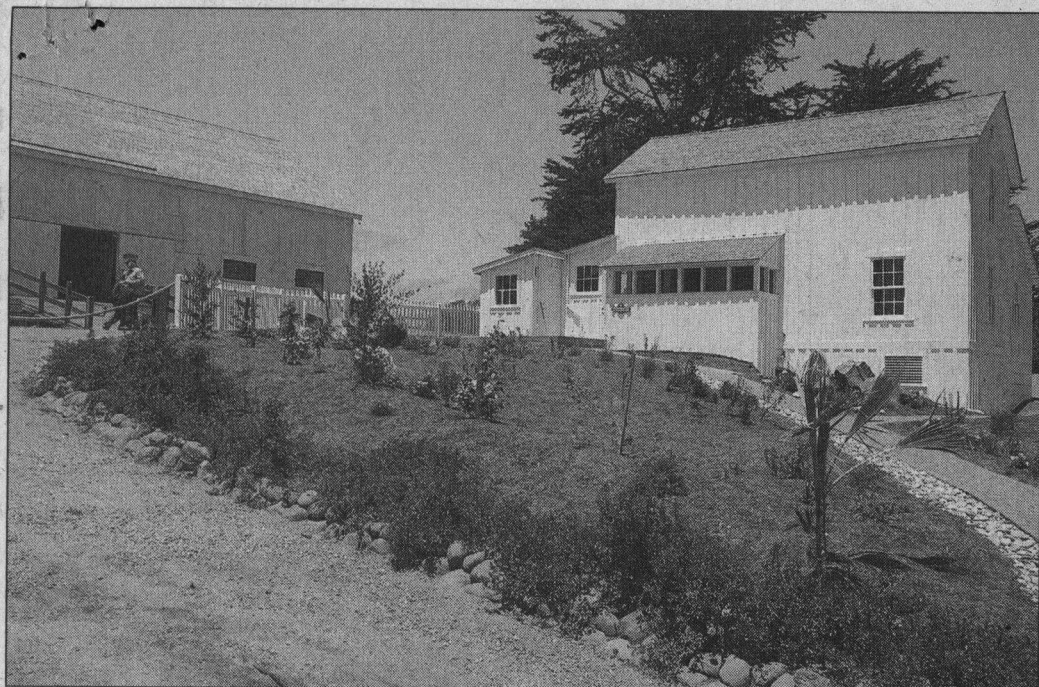
and modernize California’s money-strapped coastal parks.

Six years in the works, the center’s exhibits explain the cultural history of the area, from Spanish explorer Sebastian Vizcaino, who sailed past in 1603, to its wildlife — first and foremost the famous elephant seal colony that draws visitors from around the world.

The leading source of funding for the project, a \$500,000 personal donation, came from an

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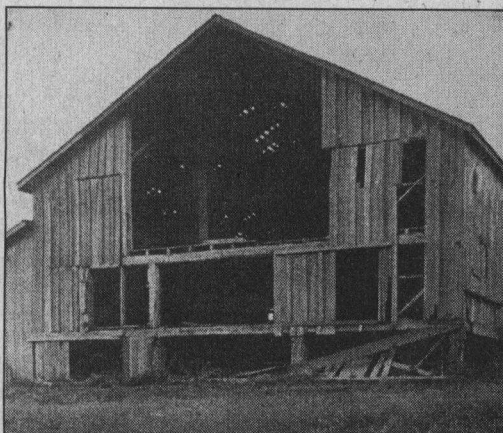




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**Above:** Barn on the left houses the visitor center; the creamery building on the right is the ranger's station.

**Right:** The barn, before renovation, is shown in a 1975 photograph.



MERCURY NEWS

# AÑO NUEVO | Expansion of exhibit will accommodate more visitors

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unlikely source: a Silicon Valley entrepreneur who clashed with environmentalists only seven years ago in the same spot.

Steve Blank, 54, has been a founder or participant in eight Silicon Valley start-ups since 1978. His last one was E.piphany, which he started in 1996. After retiring in 1999 at 45, Blank and his wife, Alison Elliott, bought 261 acres on the inland side of Highway 1 across from Año Nuevo and drew up plans for a 15,000-square-foot house.

Environmentalists protested, saying it would spoil the rustic views. Blank met with them, lowered the height, moved its location back so it can't be seen from the road, and won an 11-0 Coastal Commission approval.

Then, with newfound time on his hands, he became one of the state's next generation of environmental leaders. He joined the board of the California Audubon Society and the Peninsula Open Space Trust. Last year, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger named him to the California Coastal Commission, where he has won accolades from green groups.

## A green epiphany

Blank, who also teaches classes on entrepreneurship at Stanford and the University of California-Berkeley, said his green epiphany was due in large part to watching his daughters, now 16 and 17, along the coast.

"If you connect kids to nature early on, it's a connection

they appreciate," Blank said Monday. "They vote to preserve it, they bring their kids to it. It's permanent. This is an opportunity to expand their appreciation of what makes California such a spectacular, special place. It seemed like a no-brainer to me."

Blank's old adversaries now say they hope his assistance to the cash-strapped state parks department is something other tech entrepreneurs follow.

"We'd like to cultivate more people like him," said Mark Massara, the Sierra Club's top California coastal advocate. "Every single state park on the coast needs these kinds of partnerships."

Año Nuevo's new education center modernizes and expands the park's old, small exhibit area.

It is now housed in restored barns and a farmhouse that date back to the 1880s. A key feature is a new high-definition TV camera that visitors can operate to focus on wildlife, not only from the visitor's center, but also soon on the Web.

"We're going to be able to see great white shark attacks, stellar sea lions pups being born — it's going to be great," said supervising ranger Gary Strachan.

The center also will provide a classroom and space for the intensive training of the park's 230 volunteer docents who lead the elephant seal tours.

More docents mean more tours. Each year more than 15,000 school children visit from as far away as Sacramento, Strachan said, but an equal number are turned away for

lack of space. Now, he said, the goal is to increase school visitation 60 percent in four years.

Blank, who grew up in a 600-square-foot apartment in Queens, N.Y., currently is installing solar panels on his home to make it carbon neutral.

## Additional donors

In addition to Blank's donation, \$1.3 million came to the center from the state Coastal Conservancy, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund, and other donors. An additional \$1.5 million came from state park bond funds.

Blank and other parks lovers hope younger tech entrepreneurs who enjoy visiting the beach follow his lead, including helping pay for a \$5 million effort to restore Pigeon Point Lighthouse five miles north along Highway 1.

"It really is an important breakthrough for us. It's the first and most significant contribution from Silicon Valley entrepreneurs for a state parks projects on the coast," said Elizabeth Goldstein, executive director of the California State Parks Foundation, a non-profit group in Marin County that led fundraising efforts. "We're hopeful this will intrigue others."

## IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

The grand opening will be Webcast live at noon today at [www.parks.ca.gov](http://www.parks.ca.gov)

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