



JUDITH CALSON — MERCURY NEWS ARCHIVES

Visitors gather on a beach near Año Nuevo to observe elephant seals, which breed on the preserve's beaches from December to March.

## Año Nuevo center gets funding

By Paul Rogers

*Mercury News*

✓ The first tourists came to Año Nuevo Point in 1603. Now, 402 years later, a proper visitors center is finally about to be built there.

On Thursday, a longtime dream of nature lovers moved closer to reality when the California Coastal Conservancy approved contributing \$350,000 in state bond money toward construction of a marine education center at Año Nuevo State Reserve, located south of Pescader-

o along Highway 1.

The money completes a three-year fundraising effort for the new \$3 million center, which will be the first such facility of its kind on the San Mateo County coast.

Construction is set to begin in September and finish in October 2006.

The center will explain to the public the cultural history of the region, from Spanish explorer Sebastian Vizcaino — whose

See **AÑO NUEVO**, Page 5C



# AÑO NUEVO | Agency gives \$350,000 to marine center

Continued from Page 1C

crew named the area on Jan. 3, 1603, using the Spanish words for new year — to 19th-century dairy farmers who lived there.

The center also will offer exhibits about wildlife, most notably the nationally famous colony of elephant seals that comes ashore to breed every year from December to March on Año Nuevo's beaches, drawing thousands of tourists who hike along wooden boardwalks, snapping photos of the huge, blubbery mammals.

"This is an important component of coastal protection — education," said Gary Strachan, supervising state parks ranger at Año Nuevo. "Within an hour of here we have 7 million people. People need places to come to and relax; they need places to inspire them. And that's why we're doing things like this."

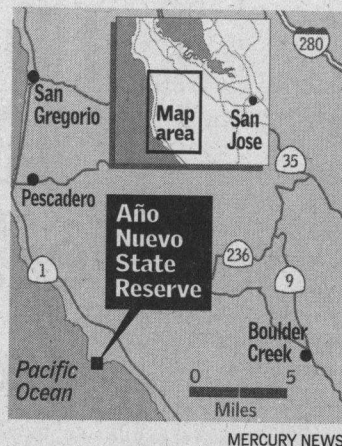
The center will total 7,500 square feet, in three rustic buildings dating back to the 1880s that once were part of the Steele Brothers dairy, Strachan said.

It also will provide room for more training facilities for the park's 220 volunteer docents who lead the elephant seal tours, enabling the park to increase volunteer staffing by 25 percent and offer more tours, said Elizabeth Goldstein, executive director of the California State Parks Foundation, a nonprofit group that raised the money for the project.

"We're very excited," Goldstein said Thursday. "We think the new center will give the visitor a much more comprehensive sense of Año Nuevo and all of its glorious features."

Año Nuevo is a 4,000-acre state park located just north of the Santa Cruz-San Mateo County line. Home to the world's largest mainland breeding colony of northern elephant seals, it is visited by 200,000 people a year.

Strachan said that last year more than 22,000 schoolchildren came on tours of the park, but an equal number were turned away because space is limited. The new project will involve the renovation and restoration of a small visitor center built in 1987, com-



plete with underwater video of elephant seals, Web cams and other new exhibits. But in offering community meeting rooms and large new areas for docent training, more schoolchildren also will be able to visit in the future, he said.

The \$350,000 approved by the Coastal Conservancy on Thursday at its meeting in San Diego came from Proposition 50, a parks and water bond approved by voters in 2002.

An additional \$1.5 million was secured earlier from other state parks bond funding. The rest came from private donations and charitable organizations such as the Packard and Goldman foundations.

As wildlife goes, elephant seals are some of the Bay Area's more remarkable inhabitants.

Weighing more than 2,000 pounds, the seals, named for their long noses, typically dive underwater for 20 minutes at a time to a depth up to 2,000 feet in search of rays, skates, squid, fish and small sharks to eat. The maximum recorded depth of an elephant seal is 5,015 feet — nearly a mile underwater.

Elephant seals once numbered in the hundreds of thousands but were hunted nearly to extinction because their blubber was a source of oil. By 1892 only 50 to 100 were left off the Pacific Coast. After protection efforts in the 1920s by the Mexican and U.S. governments, however, they began to rebound. Their numbers have expanded dramati-



SPECIAL TO THE MERCURY NEWS

Two 19th-century dairy barns at Año Nuevo State Reserve will house a new marine education center after a three-year fundraising effort.

cally to 160,000.

The number of elephant seal pups born off Año Nuevo has increased from one in 1961 to 2,000 by 1995. At Año Nuevo, males up to 16 feet long come ashore in December and en-

gage in fierce battles with each other over females. Pups are born a year later.

"The Año Nuevo State Reserve is one of California's environmental and historic treasures," said former State Sen.

Byron Sher, who helped secure much of the earlier state bond funding for the center.

## IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

For more information about Año Nuevo State Reserve or the north-

ern elephant seal, go to [www.anonuevo.org](http://www.anonuevo.org) or call (650) 879-2025.

Contact Paul Rogers at [progers@mercurynews.com](mailto:progers@mercurynews.com) or (408) 920-5045.