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Año Nuevo Docents Do a Deal

*Interpretive group
ends 'turf dispute'
with state park*

AÑO Nuevo's elephant seal tour and nature interpretation programs have been removed — at least for now — from the endangered species list.

Earlier this month, the Año Nuevo Interpretive Association, which coordinates some 150 volunteers in various park activities, voted to dissolve its programs in September if a turf dispute between the association and state parks staff wasn't resolved.

Such a move would have had a severe impact on the park's famous elephant seal tours, which are run by the volunteers.

The threat, which came after 18 months of trying to negotiate at the district and regional levels, was apparently heard in Sacramento.

At a meeting that lasted late into the night Monday, state parks director Henry Agonia signed a document that set some basic guidelines for the duties and responsibilities of parks and association staff until new guidelines can be completed. And, after several hours of closed-session debate, the association's board of directors rescinded its motion to terminate its current contract with the department.

"The board's real happy with the interim memorandum of understanding," said Bonnie Merkin Wilson, executive director of the association. "And we'd be happy if it was the final memorandum of understanding. We're going to go on with our jobs and we thank Mr. Agonia for coming and we'll wait for the department to identify what these issues are that need to be brought forward."

Association and parks staff appear to disagree over what they disagree on. According to the association, the department has been trying to wrest control over the docent programs and



State parks director Henry Agonia speaks at Pescadero meeting.

undermine the association's authority and autonomy. Association members and docents have complained, among other things, of lack of communication, threats and harassment by parks staff.

But district director Carol Nelson and regional director Richard Felty said the department had no intention of taking over the programs, and that the problems arose when the association began demanding more autonomy. Nelson dismissed some of the more serious charges of harassment as simply not true, while admitting she suspects there were some personality conflicts between parks and association staff.

"I think what's happened is you have two staffs working for different bosses, their jobs are not well clarified, and I think there's a lot of animosity now because each side is feeling that the other is doing their job," she said.

And while the parks department feels a re-evaluation and clarification of the roles and responsibilities of the two staffs is needed, the association maintains that the program, which has run smoothly for years, is fine as is.

Despite the differences, Agonia and the board seemed to agree the

association's responsibility was to run the docent programs with department oversight and that the department's responsibility was to run the park. Whether there's agreement on how that translates into day-to-day operations remains to be seen.

But the problems that have arisen at Año Nuevo are by no means unique to that site. Both parks department and association representatives say similar difficulties, arising over control of the volunteer programs, have surfaced at almost every park that has an interpretive association. Association representatives worry that problems will turn off volunteers and leave the parks with understaffed and ineffective programs.

"What's happening is the state is trying to assert total control over these cooperating associations," said Bill Dillinger, a retired parks department chief public information officer.

"The department's problem is that they are trying to step in there and take control of the docent programs and bushwack (the associations) back to the small size they once were," said Dillinger. "You've got a lot of active citizens and people of some stature in

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Docents

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these associations, and they don't take very kindly to being pushed around."

"What state parks wants, is they want the volunteers, but they don't want the organization that has control over the volunteers," said Rick Baird, chairman of the Pescadero Marsh Interpretive Association.

According to Baird, several local environmental groups were approached by the department and asked to form a group to set up an interpretive association. Despite what he considered a general understanding they would also run the program once it was established, Baird said that the department took control of the program, leaving the association with no functions except fund-raising. Baird said the board is likely to vote to disband altogether.

"What state parks has done in their bumbling is to irritate and antagonize many of the people who could have helped them. And it's going cost 'em, because people are not going to trust state parks in the future, and they don't have the funds to staff these programs. It's too bad. People in this state are going to be shortchanged," said Baird.

But Agonia offered an answer to those problems as well.

"Previously we were not dealing with the magnitude of cooperative associations that we have today," Agonia said, explaining that the volunteer organizations across the state have grown tremendously in the last few years in size and budget, making the state's liability greater. "Our contracts have been written very loosely and as associations become more complex, the gray areas need to be clarified."

To that end, Agonia announced that he is in the process of establishing a new position to deal with association relations. Among that person's duties will be the establishment of new guidelines for contracts between the department and associations. He also promised that representatives from the associations would be in on setting up those guidelines.

Still, the frustration was evident at Monday's meeting, which was attended by some 60 docents, representatives of other interpretive associations and community members, even as several audience members expressed their desire to believe that the problems were going to be resolved.

"To a lot of us this is a lot like Charlie Brown being invited to take another swat at that football," commented one man, adding begrudgingly, "but there is a different tone at this meeting." •

— Chela Zabin