New innovation at UCSC's Long Marine Lab

EDITOR'S NOTE — This is the story that had been accepted to be published by The Sentinel by Valerye Davey, the victim in Thursday's early morning fatal firebombing.

By VALERYE DAVEY

People who work in an office with windows and light are happier and healthier emotionally, say psychiatrists, than those who must work in dark, enclosed cubicles. Windows provide relief in the middle of a harried day, a chance to look out at the world around them.

At the Long Marine Lab at UCSC the staff and faculty are realizing the importance of windows in some of their large mammal research pens. These windows are not intended to give the elephant seals who dwell within a better view of the ocean, but instead they are for the curious public who grows frustrated when it hears the seals rolling and snorting a mere yard away but can't see the fascinating beasts inside.

Some visitors, determined to see the seals within the tall windowless pen, have not only been peeking through knot holes, but enlarging them, scrambling to the top and actually destroying the enclosures in an attempt to catch a glimpse of the lumbering animals.

"We had two choices," confessed Tony Huntley, who is currently using these elephant seals for his research on sleep physiology. "We could close the area to the public or install windows for easier viewing. We decided the later option would best serve the interest of the public, researchers, and animals."

Long Marine Lab is a unique research facility because it also serves as an educational center where the public is encouraged to visit and learn more about marine life. The public marine aquarium was opened in the fall of 1979, and a lay group, the Friends of Long Marine Lab, was organized to enhance the interaction between the public and the university.

"Normally the public is denied access to research animals. There is probably no other research facility in the United States that allows the public to see their research animals," Huntley said emphatically.

The idea of windows for viewing animals in a zoo or aquarium is certainly not unusual, but in a research center the idea is defintely an innovation. "Most scientific centers don't want to be bothered by the public nosing about, and these centers have no real need to keep on friendly terms with the public because their support comes from the government and from grants," Huntley explained.

However, pleasing the public is crucial to the Center for Marine Studies and for the operation of Long Marine Lab. In 1983, more than $151,000 of gift support was received from many different private donors. Contributions aid research projects as well as presentations at worldwide scientific meetings.

"Public donations were made toward a new research vessel, a large outdoor tank for marine mammal studies, and equipment for the biocaustics laboratory, the biogeochemical analytical laboratories, the new bioresearch and teaching facilities and expanded visitors center," state director William Doyle, in the fall issue of the Center for Marine Studies News, the lab's bi-annual newsletter. "These funds also enabled the development of several new exhibits for the visitors program at Long Marine Lab."

So far, one window has been installed in one outdoor "dry" pen that now houses two weaned elephant seal pups.

"After being weaned, the pups go through a two-month fasting period during which time they don't eat or enter the water. Thus there is no need to have them in an aquatic environment," Huntley explained. "Individual seals also are only kept two to four weeks and then released. New ones are brought in to replace them."

The window is actually an open space covered with wire mesh, with a wide one-and-a-half by three-inch grid. The opening is about two feet high and three feet long, with the bottom edge located five feet off the ground.

This distance from the ground makes it necessary for the smaller visitors to use the wooden step provided, but also keeps small fingers, pencils, food and etc., out of range of the seals. It also prevents the seals from rubbing themselves against the mesh and sustaining injury to their thick, but not inpenetrable hides.

The window project is being organized by various staff members including: Keith Skaug, facilities co-ordinator; Bill Doyle, director of Center for Marine Studies; Dan Costa, elephant seal researcher; and Huntley, elephant seal researcher and curator of vertebrates.

Huntley is close to finishing his doctoral dissertation on elephant seal sleep physiology and his work in this field has earned him a reputation among sleep researchers.

Along with working on the window project, Huntley contributes much time and energy to other projected around Long Marine Lab. He was one of the workers who cleaned and transported the skeleton of an 85-foot, 50-year-old blue whale to the lab after the carcass washed up at Pescadero Beach in September of 1979.

"This skeleton, though incomplete, is the only blue whale skeleton on display in the whole western United States," Huntley said proudly.

There are three other outdoor pens in addition to the one housing the elephant seals, and Costa is planning to install windows in these so visitors can see the adult female sea lions Costa hopes to acquire soon. Plans for enlarging the center's research mammal population also include acquiring dolphins — a project Ken Norris, renowned authority on cetaceans — is working on. These dolphins would be housed in the outdoor "wet" exhibit, which is already low enough to see into without requiring steps or windows. There also is "some possibility" for maintaining a small population of sea otters which are native to the Monterey coast, Huntley said.

The funds for installing the windows came from the public, and although it is fairly inexpensive project — about $50 per window — other projects planned are not so easily realized. The Center for Marine Studies hopes to continue improving relationships with friends and donors by allowing them to see as much as possible at the research center. The funds they donate will allow the lab to grow and improve both public and private facilities. A reception-opening ceremony for the window project is planned for sometime later this month.