

Parks aplenty

Despite cuts, rangers see opportunities

By ERIN K. QUIRK
Sentinel staff writer

AFTER 10 LONG years, lovers of open space in Santa Cruz County have finally prevailed. Mountain bikers will have trails, rare mushrooms will keep growing in quiet, loamy soil and the sweeping, coastal forests of Gray Whale Ranch will never again see another chain saw.

But not all is peaceful as the local district of the state Department of Parks and Recreation prepares to take possession of the 2,300-acre North Coast land.

The district already oversees 14 parks and handles 5 million visitors a year. It has also handled five years of downsizing and budget cuts, which have drastically changed how the parks are patrolled and maintained. The question now

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is, how will the district manage its new addition?

"Getting this Gray Whale Ranch is like a big present," said Chief Ranger and Acting District Superintendent Bob Culbertson. "Now the challenge is how to meet our mandate to protect habitat and provide access."

The Gray Whale property is currently entangled in a right-of-way dispute with the neighbors, which has slowed its donation by the Save-The-Redwoods League. Culbertson believes the problem should be solved in a month or two, and after that the property will become part of Wilder Ranch. He said the park will open 90 days after it is deeded to the system.

Gray Whale Ranch itself needs little improvement before it is opened to the public, Culbertson said. Existing logging roads will be used unless compelling environmental concerns arise. After portable toilets are brought in and trail signs are posted, mountain bikers, equestrians and hikers will be invited into the park.

But that all costs money — \$285,000 in the first year and \$170,000 annually in the years to follow, Culbertson said. That money will pay for a full-time ranger, a part-time ranger, one maintenance worker and 2,000 hours of park-aide time. It will also buy two vehicles and signs for 11.5 miles of trails.

Culbertson has submitted a budget proposal to Sacramento specifically for the administration of Gray Whale Ranch. Now, like the entire Department of Parks and Recreation, which receives less than 1 percent of the state budget, Culbertson must await Gov. Pete Wilson's answer.

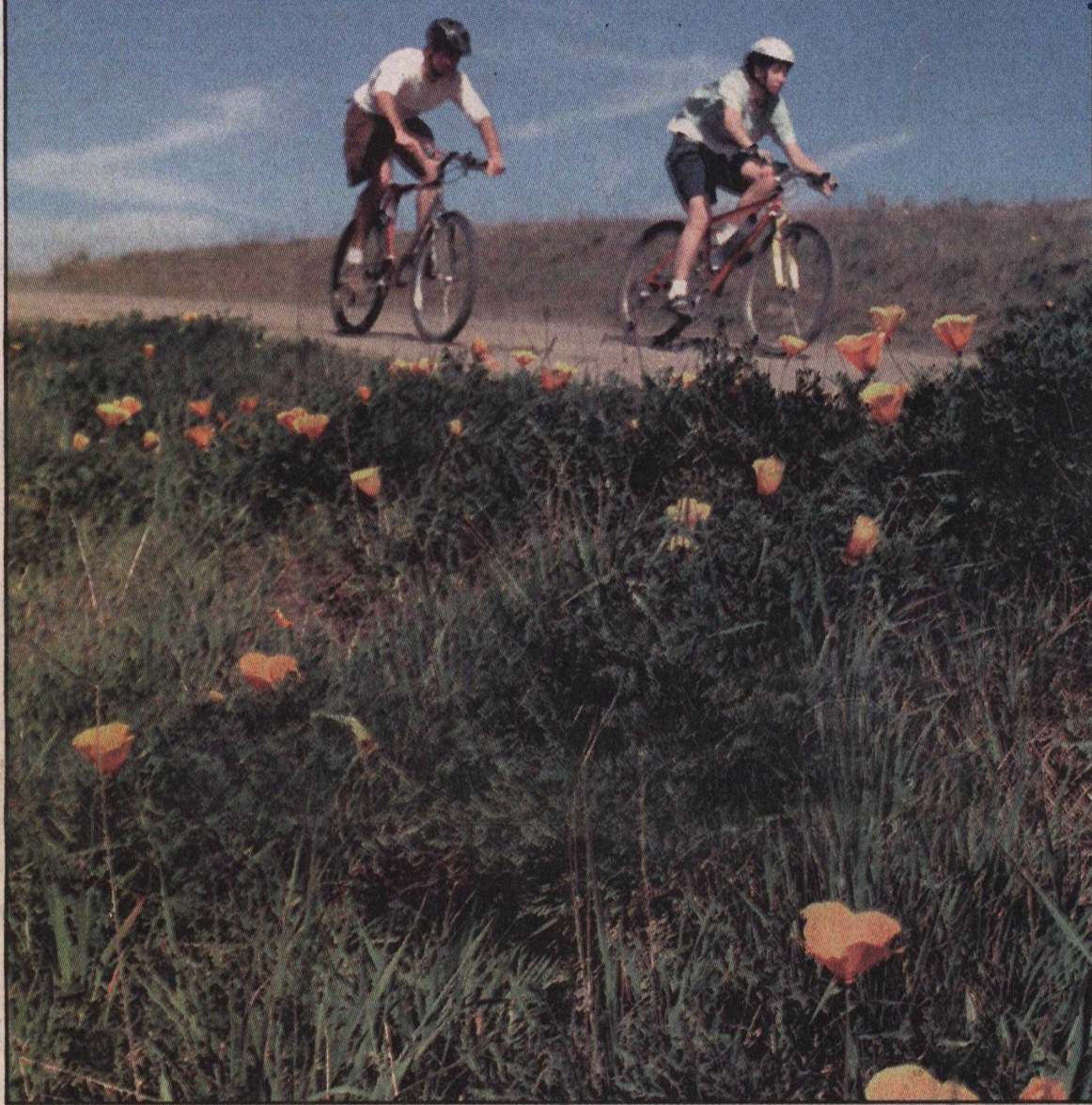
More with less

The Department of Parks and Recreation, which administers 264 parks and 1.3 million acres statewide, is no stranger to the sharp edge of Gov. Pete Wilson's budget ax.

In 1992, Wilson proposed a \$23

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Gray Whale Ranch is latest jewel in county's state parks tiara



Ranger embraces SC ethic

By ERIN K. QUIRK
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WHEN STATE PARKS District Superintendent George Cook retired in December, the top seat in the local district was left vacant. Bob Culbertson, who has served as a supervising ranger in Santa Cruz County intermittently since 1977, has applied for the job along with at least six other people. He has also been named acting superintendent until the position is filled. Culbertson believes the final decision should be made no later than June.

Culbertson, 52, has two sons and farms organic apples on his Corralitos ranch. On his office walls hang posters of elephant seals at Ano Nuevo and a sunset at Point Lobos. The following interview was conducted last week.

Q How did you get started in the State Parks system?

A I was going to school at Long Beach State and in the summers of 1964 and 1965 I worked as a park aide at



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos

Top, California poppies add a touch of early spring along the trails at Wilder Ranch State Park. Above, acting State Parks District Superintendent Bob Culbertson at Gray Whale Ranch, soon to be part of Wilder Ranch.

Big Basin, cleaning toilets and picking up trash. It was then I decided I wanted to be a park ranger, so I transferred to Sacramento State to study park management.

Because of a hiring freeze in 1967 I couldn't get a job, so I entered the Marine Corps as a reservist. I served during the Vietnam War but never went overseas. There were still no jobs in the park service, so I became a social worker in Los Angeles County. I worked with unemployed fathers and Aid for Families with Dependent Children. In 1972, I

got hired as a ranger in San Diego. I also worked at Huntington Beach for two years and was transferred to Point Lobos in 1974. I was promoted to supervising ranger of the Pajaro Coast area in 1977 and put in charge of Seacliff, New Brighton state beaches and the Twin Lakes lifeguard program.

In 1984 I worked at the training center at Asilomar and in 1988 transferred back to Santa Cruz as chief ranger responsible for Manresa, Sunset, Seacliff New

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Parks

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million cutback in the department's \$182 million budget. As a result, park closures loomed, hiring freezes continued and the districts were downsized. Santa Cruz and other districts narrowly escaped closing parks because officials in Sacramento wrangled loans from cash reserves of other state agencies. The statewide system had to be reorganized, however.

In Santa Cruz that meant more area — and fewer rangers.

"The problem with downsizing is when you cut staff and nothing bad happens they think, great," Culbertson said. "The less you spend on operating the park, the more you demonstrate you didn't need the money in the first place."

Prior to 1992, two chief rangers supervised the 14-park/beach district. When the other chief's job was cut, Culbertson, who had been chief ranger of the coastal district, took over the mountains as well. The district also lost a ranger, a chief maintenance supervisor and a heavy equipment operator. But, Culbertson said, the reorganization did give the district the use of some interpretive and resource specialists that they didn't have before.

Local Ranger Eric Bloom said he and other rangers now have more paperwork and less time to patrol — or cover for each other.

"Before, when I got sick, I went home," said Bloom, who got the flu before a work party at Nisene Marks last weekend. "Now, I'm at home with a clipboard making phone calls and making sure some ball didn't get dropped. ... There was always someone to pass off to, now there isn't."

Money woes

Five years after the reorganization, State Parks is by no means out of the woods.

The state general fund makes up 36 percent of the department's budget. According to State Parks spokesman Ken Colombini, the de-

The public speaks up

In June 1996, a San Francisco research agency polled 600 Californians about the State Parks. The telephone poll had a margin of error of plus or minus four points. Here are the results.

- 75 percent believe it is important the government find funding for parks. Funding them ranks fourth after crime prevention, roads and highways and education. Parks ranked higher than welfare and helping the needy.

- 94 percent agreed that despite the current shortage of available revenues, parks must be properly maintained for present and future generations.

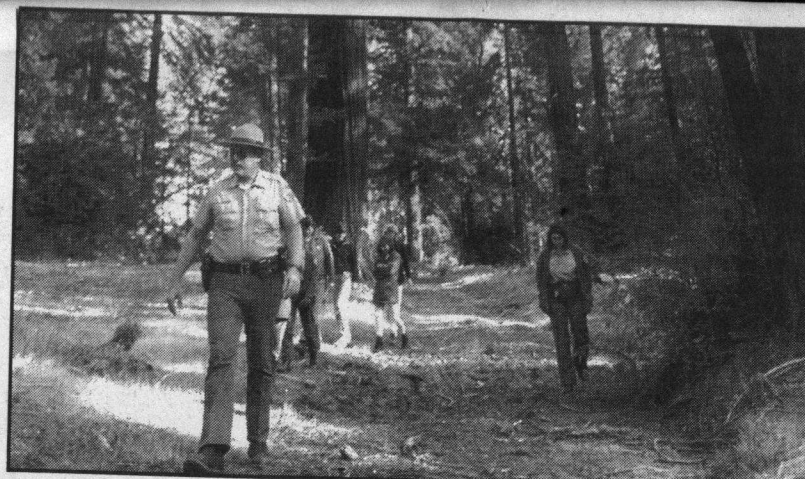
- When asked for their impression of the condition of California State Parks, 68 percent rated park ranger services and museum and visitor services excellent; 66 percent rated garbage services, trails and historic sites excellent; 62 percent rated campsites excellent and 47 percent rated public restrooms and showers excellent.

- 65 percent of respondents said corporations should sponsor California State Parks; 71 percent said they would have a more favorable impression of a corporation that sponsored the system.

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Bloom said campgrounds like those at Seacliff and Sunset state beaches are old and starting to look it.

Hill, the legislative analyst, recommends the department begin



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Acting District Superintendent Bob Culbertson leads staff through an orientation hike at Gray Whale Ranch.

Big Basin was first

Big Basin Redwoods State Park is California's oldest state park.

Founded in 1902, it was the the State Park's original public/private partnership. The park was established entirely by volunteers and was not a government project, said Acting Superintendent Bob Culbertson.

The park consists of 18,000 acres of old growth and recovering redwood forest with

mixed conifer, oaks, chaparral and riparian areas. The elevation ranges from sea level to 2,000 feet. The department is currently formulating a general plan for Big Basin. The plan will guide Big Basin's future operations development. Staff is currently gather information and data for the plan.

Watch for upcoming public meetings.

many more rescues, car thefts and maintenance projects on what was once an unpopular beach.

The situation isn't so different with Wilder Ranch.

"There are as many bikers as hikes and equestrians and they should all be give the opportunity to recreate too," said mountain biker Charlie May, who was riding at Wilder.

There are more mountain bikers now then there were 10 years ago, and State Parks must not only protect habitat but provide space for hikers, runners and equestrians who use the same trails.

"It needs to be dealt with," said UC Santa Cruz student Django

Culbertson

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Brighton, Twin Lakes, the Santa Cruz Mission, Natural Bridges and Wilder Ranch.

Q Do any big storms stand out in your mind?

A I remember very well the winter storm of 1983 that destroyed the cement ship and the entire campground at Seacliff State Beach. We've got pictures in the visitor center of huge logs at the foot of the cliffs. I remember us taking out the campground stoves with a backhoe and using them like riprap to protect the bathrooms from the water. Those houses on Beach Drive, opposite Rio del Mar flats, not only had mud sliding down from the cliffs behind them but logs sticking out of their front windows.

The earthquake for me was also really hard. I had apples sitting on the ground that needed to go to the distributor.

As for the parks, we had to check all the grounds for citizens because there was so little communication. Our radios were the only ones working so we did a lot of the emergency contact with Sacramento. Our peace officers also patrolled the armories because different gangs were claiming blankets and food based on color affiliation.

Q What's the hardest part of your job?

A Mostly the desk work. I don't get as much chance to be out in the field. It is also frustrating not to be able to provide the staff and supplies I think are necessary. I also spent months dealing with the RV park at Wilder — trying to get that land into park ownership. It just didn't go through

and it was frustrating. There were 300 acres in the quarry, 200 of which would have been kept natural habitat. The other 100 acres were primarily disturbed property and would have been used for the campground and mining. I didn't like the idea the other options for the property — a subdivision, a landfill or more mining. I don't think it was a big victory for environmentalists not to have the campground but then again I was really closely involved.

Q Why do you want to be district superintendent?

A I know the district and really do love the parks within it. I also know the people in the district well. I have allies on the recreation side, allies on the environmental protection side. Of course sometimes they reverse roles. I'd like to work on the long-range general plan with Gray Whale, Wilder Ranch, the Soquel Demonstration Forest and Nisene Marks. I'd also work with Big Basin general plan which is in progress. We have a good opportunity to make better use of that tremendous resource which really is the anchor for park system.

Q What's special about Santa Cruz County?

A I feel lucky to even live here. I lived in LA for years. In the San Gabriel Valley we used to have smog alerts and had to leave kids inside for their health. I remember taking a deep breath on those days and it would hurt. Around here I don't have that problem. Every time I drive through LA I feel sorry for the people that have to live there.

County's state parks

marks last weekend. I was home with a clipboard making phone calls and making sure some ball didn't get dropped. ... There was always someone to pass off to, now there isn't."

Money woes

Five years after the reorganization, State Parks is by no means out of the woods.

The state general fund makes up 36 percent of the department's budget. According to State Parks spokesman Ken Colombini, the department has four years to reduce its dependence on general fund revenues. The state Parks and Recreation Fund makes up another 45 percent of department revenues — of that, 36 percent comes from camping and concession fees.

In reviewing this year's proposed budget, the Legislative Analyst's Office found revenues from park user fees are, to date, \$1.6 million less than expected. Thus the State Parks and Recreation Fund is facing a deficit.

Analyst Elizabeth Hill has recommended a few options for balancing the budget:

- Finding other funding sources, such as using money redirected from other state funds — something the department did in 1992.
- Making more money. The park system has worked on various public/private partnership projects to increase revenues. In Santa Cruz County these have included: an RV Park at Wilder Ranch, tent cabins at Henry Cowell and a restaurant on the bluff at Seacliff State Beach. All three met with heavy local opposition and have since been shelved. Raising fees is not an option because, as Culbertson said, "Fees have gone as high as they can go without severely impacting low-income people."
- Cutting more fat. Districts all over the state have, for years, shaved dollars by putting off long-term maintenance projects. As a result, the department now faces \$35 million in deferred maintenance costs statewide.

Bloom, Culbertson and the budget analyst all said maintenance may be one of the department's most pressing concerns.

"Operating costs go up and we don't get increases to run things, so we take it out of long-term projects," Culbertson said. "It's like paying the bills and feeding the

they would have a favorable impression of a corporation that sponsored the system.

kids before fixing the roof — if you get a leaky roof you've got a problem."

Bloom said campgrounds like those at Seacliff and Sunset state beaches are old and starting to look it.

Hill, the legislative analyst, recommends the department begin "right-sizing" or trying to reduce its deficit while still tackling \$35 million of maintenance projects.

To do that, the department has, among other things, considered selling 34 properties which have low statewide appeal. Culbertson said some of the parcels being considered aren't currently parks but vacant property the department owns. The Porter-Seson property in Aptos is vacant, but Culbertson said it wouldn't be considered for sale because it can easily be used to extend New Brighton State Beach.

The department has also considered donating property to other jurisdictions. For example the Santa Cruz district has considered granting Twin Lakes State Beach to the county or Seabright Beach to the city of Santa Cruz because the beaches generate no revenue and are expensive to run.

State Parks officials in Sacramento are crafting a response to the analyst's report and will present it at the state budget hearings.

Volunteers step up

In the meantime, many local residents have stepped up to help area parks.

Last Sunday, the Advocates for Nisene Marks State Park got busy on two work projects. One of the projects was to fix a culvert that State Parks workers had begun to repair when rains forced them to stop. The unfinished project had closed the park for several weeks. The Advocates organized a work party with Bloom's help, and Nisene Marks has since been reopened. At the other end of the park, the second project had Advocates Chairwoman Margaret Hicks shoveling gravel at a trail head.

"This is an enormous place to deal with and they just didn't have the manpower to get it done," said Hicks. "People just don't realize.

The Advocates for Nisene Marks is a non-profit organization formed in 1992 from a citizen's advisory committee. Hicks said its mission is to maintain and preserve the 10,000-acre park in the middle of Aptos. The advocates have helped build a railroad car bridge past the Porter picnic area. They've installed bike racks, trail signs and are now lobbying for a call box.

"This is the kind of stuff State Parks doesn't have the time, the manpower and the money to do," Hicks said.

But several people, average park users, said they hadn't seen much deterioration or poor maintenance in the state parks.

"The trails are in generally pretty good shape," said Dan DeKimpe, who runs about 20 times a year in Nisene Marks. "They must have gone to clean it since the storms."

Culbertson said taxpayers wouldn't pay for the time donated by volunteers.

"Historically we've depended on volunteer help on everything from acquisition to maintenance," he said. "We've never been funded entirely from the taxpayer dollar."

Gray Whale, Wilder

Although State Parks has a long road ahead in terms of starting money-making public/private partnerships, reducing its deficit and tackling long-neglected maintenance projects, Bloom, Culbertson and recreators countywide are excited about Gray Whale Ranch and what it means to the county.

"I don't think anyone is worried about how Gray Whale will work," Bloom said. "Gray Whale is a fantastic addition to Wilder. It will draw more visitors for a time and then it will level off."

Culbertson said the more properly State Parks acquires now the better, because the population of California has doubled since the 1970s and the parks are now used in radically different ways.

For example, Culbertson said, in the 1950s, Waddell Creek was no good for beach-goers because of the gusty winds. So the district planned mostly for birders, tide-pool watchers and hikers. Then wetsuits and windsurfing were invented and now every weekend the parking lot is packed. There are

hikes and equestrians and they should all be given the opportunity to recreate too," said mountain biker Charlie May, who was riding at Wilder.

There are more mountain bikers now than there were 10 years ago, and State Parks must not only protect habitat but provide space for hikers, runners and equestrians who use the same trails.

"It needs to be dealt with," said UC Santa Cruz student Django Sussman, who was hiking with friends in Wilder Ranch. "As there's more interest in mountain biking we'll see more problems. It's still pretty spread out, but Gray Whale opening up will alleviate the problem for a couple of years."

Culbertson said the department walks a fine line keeping all taxpayers happy. He said some users want separate trails for hikers, equestrians and bikers, but he doesn't have enough staff to enforce such a plan.

"It's a recreational change," said Culbertson about the mountain bike boom. "And it all affects our ability to manage."

The vision Culbertson has for Gray Whale is a grand one.

Besides expanding Wilder Ranch by 2,400 acres and protecting it from the type of clear-cut logging it saw at the turn of the century, it could be part of a new "recreational corridor."

Culbertson sees long trail loops that could someday link Wilder Ranch to Gray Whale to UC Santa Cruz to Henry Cowell, or another from Gray Whale to Fall Creek, through water district property to Big Basin. Such a system, however, will require cooperation from other jurisdictions, like the city of Santa Cruz and the university and the property owners situated in between.

"You're talking something like the Pacific Crest Trail, the possibility of a major trail system through Santa Cruz County," said Culbertson, likening it to the popular trail that stretches from Mexico to Canada.

Culbertson also hopes to work with other districts, such as Santa Clara County, on public relations since so many of local park users come from over the hill. Santa Clara County has only one state park — Henry Coe.

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County's state parks offer host of attractions

BIG BASIN REDWOODS STATE PARK — California's oldest state park.

21600 Big Basin Way, Boulder Creek.
(408) 338-6132 or 338-8860.
Campsite Fees — \$17 in season \$14, off season.

CASTLE ROCK STATE PARK — 4,800 acres in Santa Cruz Mountains with 35 miles of trails. On Highway 35 2.5 miles southeast of Highway 9 junction.
(408) 867-2952 or 338-8860
Overnight camping for backpackers only.

FOREST OF NISENE MARKS STATE PARK — 10,000 acres of second-growth Redwoods with 30 miles of trails.
Aptos Creek Road, Aptos.
(408) 724-1266 or 429-2850

PORTOLA REDWOODS STATE PARK — 2,800 acre park South East of Half Moon Bay with 18 miles of hiking trails and one of the tallest redwoods in the Santa Cruz Mountains.
60 developed campsites.
Six miles off Highway 35.
(415) 948-9098.

NATURAL BRIDGES STATE BEACH — Famous for Monarch butterfly habitat.
No camping.
2531 West Cliff Drive, Santa Cruz
(408) 423-4609

NEW BRIGHTON STATE BEACH
1500 Park Avenue, Capitola.
(408) 475-4850 or 464-6329
Campsites in season \$17, off-season \$14.

SEACLIFF STATE BEACH
c/o Santa Cruz District
600 Ocean Street, Santa Cruz.
(408) 688-3222

to have smog alerts and had to leave kids inside for their health. I remember taking a deep breath on those days and it would hurt. Around here I don't have that problem. Every time I drive through LA I feel sorry for the people that have to live there.

Fully self-contained vehicles only. Campsites in season \$28, off season \$25

MANRESA STATE BEACH
205 Manresa Beach Rd. La Selva
(408) 761-1795.
Walk-in tent sites only. \$17 in season \$14 off-season.

SUNSET STATE BEACH
201 Sunset Beach Rd. Watsonville.
(408) 724-1266 or 763-7063.
Developed Campsites \$17 in-season \$14 off season.

TWIN LAKES STATE BEACH
Off East Cliff Drive
No camping.

HENRY COWELL STATE PARK — Redwoods growing at a lower elevation. The San Lorenzo River runs through the park.
112 developed campsites.
101 No. Big Trees Park Road, Felton.
(408) 438-2396 or 335-4598.

WILDER RANCH STATE PARK — 4,505 acres with 34 miles of hiking, biking and equestrian trails through coastal terraces and wooded valleys. Restored historical buildings.
No camping.
1401 Coast Road, Santa Cruz.
(408) 426-0505 or 429-2850.

RANCHO DEL OSO VISITOR CENTER
3600 Highway 1 Davenport
(408) 427-2288.

SANTA CRUZ MISSION STATE HISTORICAL PARK — The oldest building in Santa Cruz County and the only remaining building in Mission Santa Cruz. Historical tours
144 School Street, Santa Cruz.
(408) 425-5849