



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

A small group gathers at Gray Whale Ranch on the north coast Thursday to announce its purchase by the Save-the-Redwoods League.

Sale of Gray Whale Ranch climaxed years of struggle

By ROBERT GAMMON

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SANTA CRUZ — A near decade-long battle to preserve 2,349 acres of breathtaking beauty on Santa Cruz's north coast officially ended Thursday when a conservationist group announced that it's buying the Gray Whale Ranch and donating it to the state park system.

"There are some days when your dreams come true, and this is one of those days," said Celia Scott, a Santa Cruz city councilwoman who has fought for more than eight years — much of it on her own time — to preserve Gray Whale.

Save-the-Redwoods League, a San Francisco-based national non-profit conservation group, announced the purchase of the ranch at a press conference on a rolling meadow overlooking the Monterey Bay.

The land sits between the UC Santa Cruz and Wilder Ranch State Park. Gray Whale includes more than 1,000 acres of second-growth redwoods. The rest is sweeping vistas and limestone caves with rare bats that will become a part of Wilder park.

Santa Cruz County Supervisor Mardi Wormhoudt, who represents the district that includes Gray Whale, praised the league, Scott and her husband, Peter, and former County Supervisor Gary Patton for persevering in their campaign to save Gray Whale's trees from being cut.

"Today's announcement regenerates memories to replace those memories from an earlier Oct. 17,"

Wormhoudt said, alluding to the anniversary of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

Gray Whale's 11 miles of hiking, biking and equestrian trails should be open to the public in January, said Bob Culbertson, chief ranger of the Santa Cruz district of the state Department of Parks and Recreation.

The addition of Gray Whale means a continuous swath of land and sea now is protected, from Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park to the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, Culbertson said.

Gray Whale was clear-cut by loggers between 1910 and 1930. The league, which has acquired thousands of acres of redwood forests — all donated to state or federal parks — became interested in Gray Whale in 1988 when Sequoia Forest Industries said it wanted to log about 300 acres of the ranch.

Ron Yanke, who owns the ranch and Sequoia, was not on hand for the announcement. But Leroy Rockelman, Yanke's Capitola real estate agent, who told the Sentinel on Wednesday the land deal was worth \$12.75 million, backed off from that statement at the press conference. He said he was bound by an agreement to keep the purchase price confidential.

Mary Angle-Franzini, executive director of the league, also declined to reveal the price. She said the state Parks Department has agreed to contribute \$1 million over the next five years, and the league will supply the rest.