

Range war

GREY WHALE RANCH



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

John Steinbacher, the ranch owners' representative, secures the gate that mountain bikers cut six times in one week.

Grey Whale battles bikers

By MARIA GAURA
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SANTA CRUZ — Since the Grey Whale Ranch was closed to the public in January, a range war has been brewing between the ranch management and bands of mountain bikers determined to ride the range on

their own terms.

The 2,400-acre ranch near UC Santa Cruz was never officially open for public use, but a combination of lax enforcement and intense publicity over plans to log the property resulted in crowds of hikers, bikers and equestrians using the property

for recreation.

The number of uninvited visitors has dropped dramatically since new management began a crackdown on trespassing, but vandalism is on the rise, according to John Steinbacher, local representative for ranch owner Ron Yanke.

Despite regular security patrols, fences on the ranch are cut or trampled daily and wooden gates have been kicked apart, allowing cattle grazing on the property to wander away.

And the damage hasn't been confined to the ranch. Vandals

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have smashed windows in Steinbacher's Live Oak home and slashed his jeep tires 14 times while it was parked in his driveway, he said. Steinbacher believes the harassment at his home is related to the situation at the ranch, but is not necessarily the work of angry cyclists.

The ranch has also been the focus of environmentalists who want the property to become a state park.

"The fence into Cave Gulch has been cut six times in 10 days," Steinbacher said. "That's an environmentally sensitive area, and the fence is what keeps the cattle out of there — as long as it's up. The patrols have stopped most of the bikers," he said. "But we're down to the last hard-core group. These guys ride with wire cutters, and they cause a lot of damage out here."

Steinbacher pointed to an earth-colored scar cutting straight down a steep grassy hillside.

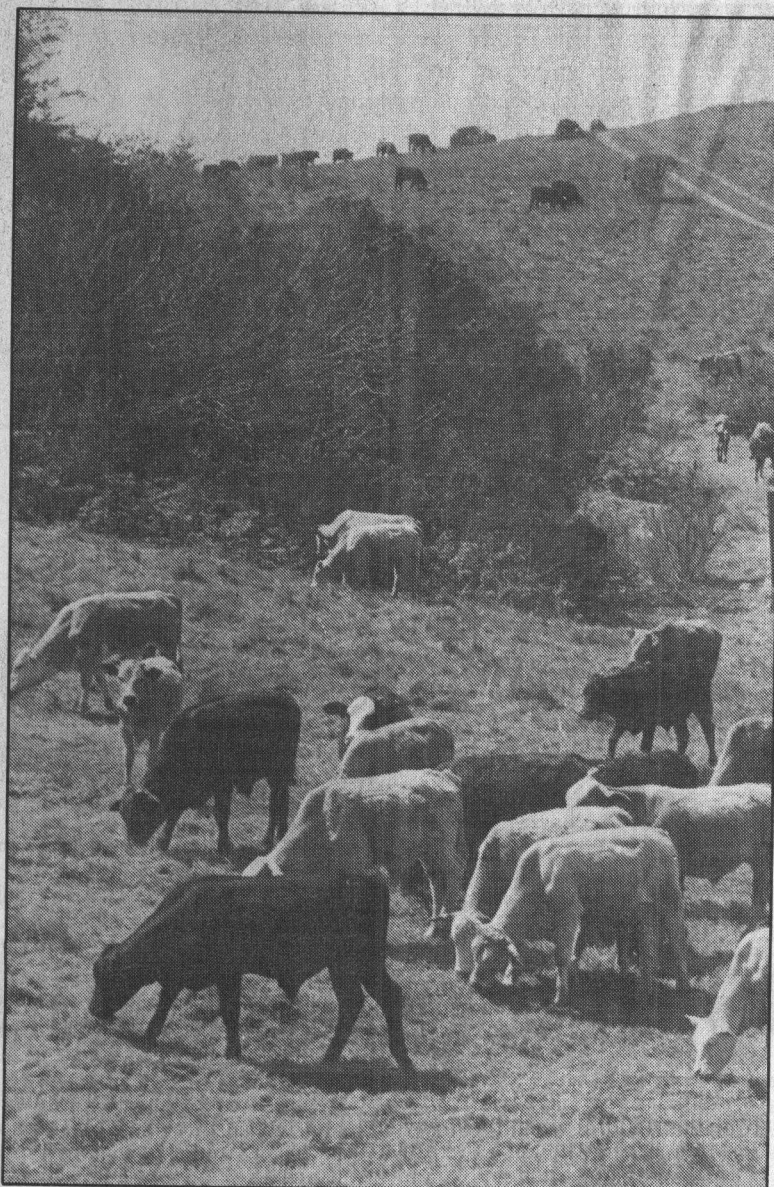
"That's from the bikes," he said. "Those gullies are 18 to 24 inches deep now, and if they're not handled carefully, in five years they could be 16 feet deep — that hillside would just be gone. I'm here to preserve and protect this property, and that's why I went to war against the bikers," he said.

Steinbacher also cited fear of liability as a strong motivation to keep people off the ranch.

Some local mountain bikers sympathize with Steinbacher.

"It's a shame that people are lashing out at him," said Adam Henderson, a mountain biker who works at the Bicycle Center. "None of the people I ride with would cut fences or do anything like that. I used to ride out there once or twice a week, but not since it's been closed. Last summer we'd go out and see people in trucks and they'd just wave and say 'have a good time.' But it's their property and their land, and they have every right."

Managers of neighboring property also deal with vandalism, but on a lesser scale than that at the Grey Whale. Steinbacher and others believe the vandalism is fueled by anger over a stalled



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Cattle now grazing on ranch hillsides can scatter through cut fences and gates.

drive to buy the land for use as a public park.

The ranch was recently placed on the market for \$11 million, but more than two years of fund raising by park proponents have garnered only \$300,000 in purchase money. Steinbacher and the Yankes recently proposed donating portions of the ranch to UCSC and a charitable trust, in exchange for the right to build 75 to 85 homes on a meadowland area.

Rudy Quintanar, superintendent of parks for the city of Santa Cruz, says the vandalism is "negative and unfortunate."

"People seem to forget the fact that someone owns the property and it's not in the public domain," he said. "Just because the rules were relaxed at one time they feel like they own it and should be allowed to use it. Sometimes I'm just amazed when the

general public takes such an arrogant stance on something so unreasonable."

City rangers have had their own problems enforcing the no-bicycles rule at the 600-plus acre Pogonip property recently acquired by the city.

"When we started patrolling up here we had problems with the mountain bikers," said Park Ranger Ann McDowell. "If you didn't leave them enough space to get through the gates they'd tear them down. The pedestrian walk-throughs still get bent out of shape in a way that looks suspiciously like handlebars."

"This is Santa Cruz, and a lot of people feel very close with the land up here," she said. "We put up fencing once to block off ravines we thought were too close to some trails, and we got a message from some environmen-



John Steinbacher

His home has been vandalized

talists saying we were stabbing poles into Mother Earth's bosom."

The ravine fencing was torn down, and rangers decided to leave it down rather than fuel the fires of resentment. "We didn't have the money to watch the fences 24 hours a day," McDowell said.

UC Santa Cruz has also had problems on its Natural Reserve property adjoining the Grey Whale Ranch. Natural Reserve Coordinator Margaret "Maggie" Fusari says the cyclists cause erosion and damage wild plants.

"Most mountain bikers don't see little plants as something to be worried about," she said. "Our groundskeeper says his staff spends a lot of time mending fences where bikers want to go through and cut them."

Fusari sympathizes with Steinbacher's dilemma.

"We have the same problem at our Younger Lagoon reserve," she said. "The surfers have a very intense feeling about their right to use this place, but the breeding birds will only take so much disturbance and then they won't breed anymore."

Steinbacher vows to keep up the patrols and have repeat offenders arrested.

And Quintanar hopes the future of the Grey Whale Ranch can be resolved peacefully.

"I personally would like to see some kind of mutual working agreement between the county and the owners, and maybe even the state," he said. "We need some cool heads in there to work for the benefit of everybody concerned, and not have these border wars going on."