



FRIENDS OF THE ELEPHANT SEAL

E-SEAL NEWS

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There is Something Out There That You Should Know About

by P. J. Webb

Numerous news reports have covered episodes of multiple strandings and deaths of sea birds and marine mammals on the California coast. Some of the animals are suffering from malnutrition and starving; others are poisoned by domoic acid, a neurotoxin that causes seizures and death—not a pretty picture. Domoic acid poisoning travels up the food chain from a toxic algal bloom in ocean waters through filter feeding shellfish and smaller feeder fish.

There are several kinds of harmful algal blooms, two in particular are of concern to Central Coast residents, whether they are winged, flippered or bipedal Homo sapiens. Pseudo-nitzschia is responsible for the domoic acid poisoning found in marine mammals and seabirds. Alexandrium is responsible for paralytic shellfish poisoning. Both are toxic to human beings as well. That is why the California Department of Health Services recently issued warnings for people to avoid eating fresh-caught mussels, clams and other shellfish unless they are commercially caught. The CDHS tests commercial seafood frequently and considers it safe.

The April 13th CDHS marine biotoxin monitoring reported that Pseudo-nitzschia levels have dramatically increased, initially in San Luis Obispo County and now over a wider geographic range. Domoic acid jumped above the alert level in the Santa Barbara area and is abundant in the waters off Avila and Santa Cruz. South of the range of The Marine Mammal Center's rescue area, marine mammals are stranding in large numbers in Laguna Beach and Los Angeles harbor. Locally, The Marine Mammal Center's San Luis Obispo volunteers have had some animals strand with possible domoic acid poisoning, but not in the numbers found in the hard hit areas. In the north, Santa Cruz is experiencing increased strandings of California Sea Lions. On the sea bird front, Pacific Wildlife Center volunteers are dealing with a large number of starving sea birds in San Luis Obispo County.

Beginning in 1998, the cycles of toxic blooms have increased in strength and frequency. In 1998, 2003 and 2005, San Luis Obispo County was particularly hit hard with stranded and dying California Sea Lions. Local volunteers were picking up nearly 10 animals daily during the peak of the unusual mortality event. California Sea Lions are the most frequent victims, but domoic acid poisoning has been found in the threatened Southern Sea



Summer Siesta

There are often many seals on the beach at Piedras Blancas during the summer, but the summer seals are just resting and shedding their skin. Different age groups haul out at different times in their annual molting season. It's called a catastrophic molt because instead of losing hair and skin throughout the year as most other animals do, the seals lose an entire layer of skin and hair during their month-long stay on the beach. The first ones to arrive are juveniles, both male and female, and adult females. They lie about, looking pretty scruffy as their skin peels off in pieces. Visitors sometimes ask if they are sick or dying. But it's catastrophic in name only. Actually, it's an annual rite of renewal. Beneath the layer of dull tan or brown skin that falls off is a sleek, silvery gray coat. The process takes four to six weeks, and they don't eat while they molt, so they leave sleeker, thinner and rested up for the next months at sea foraging for fish and squid. Visitors ask why there are so many variations in color, and the answer is that they are in various stages of molting. And of course, some appear black because they have been in the water, playing or just cooling off.

Somehow, the seals, each traveling alone at sea, know when it's their turn to head to the beach in Mother Nature's round robin molting period. In May and June, subadult males, the seal version of adolescents, begin to arrive as the juveniles and adult females complete their molt and head out to sea. In July, the adult males start coming in to molt and rest at the end of their semi-annual migration to Alaska. The subadult males are livelier than the juveniles and females. Like most teen-age males, they like to spar and play. They challenge each other with their changing voices, banging their chests together and nipping at each other's necks in mock fights. They may weigh a thousand

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Docent Spotlight: Jim Devine



The 2006 Docent Appreciation Award went to Jim Devine. He has been a docent since 2000 and in addition to his bluff duties has been on the docent training committee and served as treasurer on the FES board of directors. Congratulations, Jim!

Summer Siesta (Continued)

pounds or more, and visitors who have not seen adult males often remark at how big the subadults are. Only the males get the proboscis that gives them their elephant seal name. It begins to grow at about five years old and grows longer each year until they reach maturity. Juvenile males have just pointy noses, and as they get older, the nose widens out. By the time they are subadults, they have noses that are beginning to hang down. Their vocalizing sounds like a deep belch, just a hint of the hollow bellow that will develop as they mature.

In July, the subadults begin to leave in their new suits as the adult males begin to arrive. The adults are huge after their feeding journey to Alaska and back, and can weigh up to 5,000 pounds. But they are in a much more mellow mood in summer than they are during the breeding season in the winter, when they are vying for status and mating rights. In the summer, they are just here to molt. They may announce their presence with their impressive booming voice, and they might spar with one another, but they are just practicing. They are more likely to use each other as pillows as they snooze and rest after their arduous journey.

After the adult males finish their molt and head to sea, the beaches are nearly empty for about six weeks. Then young seals begin returning to rest. The adults will return in late November and December to begin the dramatic birthing and breeding season.



There is Something Out There That You Should Know About (Continued)

Otters, fur seals, dolphins, porpoises and whales. These algal blooms were thought to be naturally occurring events but as the cycles have increased, scientists are looking to possible exacerbating factors. Factors that may contribute to these increases include loss of wetlands' filtering systems, changing ocean ecosystems and human-created pollutants (storm drain run-off and particularly human urea that feeds the toxic bloom.)

It is unknown how long this stranding event will last or whether our local beaches will be hit harder as the season progresses. The marine mammals are acting as sentinels of the ocean telling us that something is wrong out there. Let's pay attention.

To report stranded marine mammals call – The Marine Mammal Center 24 hour rescue line at (415) 289-SEAL (7325). Do not approach or touch a stranded animal. Note the location and call us!

To report stranded birds or sick or injured wild animals in San Luis Obispo County - Pacific Wildlife Care hotline at (805) 543-9453

Websites of Interest:

Current Patient List at The Marine Mammal Center hospital in Sausalito - http://www.marinemammalcenter.org/what_we_do/rehab/patient_report.asp

California Department of Health Services Biotxin and Marine Biotxin Monitoring Reports – <http://www.dhs.ca.gov:80/ps/ddwem/environmental/Shellfish/default.htm>

Red Tide and Harmful Algal Blooms <http://www.whoi.edu/redtide/>

Margaret "P.J." Webb, an attorney, is a member of the Marine Mammal Rescue Center, a member of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council, and a volunteer for the Marine Interest Group and the sanctuary's BeachCOMBERS program.

From the Gift Shop

The following items are available for purchase from our Gift Shop. Prices include tax and shipping. Send checks payable to FES, PO Box 490. Cambria, CA 93428.



Book
Price: \$9.90



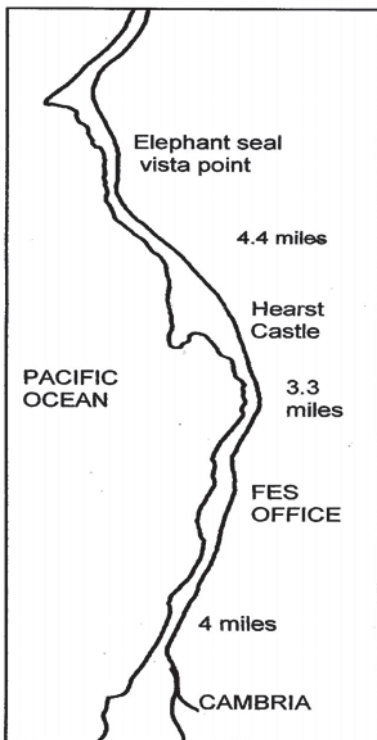
DVD
Price: \$26.90

Tips for Safe Viewing

- View from a safe and respectful distance.
- NEVER get between a seal and the water.
- Dogs and seals don't mix. Keep dogs away from the seals
- Please stay off sand dunes which are fragile areas for plants and animals.

Elephant seals are protected by law. It is illegal to harass any marine mammal. If you witness harassment, call 1-800-853-1964.

**Map to
Elephant Seal Viewing
Piedras Blancas**



**Friends of the Elephant Seal
www.elephantseal.org**

Mailing Address

P.O. Box 490
Cambria, CA 93428

Email: fes@elephantseal.org

Phone: 805-924-1628

FAX: 805-924-1629

**Visit our office, gift shop,
and displays at the
Cavalier Plaza, Highway 1
San Simeon**

What's New at Friends

Hearty party

The fifth annual Sunset at San Simeon fund-raising party in March was a great success, netting \$19,200 for Friends of the Elephant Seal programs and expenses. The Hearst Warehouse was transformed into a gala Mardi Gras celebration by Ann Grossman and her hard-working committee members, and the silent auction and raffle, organized by Pat Johnson and her crew, included an array of treasures and services. Dinner was delicious and the music was great as always. Heaters and deluxe restrooms were added to this year's party. Thanks to all who donated to the event.

Welcome

Welcome to three new volunteer docent guides. Heidi Hopkins, Marie Jakovich and Suzanne VerWest have joined the ranks on the bluff, training under the mentor program between regular fall education sessions, which they will attend in October and November. Fall training dates are Saturday October 6, Saturday October 20 and Saturday November 3.

Visitor count

Docent Megg McNamee has compiled a report of documented visitor contacts at the elephant seal viewing site. These figures represent people with whom docents have actually spoken. In 2006, docents talked to 85,350 visitors. Since 1998, docents have spoken to more than 530,000 visitors at the site.

www.elephantseal.org

The FES website is also very popular. Brandt Kehoe, who designed and maintains the site, reports that we have averaged 190 first-time visitors each day and 18 returning visitors since early December. Although the number is growing daily, Brandt reports that 34,000 different people have logged onto the website. www.elephantseal.org

New board members

Sue Boudreau, Dave Dabritz and Brandt Kehoe are now members of the FES board of directors, filling the seats left by Carol Bean, Ken Eberle and Ann Grossman, whose terms ended.

Our condolences go to Mary Lee Becwar, who lost her husband, Andy, this winter. Due to his unexpected passing, Mary Lee has been forced to step aside as president of the board of directors of FES to take care of personal business. With a vote of the board, she has switched offices with Ken Dunn, who was vice president. Ken is now president and Mary Lee is vice president and expected to become president during the next term.

Film premiere

FES cosponsored a screening of Rio Films' new documentary on sea lions at the Morro Bay Community Center in February. FES handled the publicity, and 63 tickets were sold, and net profit for FES was \$250.

Happy Birthday

FES celebrates its 10th anniversary this fall. A combination docent appreciation dinner and birthday celebration will be held on Saturday January 12, 2008, at the Cambria Vet's Hall.

Thank you

California State Parks, our new "landlord" at the viewing site, has agreed to print the FES newsletters, both the ones that we hand out at the bluff, and the ones that are mailed to our membership. State Parks is also providing the materials for docent training. Thank you, State Parks and Leander Tamoria, our liaison.