

Historical Timeline of the Elephants Seals at Piedras Blancas

1990 The Colony Is Born.

In the fall, Brian Hatfield, US Geological Survey (USGS) biologist, observes a group of elephant seals in the cove south of the lighthouse. The number that fall peaks at 150.

1992 The first elephant seal pup is born at Piedras Blancas in February 1992. The spring count is 1,367 seals. Flipper tags indicate they came from all other rookeries, especially San Miguel and San Nicolas Islands.

1993 Problems Begin.

By spring, elephant seals spread to the beach adjacent to the highway.

1994 Cars stop by the side park of the road. People hop the Hearst fence and walk right up to the seals. As many as 70 cars an hour park along the road, creating safety and traffic problems. Tour bus companies also park illegally while discharging passengers.

Problems escalate. An enforcement officer reports people on the beach encouraging children to touch the seals to get better pictures. Local merchants tell the officer that children were seen throwing rocks at the seals and dogs biting them.

Caltrans holds a Multi-Agency Cooperation Meeting in San Luis Obispo to discuss traffic and safety issues. A Caltrans spokesman states: *"We are gravely concerned about the safety of the people who are stopping along the road. Someone might get hurt or even killed there."*

In May, a man is bitten by one of the elephant seals.

A Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary representative indicates an interest in trying to help, possibly using docents to give tours of the seals.

1995 The lead ranger at Morro Bay expresses interest in establishing an interpretive program: *"We have a problem that needs to be fixed."* The Wildlife Conservation Board expresses interest in acquiring land for use as an interpretive center.

The Ocean Program Manager of California Resources Agency asks if the elephant seals might end up moving. He is assured they would not.

In July, a National Marine Fisheries Service wildlife biologist cautions people to stay at least 100 feet away: *"Last year a man was severely bitten in the leg at Piedras Blancas."*

We've had people do some really weird things, like setting their kids up on top of the seals to get a good picture, or poking the animal with a stick to get a good picture."

A Coastal Commission staff member says he'd like to see a docent-led program similar to the one at Año Nuevo.

1995 Road Realignment and Land Swap Discussed.

A February article in The Cambrian: "Nearly two miles of Hwy 1 may be relocated to enhance safety on the scenic highway. At the northernmost end of the project, planners hope to provide a coastal access way, parking area, and cooperative management with Hearst Castle docents to allow people to view, but not endanger, a large colony of elephant seals. Both the road realignment and the elephant seal access way program would require new easements with the Hearst Corporation."

The County Board of Supervisors approves of the Highway 1 project. There is a motion requiring Caltrans to get land for two access points. Roger Lyon (local Hearst attorney) says the Hearst Corporation is not interested in donating land, but it would consider the concept of trading existing vista points.

1996 Problems Continue, Solutions Emerge.

An elephant seal is hit by a car, underscoring need for a management plan.

An NMFS Special Agent states, "There are only six of us in California due to continued cutbacks by Congress. The extreme cutbacks in federal funds and staff make it nearly impossible to regulate and protect them from such abuse. Our only hope is through the use of volunteers from established volunteer organizations."

The Sierra Club appeals the \$2.7 million project to realign Highway 1. The Sierra Club state coastal director says, *"This proposal is obscene. Caltrans is offering to give away a multimillion dollar piece of publicly owned beachfront property to the Hearst Corporation for free."* At a Coastal Commission hearing, it was reported that the user-groups were about to riot.

The Interim Elephant Seal Management Plan calls for temporary signage to be replaced with high quality displays in 1998. A kiosk and interpretive panels are to be completed. Fencing and boulders are to be used to manage people and seals. The county contacts Bay Net, a program for Marine Conservation, to discuss establishing a pilot docent program.

In November, *The Cambrian* reports the highway project has opened.

1997 First FES Docents are Trained.

The State of California Coastal Resources Agency provides \$75,000 to be distributed at \$25,000 per year in 1998, 1999, and 2000. The grant is to be used to fund a part time Program Coordinator, equipment, docent recruitment, and training.

Nearly 100 people show up for the Sept. 10 orientation about training. About 90 people want to apply for the program. Rachel Saunders, from Bay Net, states, *"I was just astonished at the turnout. People are so passionate about the seals. My only concern is that we can't train all 90 of them right away.* Sarah Christy, aide to Supervisor Bud Laurent, recalls, *"People were so offended by what was going on, with the abuse of the seals. The pressure for a solution had been building so much that when there was an outlet for it, it was like a tidal wave."*

The first Friends of the Elephant Seal training class is presented by Bay Net in November and graduates 30 docents. On Thanksgiving weekend the first FES docents don their blue jackets and speak to visitors about the seals. That weekend, thirteen docents interact with 1,286 people.

In December, an elephant seal is hit and killed on the road by car. More are hit and killed the following year.

1998 FES is Officially Incorporated.

The articles of incorporation for the 501© 3 nonprofit organization, Friends of the Elephant Seal (FES) are filed in March 1998. Susan McDonald is the FES program coordinator. The first members of the Board of Directors are Bill Raver, attorney; Kerri Caserio, docent and windsurfer; Ray Easton, docent; Dave Crowther, rancher; and Kathy Brown, docent.

Bay Net will handle the second docent training, but after that FES will arrange for training.

FES docents talked to over 60,000 people the first year.

1999 In May, the FES office opens in Cavalier Plaza, San Simeon.

The FES school outreach program begins.

2000 The first website goes online at no cost.

Friends of the Elephant Seal receives the distinguished NOAA Environmental Hero Award. Roy Torres, who nominated FES, says, *"I can't say enough about what these people do. They are out there every day in the wind and cold, looking out for the animals and sharing information with the public. They are terrific."*

- 2001** Significant harassments are observed at Arroyo Laguna, including placing children on the backs of elephant seals and people aggravating males to get them to charge. A traffic redirection program directs people to VP3.
- 2002** The American Land Conservancy and the Hearst Corporation agree on a framework for a conservation easement transaction. Details are to be worked out later.
- 2003** In October, the first elephant seal boardwalk (south end) is built by the California Conservation Corps. The Coastal Resources Agency had awarded a \$100,000 grant for construction. The new boardwalk defines the viewing area more and makes the work of the docents much easier.
- 2004** The first FES fundraiser, "Sunset at San Simeon," is held at the Hearst warehouse.
- Controversy over the proposed Hearst Ranch Conservation deal becomes heated. The FES Board of Directors sends a letter to Governor Schwarzenegger in support.
- 2005** Escrow closes on the groundbreaking conservation easement to transfer 82,000 acres of privately held property to public land. The Hearst Conservation deal includes over 900 acres of land west of Highway 1 that are deeded to California State Parks. The elephant seal beaches and bluffs are now under the jurisdiction of California State Parks. The trails west of Highway 1 are designated to become part of the California Coastal Trail.
- As part of a Coastal Conservancy/State Parks/Conservation Corps Coastal Trail Project, \$300,000 is approved for a second elephant seal boardwalk.
- 2006** State Parks announces "Closure and Restriction for Public Access to the Elephant Seal Areas." Some areas are designated under permanent closure and some are under seasonal closure.
- The FES website is revamped, including Google language translations
- 2007** The waters off the elephant seal colony are included within the Piedras Blancas State Marine Reserve and State Marine Conservation Area.
- 2008** In May, three sub adult male elephant seals are shot and killed at Vista Point 3.
- 2009** Donation tubes are used at VP3, resulting in increased donations.
- 2010** The second boardwalk connecting Vista Points 3 and 4 is completed. State Parks replaces interpretive signs at VP3 and VP4.

2011 Friends of the Elephant Seal become a Cooperating Association with California State Parks.

The shooting of the 3 seals in 2008 is solved.

2012 The webcam is installed at the south boardwalk. With full Cooperating Association status, FES can also begin to sell merchandise at the bluff.

2013 Merchandise sales and donations help make FES less financially dependent on donations, grants, and membership.

A new threat to the elephant seals develops with the advent of small drones.

Two research projects are funded: Installation of a shark monitoring buoy and sponsoring a scholarship for Cal Poly students to work at the Marine Mammal Center in Morro Bay and to assist with elephant seal census surveys.

2014 The San Simeon Tourism Alliance (SSTA) contributes funds for web hosting. Portable WiFi portals, including language translations, are installed at VP3.

2015 State Parks begins the Ambassador program at Arroyo Laguna and San Simeon Cove. The goal is to redirect visitors to VP3.

2016 By the end of 2016, FES docents document over 2 million personal visitor contacts in its first 20 years at Vista Point 3.

2017 FES begins celebrating 20 years of successful service.
