

Comments from Docent Interviews

How and why did you become involved with Friends of the Elephant Seal (FES)?

"One day on a drive up the coast, we saw the seals. We were so surprised that people were just walking among them. We saw a mother putting a baby on a molting adult male's back."

"I was distressed to see folks down on the beach, wandering among the small, but growing, mob of elephant seals. Nobody seemed to know what was going on with them, so I began calling agencies to find out. I left a message for Roy Torres. He heard me out and referred me to Susan McDonald as a person trying to form a group of volunteers to tend to the growing number of visitors to the colony."

"When I saw people sitting on the e-seals and poking them, I didn't like it and felt like I could help protect the animals and the safety of the people."

What was being on the bluff like in the early years? How has it changed?

"The early years on the bluffs was like breaking new ground. There were no fences to keep people out and rough trails. It rained a lot that first winter (sideways sometimes, it seemed!)"

"Before there was an office, there was a lean-to shed with a key at the old San Simeon Store (Sebastian's). We kept the equipment in there. The fanny packs had pictures, a list of phone numbers to call, and a cell phone. But the reception up there was so poor, the cell phone often didn't work."

"Because there was no fencing, often when we arrived in the morning at VP3 we had to go down on the beach and convince visitors there that respectful viewing was necessary and should be done from the bluff. The boardwalk installation has made our duties as docents much easier, as it really delineates bluff and beach."

"It was not always fun out there, but most visitors would come back up if asked politely. It is so much more pleasant now with the boardwalks and fencing so you can direct all your attention to the visitor's questions."

What were the biggest challenges?

"That first year (1997-98) was brutal. We were out there in brutal weather. We weren't sure exactly what to do. Sometimes we stayed in our cars until people came. Paths were muddy. We didn't have fencing so seals came right up the paths. We had to warn people. The fencing helped. The boardwalk and railing were just a godsend."

"One of the biggest challenges of being a docent was dealing with the reality of viewing wildlife in life-or-death situations. The El Nino of 1998 was a crushing experience. Many of us were distressed to see pups washed away and mothers frantically calling for separated pups. But reality is part of the package."

"The constant need as a non-profit to creatively search and obtain funding to keep us going. In 2007 the downfall of the economy made obtaining gifts, donations and grant much harder. How best to ensure our long-term sustainability as an organization, while honoring our mission statement."

What were the greatest rewards?

"How much the visitors appreciated getting the information. Seeing the children and their wonder."

"There is a lot of instant gratification for us, as many of the visitors we talk with are very thankful for information about the seals. Being an elephant seal docent is enjoyable and rewarding, the site is very beautiful and many other animals are also seen."

"All the special people I have known and volunteered with as a member of FES! Opening up for me a rich and deeper appreciation, understanding, and knowledge of our awesome super seals and the amazing world of the ocean and marine life that we are fortunate to experience. The experience of sharing all this with thousands of people from all over this country and the world."

"That 'thank you' from visitors, being part of something that matters."

What is your favorite memory?

"Seeing a big male elephant seal come ashore on a beautiful December evening, with the sun setting behind him. Spectacular!"

"I have many fond memories of our association with the FES. Most of them revolve around the wonderful people who spent thousands of hours serving the group in so many ways. I loved the camaraderie, especially in the early days. I have burned into my memory some of those blustery days on the bluff, when volunteers would get soaked to the skin, but stayed there fighting the elements to tell visitors about the elephant seals."

"Meeting and sharing with people from all over the planet in such a beautiful natural setting. No tech device can ever duplicate the LIVE, IN-PERSON experience!"

"I remember a grade school girl who listened while her older sister, cousin, and mom asked questions. I guess I included her in the conversation more than I thought, because as the group walked back from the end of the boardwalk and stopped to thank me again, she came up and gave me a big hug."

What was your least favorite memory?

"It was miserable weather, and seeing pups washed away by storms."

"The shooting and killing of 3 juvenile elephant seals at the north end in 2008. We were saddened, angry, and stunned that something like that could happen at our rookery. As Board

President at the time, I will never forget the hours and effort so many people put in to follow up, resolve, and restore everyone's confidence to move forward."

Are there any stories you would like to share?

"I enjoyed talking to people from all over. As time went on it amazed me how they had heard about the seals and us, too. I remember one young boy (probably about 15) who had shorts and a tank top on, and I asked him if he was cold. He said, 'No, I'm from Minnesota!' And I was bundled up in several layers of windproof pants and jacket."

It didn't take long for people to become fans of the seals. I remember a group of ladies who came for a week every year during the breeding season. One day they were particularly distressed because high water had caused havoc among the seals. They said, 'That mom has that one's pups and that mom has that one's pup' and so on. They wanted me to go down on the beach and sort things out."

"I remember when we had the iron gate at the north end and had to close it at the end of the day to keep the e-seals in and we used to tell people who came along as we were ready to leave, 'The gate is to keep the seals in, not to keep you out. Please close it when you leave.' And most people did."