Wildlife Disturbances
Elephant Seals at Piedras Blancas

Tim Bridwell- Kathleen Curtis
Friends of the Elephant Seal
Friends of the Elephant Seal

- 501(c)-3 non-profit organization,
- San Simeon, California Visitor Center
- Established in 1998
- Dedicated to educating people about elephant seals and other marine life and teaching stewardship for the ocean off the central coast of California.
- Cooperating association with California State Parks,
Piedras Blancas Northern Elephant Seal Rookery

- First northern elephant seals sighted in 1990, first births in 1992
- Largest mainland rookery (over 5000 births per year; estimated colony size of 25,000)
Friends of the Elephant Seal Docents

- Greet almost 200,000 of the 1 million visitors to the main viewing area each year.
- Provide 10,000 hours of direct contact with the public, annually.
Locations in Development 2019

(1) Arroyo Laguna
- Birthing and breeding beach with high visibility from CA Hwy 1
- Closed to the public annually, except for water sports from December 15-April 30

(2) William R. Hearst Memorial State Beach
- “Bachelor Beach” populated by over a dozen exiled sub-adult males from Dec-March
- Popular beach for locals/tourists, fishing, water sports, hiking, dog walking; open year-round
WINTER 2019
WILLIAM R. HEARST MEMORIAL STATE BEACH

Goodwein, A. & Peck-Burnett, T.
California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo
2019 Interns, William J. Goodger Memorial Internship Program
Needs Assessment

1. Census
2. Disturbances and Safety Issues
3. Recommendations
Longer Duration in 2019 from First to Last Sightings
(Numbers of Days that seals are on beach)
Average number of seals on the beach per day was higher in 2019 than in past years.
Peak number of seals on the beach was higher in 2019 than in previous years.
Peak of 17 Seals on Beach on Feb 22, 2019
Entrances to beach often blocked by seals
San Simeon Point Trail

Popular destination for visitors
Boy throwing rocks for seal reaction
Photographer unaware of seals
Disregard for barriers
Family was observed petting this seal through chicken wire fence
Disturbance Criteria:

- 0 - No Disturbance
- 1 - Seal lifts or turns head
- 2 - Seal moves from a resting position
- 3 - Seal flushes or changes direction in movement or any physical contact with the seal

Safety Criteria:

- 0 - No human safety concern
- 1 - Within one (seal) body length
- 2 - Between two seals or ocean and seal
- 3 - In water with seals or in the path of charging seal or within 50 feet of a fight
Of 35 observed interactions, 32 (91%) raised human safety concerns; 26 (74%) caused seal disturbances.

15 (43%) were Level 3 concerns or disturbances.
What Does This Mean?

- Longer duration of elephant seal presence in 2019
- Daily census higher in 2019
- Consistent presence of seals in areas with highest human traffic (parking lot, stairs and trailhead)
- Continuous concerns for human safety and wildlife disturbance

*DYNAMIC SITUATION WITH HIGH POTENTIAL FOR CONTINUED HUMAN INTERACTION*
Recommendations for Hearst State Beach

A Multifaceted, Multi-agency, Collaborative Response is Needed
i.e. A WORKING GROUP!

- Education and Outreach
- Signage
- Symbolic Fencing
- Directive Fencing
- Social media conservation marketing
- Policy & Enforcement
Arroyo Laguna State Beach

Visibility of seals from Hwy 1 and accessibility from the parking lot attracts passing motorists to stop.
Current roadside signage inadvertently attracts visitors to stop at this vista point.
Visibility of water sports entices visitors to access.

Closed to the public
December 15-April 30
Recommendations for Arroyo Laguna State Beach

Will require a different approach than those practices recommended for Hearst State Beach, since a visible docent presence on the beach would only exacerbate the opportunity for visitors to cross the fence line.
Recommendations for Arroyo Laguna State Beach

Docents do not have authority to restrict access but can offer an educational program (in the parking area) and provide redirection to the main viewing area.

Training and seasonal assignments will be developed, with new sources of volunteers.