

FRIENDS OF THE ELEPHANT SEAL

Piedras Blancas is the only rookery of elephant seals in the world that is easily accessible, free and open to the public 365 days each year.

The essence of *Friends of the Elephant Seal (FES)* is embodied in the personal exchange between a knowledgeable guide and a curious visitor. Every other *FES* activity—whether training, research, membership, administration or fundraising—is designed to support this exchange.

FES's most valuable asset is its docents—a cadre of nearly 100 carefully trained volunteer guides committed “...to the preservation of the Piedras Blancas Elephant Seal Colony for ecological, educational, scientific, historic or scenic opportunities...” The adoption of this purpose marks the 1997 founding of *FES* as a not-for-profit, 501(c)3, corporation.

The earliest evidence that an elephant seal rookery was developing a few miles from San Simeon was in November 1990, when nineteen northern elephant seals were spotted hauled out in a small cove in the lee of the Piedras Blancas Light Station. By early December, 174 were counted in the cove. The following spring, 380 hauled out to molt. In early 1992, birth of the first pup initiated one of the fastest growing elephant seal rookeries ever recorded. In 1996, approximately 1,000 elephant seals were born in the rookery. In 2015, that number exceeds 5,300. The current population of the colony is about 23,000 individuals.

As the seal population grew, so did problems of seal-human interactions. The seals became a major fascination for those traveling Highway 1. Thousands stopped, parked illegally and precariously, then breached perimeter fencing and made their way over private property to view the seals. From 1994 to 1997, there was a steady increase in reports of seal harassment and dangerous behavior by people who were both curious and uninformed.

All that changed in 1997. Enabled by a trade of property between the State and the Hearst Corporation, Highway 1 was rerouted to permit construction of a legal parking lot with safe viewing areas. And *Friends of the Elephant Seal* was created to protect the seals from harassment and to teach rookery visitors about the seals and marine environments vital for their survival.

The presence of *FES* guides in the rookery steadily reduced seal harassment. In 2003, *FES* obtained a grant for a boardwalk on the bluff trail south of the viewpoint parking lot; a boardwalk on the north trail was added in 2010. The 2005 agreement between California and The Hearst Corporation made the entire six miles of rookery beaches part of Hearst San Simeon State Park.

Under a cooperation agreement signed in 2011 between *Friends of the Elephant Seal* and California State Parks, *FES* docents provide interpretive services in the rookery as Volunteers in State Parks.

In the *Consolidated Natural Resources Act of 2008*, the U.S. Congress designated the 20 acre promontory of the Piedras Blancas Historic Light Station as the Piedras Blancas

Outstanding Natural Area. The promontory is federally owned, controlled by the US Department of Interior and managed by the US Bureau of Land Management. This legislation also authorized the Bureau of Land Management to contract with the owners of adjacent land to extend the same federal protections without the transfer of their land to the federal government. In February of 2011, 208 acres of Hearst San Simeon State Park were annexed by contract. In September of 2013, a second contract brought the remaining 216 acres of state park land into the Piedras Blancas Outstanding Natural Area.

In 2014, the Piedras Blancas Light Station Association and Friends of the Elephant Seal launched a campaign to have the Piedras Blancas Outstanding Natural Area designated as a State and National Monument. In the fall of 2015, Senators Barbara Boxer and Diane Feinstein and Congresswoman Lois Capps introduced legislation to designate the 20 acres of federal land in the Piedras Blancas Outstanding Natural Area as the Piedras Blancas Unit of the California Coastal National Monument. If enacted, the same law authorizes the U.S. Secretary of the Interior and the State of California to sign a joint management agreement that will confer National Monument status on the entire Piedras Blancas Outstanding Natural Area including all six miles of beaches that comprise the elephant seal rookery.

FES operates as a public trust; its board meetings, minutes and financial records are open to the public. It is governed by a board of nine volunteers who serve in the rookery as docents and are also active in day-to-day management. In support of its volunteer guides, *FES* employs part-time staff.

With income from visitor and member donations and from merchandise sales, *FES* is financially stable. This income supports robust conservation and education programs that include the creation and distribution of educational materials for rookery visitors, a vigorous school-to-rookery education program, the publication of a membership newsletter, a translation system for visitors who do not speak English, research into the relationship of elephant seals and the great white shark, support of selected students of marine or veterinary sciences to intern with marine mammal rescue teams, and a sophisticated web site (that can be accessed from around the world) with information, pictures and real-time images from a live camera in the rookery.

The most important use of *FES* income is to provide training and logistical support for its docent/guides. Initial training is organized by a committee of experienced guides and presented by knowledgeable professionals. On-going training is provided by presentations of guest scientists and distribution of condensations by the *FES* research committee from the increasing body of scientific writing about elephant seals.

In 2013, *FES* established an endowment fund at The Community Foundation San Luis Obispo County. Income from the fund is permanently restricted to support *FES*'s dual missions of conservation and education. The fund's capital goal is \$1 million ; its operational goal is to protect the seals in the Piedras Blancas Rookery in perpetuity.