

Operational Guidelines

FRIENDS OF THE ELEPHANT SEAL DOCENT PROGRAM

MISSION STATEMENT

Friends of the Elephant Seal is a non-profit organization dedicated to educating people about elephant seals and other marine life and to teaching stewardship for the ocean off the central coast of California.

Friends of the Elephant Seal (FES) docents serve as representatives of California State Parks and a point of public contact at Hearst San Simeon State Park.

Section A. Operation and Duties.

A.1. EXPECTATIONS. We expect our docents to complete four training sessions, three mentoring sessions and a peer review as well as to pursue continuing education; scientists are always learning new information about elephant seals, and it is important for docents to keep up with new developments. Docents are expected to commit to at least one year of service and four shifts at the rookery per month unless they live more than 40 miles from the rookery, when the commitment is reduced to three shifts.

A.2. DOCENTS WORK TOGETHER AS A TEAM. Assess the area and agree upon a plan at the beginning of each shift. Be flexible. Respect that all docents have different styles. If you disagree with something a fellow docent does, or if you feel they are giving out incorrect information, pass this information on to the Docent Coordinator.

A.3. WE ARE EDUCATORS, NOT LAW ENFORCEMENT; HOWEVER, WE ARE OCCASIONALLY PLACED IN A POSITION OF DIRECTING THE PUBLIC. Discuss rules of conduct with a visitor in a friendly, respectful manner. Stress respect for the animals and the habitat. Remind people to keep a safe distance from the animals and stay on the bluffs. Call 911 or rangers if needed. All emergency numbers are in the back of our picture books.

A.4. KNOWLEDGE OF THE HABITAT. It is incumbent upon each docent to develop a working understanding of the Piedras Blancas ecosystem and of all aspects of the elephant seal.

A.5. EQUIPMENT. You are responsible for the binoculars, fanny packs, donation tubes, and any other FES equipment issued for your use as a guide. Pick up and return the gear to the designated storage area after your shift.

Section B. Non-Discrimination & Harassment Policy

B.1. Friends of the Elephant Seal (FES) is committed to an environment and climate in which docent relationships and visitor communications are characterized by mutual respect, courtesy and equitable treatment. It is the FES policy to provide all docents and visitors with an environment free from all forms of unlawful or unwelcome harassment or discrimination.

FES docents interact with people from many cultural backgrounds who hold a wide variety of views on the appropriateness of physical touching. We must consider this when dealing with all visitors to the rookery as well as in our interactions with other docents. FES expressly prohibits any form of discrimination or harassment based on race, religious creed, color, national origin, ancestry, physical disability, mental disability, medical condition, genetic information, marital status, sex, gender, gender identity, gender expression, age, sexual orientation or military and veteran status. Any visitor or docent who feels a docent or staff member has subjected him/her to such discrimination and/or harassment should promptly report the incident to the FES board president or a board member. They will promptly discuss the complaint with the members of the board. The board president and/or designated board member(s) will investigate and take appropriate measures to resolve or correct the situation in an expeditious manner while protecting the privacy of those involved. The investigation will include a discussion with the accused person.

FES has the right to take appropriate action up to and including termination of a docent who has engaged in inappropriate conduct. FES will communicate this policy to all current docents and will instruct new docents on this policy during our yearly training program.

Section C. General Guidelines.

C.1. ATTITUDE: Your attitude always shows. . .make it your best. Be open and approachable. A pleasant, friendly and professional attitude is most important. Invite public contact. And expect the best from visitors. Most often, visitors who make mistakes - like getting too close to the animals - do not do so maliciously. They are usually uninformed or unaware. Approach folks with respect, humor and good information, and they will most likely respond in kind. We are teachers, not enforcers. And most people are hungry to learn. A big smile and friendly words go much further than demeaning statements and angry threats. If you are stumped for an answer to a visitors question refer that visitor to other docents, the F.E.S. office, or the FES website *ASK US* link. Always be prepared to give any interested party an E-seal Newsletter.

C.2. THE DECISION TO APPROACH SOMEONE WHOSE BEHAVIOR IS INAPPROPRIATE. The Marine Mammal Protection Act forbids any human activity that causes elephant seals and other federally protected animals to change their behaviors. That includes:

- Making physical contact with a marine mammal.
- Waking or disturbing a resting animal.
- Allowing dogs or other pets to aggravate marine mammals

State park orders issued under the California Public Resources Code have permanently closed the beaches at VP3 and from VP4 to the Piedras Blancas lighthouse for elephant seal viewing. Other beaches (such as Arroyo Laguna) are closed to elephant seal viewing during the breeding season. Visitors are permitted to pass through the beaches, including VP3 and VP4, for the sole purpose of participating in water-based recreational activities such as kayaking or windsurfing as long as the seals are not disturbed.

Should you choose to approach someone, we recommend you avoid references to arrest or fines on initial contact. Instead be open and friendly, and assume they are not aware of the law or the consequences of their actions.

Some examples of approaches you might use. . .

. . . "Hi there! It sure looks like you're having fun, but I need to let you know that the large bulls are very aggressive and protective of their harem during breeding time and don't mind going after other species -- like us!"

. . . these animals are here to rest (breed, give birth, etc.) and what you're doing is disturbing them."

. . . people have been bitten by doing just what you're doing."

If nothing else works, inform the visitor that they are violating state and (possibly) federal law, and that you are calling law enforcement.

C.3. DRESS. Ours is a public position. . . wear your name badge and blue docent jacket, vest or shirt identifying you as a guide with pride. Keep the jacket zipped or at least partially closed in front so that visitors may read your name and see our logo on the front. Weather conditions are variable, so dress appropriately. . . and that means layers. Hats, gloves, rain gear and sunglasses and other apparel suitable to the climate are recommended.

C.4. WEATHER. Our goal is interaction with people. If the weather is such that people won't get out of their cars, stay in your car or go home. If the weather turns bad while you're on site, you decide whether to stay or go home. Hardy types, remember that during the busy mating season we still have many visitors, even during heavy storms. If you are appropriately geared up and want to stay, your presence IS MOST APPRECIATED, BUT THAT DECISION IS ENTIRELY YOURS.

C.5. TIME. Arrive at the office at least fifteen minutes before your shift to sign in and pick up fanny packs and other gear so you're on time for your shift at the vista point. Remember, if you are on the first shift, there are probably visitors and fellow docents on the scene waiting for you. Or, in later shifts, the first shift is likely waiting for you to relieve them. Please be punctual.

C.6. SHOWING UP. If you know of a schedule conflict, please call around and find another docent to substitute for you. The best idea is to trade shifts with someone or to call someone on the substitute list. If you are unable to find another docent to substitute, call the others on your scheduled shift and let them know you won't be there. If you miss a shift, call the Docent Coordinator to find out when you might fill in.

Thanks for volunteering to join us. **Have fun!**