

INTERPRETING THE ISLANDS

When talking with visitors in front of a beach full of elephant seals it is easy to forget that the first mainland rookeries (after the days of whaling and sealing) were established less than 50 years ago. Islands were probably the earlier rookery sites because there were no predators on islands. Archeologists suspect that when humans settled the Channel Islands elephant seals even stopped hauling out there and concentrated on the islands off Baja.¹ Elephant seal females that are unsuccessful in raising a pup will often haul out on a different beach for their next birth. The few elephant seal bones found by archeologists are mostly from young pups and females, which would be easiest to hunt, but the scarcity of elephant seal bones compared to those of other pinnipeds indicates elephant seals didn't use the Channel Islands much while Native Americans were there. As Europeans and others settled the west and Native Americans left the Channel Islands, the elephant seals returned. This accounts for the abundance of elephant seals found by the whalers in the 1800's. After their near extinction, elephant seals again returned to the islands. (See table below for the year of their return).

Population data from the islands is not collected or published regularly, but we have some good numbers from 1991 and 2010. (See the graph and map on the next pages.) Note that these numbers are counts of pups – which is easier since pups all occur in one season. Scientists who study elephant seals consider the whole population to be about 4 times the pup count.

When a visitor asks "why are they here?" a good answer is that our beaches are much like the island beaches that most elephant seals use to haul out, that we don't have the predators that were here 300 years ago and that the seals are successfully raising their pups.

ROOKERY	Year Rookery was established after Whaling & Sealing
Isla Cedros	1965
Islas San Benito	1918
Isla de Guadalupe	Always used
Santa Barbara Island	1948
San Nicolas Island	1940
San Miguel Island	1925
Santa Rosa Island	1985
Piedras Blancas	1990
Cape San Martin/Gorda	1981
Año Nuevo Island	1955
Año Nuevo mainland	1975
South Farallon Islands	1959
Point Reyes Headlands	1981

1. Torbin C. Rick, et.al. Where were the northern elephant seals? Holocene archaeology and biogeography of *Mirounga angustirostris*