

Entries from Docent Interviews

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

"We heard about the seals from the Morro Bay Museum staff. They told us they were there. One day on a drive up the coast we saw the seals. People were stopped along the road. 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. This would have been in July or August. We first saw them about a year before the notice in the paper. At the museum there was a note asking for experienced docents. At the first meeting, there were more volunteers than they had room for." –Dave and Evelyn Dabritz, class of 1997

"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. –Geoff West, honorary docent

"We had seen people disturbing the seals on the beaches and wanted to join in protecting them. –Phil Adams, class of 1998

"We were deeply distressed by the chaos going on along Highway 1. Cars screeched to a halt, sometimes right on the highway, and the occupants trampled over private property and down cliffs to get up close and personal with the seals. It was bad for the animals and potentially dangerous for people. Something had to be done! That something included the formation of Friends of the Elephant Seal. We read about the opportunity to become docents in the Cambrian and were in the second training class – yes, we were "second class" docents." –Carole Adams, class of 1998

"I had just retired and needed something to do in my spare time and these strange looking animals intrigued me. It also seemed dangerous to me out there when cars were parked all over the road and people were walking every which way all over the highway so I thought maybe I could help in some way. Plus, 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." –Ken Eberle, class of 1999

"After living in Cambria about 6 months I started visiting there often. I also liked to walk the beach at Arroyo Laguna, and talked to state parks people there during the birthing season. One of them suggested that given my interest I might like to be a docent." –Tim Postiff, class of 2007

What was the experience 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!) We only had enough people to work weekends, but there weren't as many tourists then and the

number of seals was not as large. In fact, sometimes in the spring, there were hardly any animals on the beach.” –Shirley Green, class of 1997

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.”

At the north end, windsurfers would go down on the beach and walk among the seals to get to the water. We did have a lot of people who said, “We’ve been walking on this beach for years.” –Dave and Evelyn Dabritz, class of 1997

“Initially, to begin our bluff stints, we went to a small outside storage cabinet next to the San Simeon Post Office. We would sign in there and pick up a pack and spotting scope for visitors to use. 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.

There was so much erosion along the bluff we volunteers put in more fencing at the end of the path at the south end to help keep visitors off the beach. People viewing at the north end would go down on the area just inside the gate and get very close to the seals. It was evident during the birthing season the seals would avoid using the beach just below the bluff because of the nearness of visitors. For that reason we installed some poles and cable up near the gate entry to prevent interference and make more of the beach usable for the seals. The boardwalk installation has made our duties as docents much easier as it really delineates bluff and beach”. –Phil Adams, class of 1998

“Our mission was to protect the seals and to instill that sense of protection in others. Although we had no enforcement capabilities, our immediate goal was to keep people on the bluff. Before the south boardwalk was constructed the job was difficult, very difficult. We were the first line of defense for the seals. Those of us on ‘A’ shift usually had to coax people up off the beach and at times it was challenging. Phil and I usually took the Sunday morning shift. Gratefully, Steve Johnson also signed up for that shift and he got there very early. Steve was terrific at getting people off the beach. We were so grateful to Steve.

People stood, sat, and edged their way over the bluff. As a result there was a great deal of erosion. At the south end of the boardwalk over a foot of soil was blown or washed away in just a couple years. Land that had once been covered with buckwheat and other native plants was literally blowing in the wind.

As the years went by there were wonderful improvements at Vista Point 3. Fencing was added along the first bluff facing the south beach. That was great, but people simply walked around the fence. Praise goes to Bill Johnson, who worked so hard on the boardwalk project. It was a turning point for the docents. No longer was the job of keeping people off the beach so difficult.” –Carole Adams, class of 1998

“The early years were very challenging insofar as visitors always kept going down on the beach before fencing and confrontations were almost a daily occurrence. 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 of your attention to visitor's questions. We would even have people going over the fence in the parking lot and walking on the dunes and have to yell at them to come back because we were trying to get vegetation to grow on the dunes to keep the sand from blowing so much.” –Ken Eberle, class of 1999

“In 2001 there were no boardwalks, only bluff trails at both VP3 & 4 for observing seals ‘from a safe distance.’ Docents spent a lot of time ‘politely requesting’ folks who were attempting to ‘go down and get too close’ to come back up to the viewing trail, for their safety and the protection of the seals as well. A front-page picture in the Cambrian of a 3-year-old-child on the back of a full grown male E Seal, and the father taking a picture, was a favorite story to tell folks as we explained why we started the group and the important reasons why we ‘stay only on the Bluff Trail!.’

The boardwalks, built by the hard work of the Conservation Corps, marked a turning point in the safe viewing capabilities of all the public and the protection of the e-seals! FES President at the time was Bill Johnson who worked tirelessly with others to make it possible! It became rare that we needed to ask anyone to ‘please return to the boardwalk!’”

–Mary Lee Becwar, class of 2001

What were the biggest challenges?

“Rainy days when we sat in the car and leaped out if any visitors appeared. But we felt it was worth it as we were teaching people about these wonderful animals and how interesting they were. Many had never seen them before. I remember one lady getting out of her car and saying it was just like National Geographic!” –Shirley Green, class of 1997

“That first year it was brutal (1997-98). 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.

Keeping people off the beach at first. It was one of our main jobs. Watching pups get washed away during high tides and storms. It was hard to explain that pups are washed away every year, and we didn't go out and save them. People would say, ‘Oh, they're fighting! Stop them!’

Sometimes we didn't know how to handle it when people just went down among the seals. We tried yelling and whistles. That's about all we could do. Sometimes the crowds would help with the yelling. The representative from NOAA, Joe Cordaro, he said really clearly, “Your job is not law enforcement.

People would park at VP4 and climb over the fence. They would walk north up to the cove. We were in a quandary as to what our responsibility was. The subadult males starting showing up at Arroyo Laguna - we called that Loser's Beach. We couldn't do anything about that.” –Dave and Evelyn Dabritz

“Early on 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 they were causing a disturbance and

perhaps making the seals use up energy they would need on their challenging life cycle. We would try to convince them that respectful viewing was necessary and should be done from the bluff. After a while Caltrans put up some fencing.” – Phil Adams, class of 1998

“One of the biggest challenges of being a docent was dealing with the reality of viewing wildlife in life/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. These are wild animals. They are not ‘ours’. That is an important message.” – Carole Adams, class of 1998

“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.” –Geoff West, honorary docent

“Scrambling on the old trail before the boardwalk was a different experience than it is now; erosion was quite the problem.” –Ken Dunn class of 2000

“Pre-office there was a little lean to by San Simeon Post Office which always had a big puddle in front of it. Personal challenge-the weather.” – Pat and Bill Johnson, class of 1998

“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.” –Mary Lee Becwar, class of 2001

What were the greatest rewards?

*“How much the visitors appreciated getting the information. Seeing the children and their wonder. There were rewards of people learning about them, that they are mammals. The foreign visitors would say how wonderful it is that they don’t have to pay for it and that you’re a volunteer. We’re seeing more people coming back, year after year, at different times, to see the seals at different phases in their life cycle. There are changes from year to year.”
–Dave and Evelyn Dabritz, class of 1997*

“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. Our time on the bluff has helped the seals to be protected and survive along with the rookery itself. So many visitors were going down on the beach with them before FES started; I doubt the beaches at VP3 would have continued to be used by the seals. I have been fortunate for the last 12 years to be involved with the training of the new docents. This for me has been another rewarding experience with Friends of the Elephant Seal.” – Phil Adams, class of 1998

“Being involved with FES in the early years was an exciting and fulfilling experience, fraught with emotional ups and downs. The biggest challenge was keeping people off the beach. The greatest rewards came during those times when I knew I had reached someone. There is an ‘ah-

ha' moment when people's eyes show they embrace the message. Another big challenge was trying to get people (of all ages) to stop making noise or throw things to get a seal's attention. These moments are opportunities to explain that we should not disturb wildlife, but it is a touchy situation. It is much better to talk to people before they do something potentially disturbing than after." –Carole Adams, class of 1998

"All the special people I have known and volunteered with as a member of FES for 16 years! 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 LIVE here! The LIVE experience of sharing all this with thousands of people from all over this country and the world (on many bluff shifts we would talk to people from 7-10 countries in one afternoon.). We would say 'we got more internally from the experience than we gave.'" –Mary Lee Becwar, class of 2001

"That 'thank you' from visitors, being part of something that matters." –Pat and Bill Johnson

"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." –Tim Postiff, class of 2007

What is your favorite memory?

One unforgettable, fantastic, memory is seeing a huge adult male elephant seal come ashore on a beautiful December evening, at sunset. What a sight! There was that big male with the sun setting right behind him. Being able to point out other types of wildlife to visitors is a joy too." –Carole Adams, class of 1997

"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 always enjoyed the fund raisers and the Docent Appreciations Dinners - lots of fun. I have burned into my memory some of those blustery days on the bluff - before the slickers - when volunteers would get soaked to the skin, but stayed there fighting the elements to tell visitors about the elephant seals." – Geoff West

"My favorite memory is asking a youth group wearing uniforms what they were representing. They were a choral group going to a singing competition. I asked them to sing for the crowd and they did and received a big round of applause." –Ken Eberle, class of 1999.

"One of my most favorite memories was taking a pup from a visitor who had picked it up somewhere on the bluff or the beach, and didn't know what to do with it. I kept it in the bed of my pick-up truck until people from the Marine Mammal rescue center arrived to take it to Morro Bay." –Ken Dunn, class of 2000

"Meeting and sharing with people from all over the planet in such a beautiful natural setting. Toward the end of one of my afternoon shifts, a motor home arrives at the North End. A friendly couple, very taken with the E-Seal experience and the beginning of a gorgeous sunset, get several paper cups and a bottle of wine and pours us all a 'small amount' and we all toast to 'the beautiful wonder of what's before us!' No tech device can ever duplicate the LIVE, IN-PERSON experience!" –Mary Lee Becwar, class of 2001

"Keeping all docents current was a problem that came up often. I think we are addressing that issue in several ways. I'm proud to have been a member of the training comm. and am very pleased to see it move forward." –Tim Postiff, class of 2007

What was your least favorite memory?

"It was miserable weather, and seeing pups washed away by storms."
–Evelyn Dabritz, class of 1997

"I was wearing a yellow slicker and I forgot to put the flap down over my pocket. I put my hand in my pocket and it was filled with cold water." –Dave Dabritz

"One morning, before there was fencing or the boardwalk, I was at the south end of the path and looked back in horror to see a small child, around 3-4 years old, on the beach with the seals. The adults on the bluff were not able to see him so I came running. The parents were angry with me. They felt if their little one wanted to go down on the beach with the seals that should be OK." –Carole Adams, class of 1998

"One day when the wind was blowing so terribly and I was at the north end of the parking lot, I headed the car south, put it in neutral and the wind blew me very slowly to the south end. True story!" –Ken Eberle, class of 1999

"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 house and effort so many people put in to follow up, resolve, and restore everyone's confidence to move forward." –Mary Lee Becwar, class of 2001

What activities did you do in addition to being a docent on the bluff?

"We were more than docents. We presented a slide program to the incoming docents about the birds they would see at Piedras Blancas – we tried to make it short and interesting (and funny, too). We encouraged them to be able to identify some of the species, especially the Western gulls who cleaned up the afterbirth on the beach. Not just any old gull!" –Shirley Green, class of 1997

"An elephant seal was hit and killed by a car: The Department of Highway took a skip loader and dumped the carcass over the side onto the beach. Dave took the head. Ron Ruppert from Cuesta College prepared it for the museum. Another adult male washed ashore at Cayucos. Dave cleaned the head and donated it to the Coastal Discovery Center in San Simeon. The third skull

(an adult male) is on display at the elephant seal office. That was prepared by Dave and Brandt Kehoe.” –Dave and Evelyn Dabritz, class of 1997

“We thought a book would be a good way for FES to generate funds and help educate people about the seals. We put in a lot of time writing the Elephant Seal book as a fund raiser for FES and they have received all the proceeds.

Three to four pairs of binoculars were donated by a Cambria business. I made several wood boxes to hold them and we installed posts to set the boxes on. The binoculars were attached to the boxes with chains, enabling visitors of all ages and heights to use them.

To help viewing I removed fennel from places along the south bluff where it was a visual obstruction for visitors. It took several years of seasonal work to eliminate the fennel.

To further the goal of education, we organized and promoted a guest lecture series. There was no fee for the lectures and the presenters were not paid. The public responded positively to being offered educational opportunities.” –Phil Adams, class of 1998

*“I do remember the beginning of the Donation Table in 2007 or 2008(?). The first time I saw the table was a day when Meg McNamee and Judy Burley took a table out to see if people would buy stuff. They did it a few times and asked for volunteers to join them on a regular basis. I began operating the table on my shifts and settled into being Table Person every Saturday. In the early days, we tried a number of merchandise ideas—I took out t-shirts and found that it was too difficult to have correct sizes and colors and to keep the shirts from blowing away. We tried selling the wine glasses left over from the FES fund raising events—they had e-seal indicia on them and were attractive but never sold well. We tried for a few times taking a folding canopy out with the table for visibility and shade but had way too many problems with the wind. Judy was the person who found the small e-seal stuffies for us to sell; she saw some at the Shell Gas station in Cambria, tracked down the manufacturer and ordered twelve dozen—which was the minimum order size (and I remember she was concerned about having to commit to so many—but they became one of our biggest sellers!) I always enjoyed doing the table—you really got to talk to more people than just being on a bluff shift—the table gave you visibility.”
–Bob Gross, class of 2001*

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 wind proof pants and jacket.” –Shirley Green, class of 1997

“There was a mother and father with a child. I’m telling them about diving, finding food and other adaptations. And this little child says, “Oh, evolution.” –Dave Dabritz

“ There was a woman asking questions, then she pointed at the male’s nose and asked, “Is that the sexual organ?” So I explained it to her.” –Evelyn Dabritz

"I was talking with about 20 people. A father with two kids walked right in front of us onto the beach. I called out to him and he ignored me. So I reached in the pack and pretended to have a cell phone. The man saw that and called me an S.O.B. I said, "Yes, I am!" The group I was with just roared with laughter. He walked away, humiliated." –Dave Dabritz

"I was talking to a group of veterinarians from Columbia University. Some of them were doing work on cows. One of them said, 'If only we could cross an elephant seal and a Holstein, then we would have lots of really rich milk!'" –Dave Dabritz

"There are so many memories, but a few stand out. There was the Sunday morning that we arrived to find a bus full of Swiss dairy farmers on the beach with the seals. The only one who spoke English was the driver. He explained they wanted to find where the teats are located. What else would a dairy farmer be curious about!

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." –Carole Adams

"My first day on the bluff, I felt overwhelmed because I didn't think I yet felt qualified to answer all questions that might come my way but my mentor and very good friend, Don Meyers, made me feel very special and comfortable so I wound up with knowing it was something I wanted to keep doing." –Ken Eberle, class of 1999

"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." –Bob Gross, class of 2001

What do you feel the goal of Friends of the Elephant Seal was in the beginning and do you think that goal has changed?

"To begin with, the goal was to inform the public and protect the animals. I still see that as important as ever. That's enough. Keep it simple. Educate them not just about the seals, but that all marine mammals are protected. I still get questions about things other than elephant seals. I've had to expand my knowledge, to include whales, sea otters." –Dave and Evelyn Dabritz

"When FES began the emphasis was on the seals and avoiding disturbances." – Phil Adams

"It seems that over the years the focus on protecting the seals has been replaced with focusing on the organization. On this, the 20th anniversary of the organization, it might be a good idea to stand back and remember why Friends of the Elephant Seal was formed. " –Carole Adams

“The only part of our goal at FES that has changed somewhat is how much more emphasis we had on safety in the beginning for both the people and the seals by getting people not to park on the highway and also not to go down on the beach. Since we don't have those problems now, we can devote more time and energy to greater education for all, i.e. school tours, bus tours, giving more precise information to ‘the whole world’!” –Ken Eberle, class of 1999

“To me the goal of the Friends was to help visitors appreciate the unique place that the rookery is.” –Ken Dunn, class of 2000

“We seemed to emphasize protection of the seals from visitors more in the early days and did have frequent visitors trying to go on the beach, probably a carryover from the 1990-1997 period when people did have open access to the seals. It slowly disappeared, particularly after building the South End boardwalk in 2003 and the North End in 2010, and the FES emphasis changed to public education and information.” –Bob Gross, class of 2001

“Although some change is inevitable, the mission statement that FES has always followed, I believe, is still at the heart of the organization. The development of our membership program, sources of funding, and our outreach programs have been exciting to see take shape over these past years. Going from “fighting for every dollar” to keep us going, to being able to help sponsor interns interested in the study of the marine environment is a great testament to the future and of the long-term sustainability of this amazing FES volunteer organization!” –Mary Lee Becwar, class of 2001

“In a word, education. I think the organization has succeeded in staying close to its mission statement. Methods have changed (look at school groups), but the goals are the same.” –Tim Postiff, class of 2007

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