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Send a Letter to the Editor

Ex-park chief calls for moratorium on island 'hunt'

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Commentary: TIM J. SETNICKA

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I recently had the pleasure of attending the well-done 25th anniversary party for Channel Islands National Park. The father of the park, former congressman Robert J. Lagomarsino, gave a great personal account of how he got the park legislation through Congress in 1980. The conclusion of the event was a slide program capturing highlights, and some low lights, of the park's 25 years of history.

Watching these images flashing on the screen, it became clear to all watching that a large portion of the park's history revolved around killing one species to save another.

Beginning in the early 1970s, even before the park was established, park staff began shooting all the abandoned mules and donkeys on San Miguel Island. As the slides showed, in 1976, then Superintendent Bill Ehorn personally finished the mule eradication program by shooting the last pregnant jenny. Even in the 1970s, his action took some heat in the press, but one of the main dissenters suddenly passed away, and so did public opposition. Also, because this action could be done quickly and was out of public view, the presiding animal rights advocate at the time, Cleveland Amory, could not muster his troops in time to intercede and challenge the program.

In the late 1970s Mr. Ehorn established a hare (rabbit) eradication program on Santa Barbara Island, another island that most people didn't know existed. Bill and staff successfully, and quietly, shot the last hare in 1979.

In the 1980s, then Superintendent Mac Shaver, completed the Santa Rosa Island pig eradication program. More than 1,200 pigs on Santa Rosa Island were killed, first by shot-gunning from a helicopter, and then hunting them on the ground using vehicles and dogs. Both Mr. Shaver and I participated in these hunts and killed many pigs. It took nine months to track down and shoot the last

boar. Some public opposition about the project developed but a couple of controlled five-hour media trips to the island to look at pig-damaged vegetation took the fight and media interest away from the issue.

AVOIDING BAD PUBLICITY

We never allowed the media to accompany hunters to film the hunting activity. Safety reasons were always given as the reason for denial of their request. The real reason was we wanted to avoid images of the ugliness of the hunt.

In the late 1990s, widespread media coverage of the events leading up to the legislative acquisition of the Gherini property on East Santa Cruz Island and the arrest of the grave robbers using a large U.S. Customs helicopter loaded with hooded federal and local agents, more than increased public interest in park activities.

Because of the NPS record of shooting mules, rabbits and pigs, plus The Nature Conservancy's program of shooting more than 36,000 sheep on their portion of Santa Cruz Island in the 1980s, rumors quickly spread that the NPS was going to shoot the remaining 9,000 sheep and the 30 abandoned horses. These rumors got great traction in the news media. A large public outcry arose to not shoot the sheep or the horses.

If we could have got away with shooting all the sheep and horses we would have; however, the large opposition quickly erased all thoughts of such action. So we change plans and began trapping and transporting sheep and horses; all except a few were successfully relocated to the mainland. During the process we had to fight off the idea of establishing legislation, which allowed for a Heritage Horse Herd on Santa Cruz. The major reason the Heritage Horse Herd legislation could not be passed was because the horses were private property, did not belong to the public, and they wanted them removed from the island. That was a close one.

THE 'FINAL SOLUTION'

Pigs remained on Santa Cruz and continued to grow into a large problem with the increase in vegetation and cover for them. We also now had public use and facilities on the eastern portion of the island. When pigs became a problem on East Santa Cruz, and unknown to the public, I authorized the clandestine intermittent killing of problem pigs in about 1998 by signing a NEPA document called a Categorical Exclusion. Pigs had found the campground in Scorpion Valley. If left unchecked, someone would eventually get hurt. These problem pigs were either individually shot when no one was around or they were trapped first and shot or knifed in the trap. This program probably continues today. But we wanted to remove all pigs on an island-wide basis. How to do that?

In addition, in the mid 1990s arose the concept of the "final solution" to getting rid of the rats on Anacapa Island. We would poison them all. These noxious animals were feeding almost entirely on native island species.

We tried intermittent trapping of rats with snap traps, but this was ineffective because rats lived all over the island, including cliff areas inaccessible for humans to place traps. We tried poisoning them using various bait stations techniques, but we could never come close to killing them all. Using a .270 rifle to shoot them would obviously not work. So the park's chief of natural resources management developed a plan to use a group that had successfully used poison pellets to remove rats

from other islands.

To get to the inaccessible places, we would use a helicopter to sprinkle poison bait all over the island.

We didn't think we would have much problem in the media with this project. Who could love a rat? Well, as it turned out, lots of people. A group of dedicated animal rights activists fought hard to stop the project, including two getting arrested on the island. Most embarrassingly, it was a poor case and they were found not guilty by a Santa Barbara U.S. magistrate. As a consequence of the rat project, Channel Islands Animal Protection Association, CHIAPA, was formed. The group almost got the project stopped, but was too late in mobilizing.

ISLAND FOXES AND GOLDEN EAGLES

Along with the rat poisoning program, the now famous fox program was started in the mid-1990s. In the late 1980s, seeing an island fox was a daily occurrence and easier than seeing a pig on Santa Rosa Island and they were in abundance on the large park islands. But their numbers mysteriously declined, and in the mid 1990s it was learned their decline was due to the influx of golden eagles that had taken to becoming nesting residents in the park. The reasons for their arrival are speculated to be that generally their population was expanding in the West, there were no dominant bald eagles to scare them off, and they found an easy source of food -- foxes.

To help sell the fox restoration program for which we had no money, we came up with the media spin that one of the main reasons golden eagles reside on park islands was because of pigs. This would help vilify the pigs and help support the pig removal project. We didn't really remind folks that by 1991 we had shot all the pigs on Santa Rosa Island so there were no pigs for eagles to eat. Of course the golden eagles eat pigs, but they eat many more foxes, which are easier for them to catch.

A successful fox plan also requires the "removal" of golden eagles. We proposed doing this first by capturing them and then, if we couldn't capture them all, by shooting them. Shooting them was not emphasized in the media spin. The reason was because we anticipated the huge amount of public heat shooting eagles would cause. Unfortunately, golden eagles were much smarter and more elusive to capture than first thought. Capturing them with net traps set on the ground was partially successful but very difficult and expensive to pursue. We also tried capturing them by shooting a net gun from a helicopter. This effort was a bust -- like trying to catch a hummingbird with a throw net while riding a unicycle. Of course shooting a net around a flying eagle likely will kill it in the fall, but we could at least say we at least tried live capture. So the final plan was to shoot golden eagles from the ground, and with approval, from a helicopter. As far as I know [this] never was really tried, but who knows for sure?

PLAYING GOD HARDER TO DO

The point is that due to adverse public pressure questioning management actions, for the first time in Channel Islands National Park history, the National Park Service was forced to modify its fox recovery due to the activities of CHIAPA and the general public. For this reason, I'm afraid the pig project on Santa Cruz Island is in jeopardy of failing due to strong and growing public and political opposition.

The fact is that as a public agency the NPS generally looks backwards at its success. It only changes its actions when put under significant public or political pressure. This unknown park, now largely

being known as an area in which systematic biologic genocide has been committed, has come to light.

The park is no longer hidden off shore from public view, which allowed projects to occur out of public view.

At the anniversary event, everyone roared at hearing Bill Ehorn retell the story how he personally was able to jump into a helicopter and go out and shoot the last remaining mule on San Miguel Island, a true story from the old west. But the days of the gun-slinging park superintendents are over.

Each year, as a park superintendent, playing God in your national park gets harder and harder to do.

The NPS model of hiding controversial projects from the public, minimizing and denying their adverse impacts, and then outliving or litigating the opposition is over. This technique worked in the last century but likely won't succeed in today's society. Opposition groups are wise to this technique, and the public is more aware of what the NPS is up to and how it sells its programs.

For this reason, I am very concerned about the chances for success that a long term project such as the Santa Cruz Island pig removal project has.

The current plan calls for fencing the island into units and then beginning the systematic killing of pigs by aerial gunning, followed by horse, dog and ATV hunting. In certain areas, widespread spraying of herbicide over large areas of the exotic fennel plant will occur at least twice. Once dead, large fires will be used to burn the dead plants. This allows hunters to work an area more successfully. Such a hunting program will take a minimum of six years to accomplish, and the funding for the entire project does not exist. Also, after spending millions of dollars, the restoration plan does not eradicate the fennel plants from the island, it only controls them. Under this program, fennel will quickly grow back.

The Santa Cruz pig project is the mother of all exotic species "removal" projects. Because of the project size and multi-year duration, it is more in the public eye than ever before, especially by groups such as CHIAPA and PETA. The secret of the plan's success was to kill the pigs as fast as possible so opposition groups wouldn't be able to launch a significant public or legal challenge. However, to withstand any legal challenge, government attorneys advised us to do a full environmental impact statement. This took years to complete, and it does not dispel many questions about the conclusions and analysis contained in the EIS.

CONTROVERSIAL METHODS

The pig project involves the most controversial methods of resource activities the NPS gets involved in: building miles of permanent fences, killing animals, spraying of herbicide over large areas of the park, and doing prescribed burning. Internally we called this project the "mega kill, poison, and burn" plan.

The first phase of the fence building is complete. Compared to the upcoming activities, this was an easy and benign management action. But when hunting, spraying and fire activities begin, the NPS will come under much more negative public scrutiny. Such criticism is already beginning in earnest.

Even though a large portion of the hunting will take place on private and closed lands, I predict that

somehow opponents will get video or photos of the hunting activities, and these activities are very graphic and ugly. Regardless of how the NPS tries to spin this eradication effort, images of what "eradication" truly means will go to the media and the general public will go nuts.

Once aerial shooting is complete, ground hunting begins. In the case of Santa Cruz Island, the vast majority of the hunting will be on foot in thick vegetation. I participated in 10 or so of these eradication hunts both on Santa Rosa and Santa Cruz. In thick vegetation, clean kill shots are hard to make. While hunting in such conditions, we frequently gut shot and wounded pigs who escaped. When sows were shot, their piglets were caught by dogs or we chased them down on foot. The dogs frequently chased down and cornered pigs. They would often tear into and mangle the smaller pigs. The larger pigs would fight the dogs, occasionally, injuring or killing one. Due to the close quarters, pigs were caught by their hind legs and then were knifed or beaten to death.

The terms "squealing like a stuck pig" or "bleeding like a stuck pig" are given graphic definition.

Watching an animal bleed to death after sticking a knife in their jugular vein is a horrendous sight. You watch the life drain out of their eye which becomes dull as they die. This is an impossible image to sell to the public or politicians which is why no photos are allowed.

Later phases of pig hunting include widespread spraying of poison which kills native as well as non-native vegetation. But killing native plants is acceptable as collateral damage to many scientists. Others have challenged this practice, especially when the NPS admits that this spraying will not eliminate fennel from the island. Fennel eventually will grow back into all burned and sprayed areas.

To clear the dead vegetation, fire will be used, another nonspecific and widespread action. In particular, the NPS record on setting and managing fires is a poor one. In setting fires, there are too many unknowns and things can turn bad in a hurry. Not well-known is that in the 1990s a NPS prescribed fire on Santa Cruz Island escaped and burned hundreds of acres. Fortunately, no structures were involved, and the area needed to be burned anyway so we escaped much criticism. This also occurred before the disastrous NPS Los Alamos fire in New Mexico. The fire review board pretty much whitewashed the event, and we were safe from public criticism. Again, out of sight, out of mind worked.

INCREASING CONCERNS

Because of the park's history of killing animals and the increased interest in this activity by animal rights groups toward the project, it is now on the public's radar screen. Also, because the hunting phase of this project has been delayed for over three years due to completion of the EIS and federal contracting reasons, both the project costs and public concern grow. Awarding a multi-year, multimillion dollar hunting contract to a non-U.S. company is also being questioned.

While the Bush administration generally supports national parks, it clearly supports a strong right-to-life philosophy, which often has a ripple effect on reviewing charges of cruelty to animals. In a similar situation in Olympic National Park, the NPS did two environmental assessments and an environmental impact statement to shoot all the Billy goats that had moved into the park's ecosystem. The public opposed the proposed NPS actions. Responding to the public outcry, the local congressman, Norm Dicks, got involved. The congressman put the NPS on notice that if it continued with plans to shoot goats, he would pass legislation specifically allowing goats in the park. This stopped the project. I would hate to see this occur in Channel Islands National Park for pig removal.

ADVISORY BOARD NEEDED

There is a solution to this dilemma. A Channel Islands National Park advisory board needs to be established. This action will modernize its management structure to reflect how effective organizations are managed in the new millennium. Such a board would serve a role by being a board of directors that advises the park superintendent who acts in the role of a CEO.

The superintendent would be responsible to the board for explaining and getting concurrence for park management actions and goals.

The board would serve as a link between the NPS and the public, which actually are the shareowners of the park. The board would have the power to propose, examine and amend controversial park actions. The Channel Islands Marine Sanctuary has an advisory council that operates under a similar management structure.

The first chairman of the board should be former Rep. Robert J. Lagomarsino, the park's father. His ability to bring people together and review matters in an honest public forum is unmatched. The park needs his talents. Other board members should include local conservation groups, city and counties officials, animal rights groups, fishermen, former landowners, the Santa Cruz Island Foundation, development groups, as well ordinary citizens. If such a board had existed and approved the current pig eradication plan I approved, there would be much less public discord because the plan would have been developed in a much more public light in an open process. Instead, we chose to develop it to meet a minimum legal standard and in the dark halls of the park's resource management building with a biased preferred alternative.

Establishing such an advisory board requires a two- or three-sentence amendment to the park's enabling legislation. This change is necessary to avoid a conflict with the Federal Advisory Committees Act, which prohibits federal agencies from having such boards unless such a board is authorized by law. Other parks have such boards, so this is not a new concept.

Fortunately for Channel Islands National Park, we have a great legislative team of Rep. Elton Gallegly and Rep. Lois Capps. Often on different sides of the aisle on many issues, both have come together to support various local issues. In the past, Mr. Gallegly also has proven to be a large animal rights legislator. He personally sponsored and got passed legislation to make illegal the insane practice of stamping on mice for exotic pleasure. As a ranking member of the House Interior Committee he can easily sponsor and get such advisory board legislation passed through Congress. Such legislation costs the taxpayers nothing because council members would not be compensated.

The first task of this new advisory board would be to review the park's general management plan update process and get it restarted along with reviewing the Santa Cruz Island pig removal plan. Until this board is in place, the pig hunting project should temporarily stop, along with the herbicide and burning activities. Such a temporary delay, given the past years of delay, would not compromise the pig removal process.

The first goal of the advisory board's review is to bring new concepts into how pigs and alien plants can be removed while gaining more public support and understanding during the process. Such action would allow PETA and CHIAPA to actively participate in the process. Having them involved before the fact is better than trying to cram it down their throats.

The NPS is going to be strongly against the establishment of an advisory council or voluntarily agreeing to a delay in pig hunting activities. I can't blame them. The NPS does not want to give up some management control to a board. The old, existing NPS model gives superintendents a wide range of power with very little public accountability. Playing God in a national park is difficult enough without having to explain management actions to a board as well as the public, but times have changed and a board is a necessary step. Being able to force large, expensive and controversial projects on the public is over.

In view of the increasing widespread public opposition to the current pig removal project, I'm afraid the pig eradication program will likely be stopped before it is completed. As shown by the situation in Olympic National Park the pig removal program can easily be stopped by political or legal action.

Delaying the start of hunting, poisoning and burning until establishment of an advisory board to review and consider alternatives to the plan does not jeopardize the removal program. Rather, it will ensure its success. A moratorium of pig hunting and associated activities along with the process for the establishment of a Channel Islands National Park advisory board should occur today.

Tim J. Setnicka is the former superintendent of the Channel Islands National Park. The Park Service reassigned him to other duties before his retirement. He lives in Ojai.

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