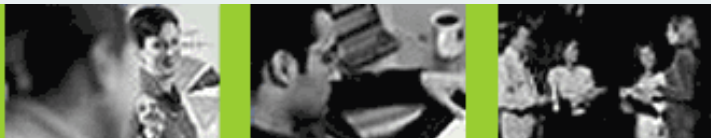


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Suit Filed to Halt Pig Eradication on Santa Cruz Island

A Montecito man says the \$7-million federal effort to preserve native plants and save an endangered fox is unnecessary and cruel.

By Gregory W. Griggs
Times Staff Writer

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A Santa Barbara County businessman has sued the National Park Service and the Nature Conservancy seeking to halt their \$7-million feral pig eradication program, which has killed about 1,100 pigs on Santa Cruz Island in the past six weeks.

Richard M. Feldman, owner and chief executive of Santa Barbara Eyeglass Factory, filed his request for a preliminary and permanent injunction Wednesday in U.S. District Court in Los Angeles.

The park service has hired a New Zealand-based hunting company on a two-year contract to track down the pigs, using snipers in helicopters, dogs and electronic monitoring collars. The goal is to eliminate an estimated 2,000 to 3,000 wild pigs, which threaten nine endangered plants and indirectly harm the endangered Santa Cruz Island fox.

The cat-sized fox, found only on the island, has been preyed upon by golden eagles, which park service officials say came to the Channel Islands about 15 years ago to feed on the pigs. Today, fewer than 150 foxes remain on Santa Cruz Island, which lies 18 miles off the Ventura County coast. The National Park Service owns a quarter of the island, and the nonprofit Nature Conservancy owns the rest.

Saying the method used to kill the pigs is inhumane and that the eradication is unnecessary, Feldman accuses the park service of deviating from the plan outlined in an environmental impact statement approved two years ago.

The Montecito resident maintains that feral pigs, descendants of domesticated pigs first brought to the 96-square-mile island in the 1850s, peacefully coexisted with the foxes for about 140 years. He blames the park service for the arrival of the golden eagle, saying the predators were attracted by the carcasses of hundreds of sheep that were killed in the 1980s to stop their destruction of native plant life.

"The park service puts out stories to make the pigs the villains on any number of fronts: from digging up endangered plants, increasing erosion problems, digging up Chumash archeological relics and being responsible for the destruction of the little foxes," Feldman said Thursday. "The idea that you'd have to eliminate thousands of pigs to save the Island fox is a spurious

argument at best."

Yvonne Menard, spokeswoman for the National Park Service, said 150 years is relatively insignificant in ecological evolution.

"The feral pig was introduced by man and is not a component of the naturally functioning ecosystem on Santa Cruz Island," she said.

Julie Benson, spokeswoman for the Nature Conservancy, said her organization believes it and the park service "are in compliance with the environmental impact statement."

The choice between saving the fox or the pig is an easy one, Benson said. Wild pigs exist throughout the world, but the Santa Cruz Island fox is found only in one location, and scientists believe it dates back more than 18,000 years, she said.

Several previous attempts to eradicate the pigs, including introducing cholera twice in the 1950s, were unsuccessful, Benson added.

Northern California veterinarian Elliot Katz said that allowing the deaths of thousands of pigs for the benefit of a few foxes doesn't seem to be a fair balance of nature. Katz, founder and president of In Defense of Animals, a nonprofit animal rights organization based in the Bay Area city of Mill Valley, supports halting the pig slaughter and says he intends to contact Feldman about lending his support for the lawsuit.

"Our position is to take a step back and not to be killing animals for man's belief of what's right and wrong," Katz said. "Allowing an injunction will permit everyone to step back and rethink this thing and also to further evaluate whether it's necessary to remove each and every pig from the island."

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