



# Wildlife Disturbances Elephant Seals at Piedras Blancas

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Friends of the Elephant Seal

# Friends of the Elephant Seal

- 501(c)-3 non-profit organization,
- San Simeon, California Visitor Center
- Established in 1998
- Dedicated to educating people about elephant seals and other marine life and teaching stewardship for the ocean off the central coast of California.
- Cooperating association with California State Parks,



# Piedras Blancas Northern Elephant Seal Rookery

- First northern elephant seals sighted in 1990, first births in 1992
- Largest mainland rookery (over 5000 births per year; estimated colony size of 25,000)



# Piedras Blancas Northern Elephant Seal Rookery

Arroyo de la Cruz

Piedras Blancas State Marine Reserve

Arroyo del Corral

Surfer's Beach

Piedras Blancas Pier Station

Piedras Blancas

VP4 to Hoopie Beach

VP3 North

VP3 South

Cove South of VP3

VP2

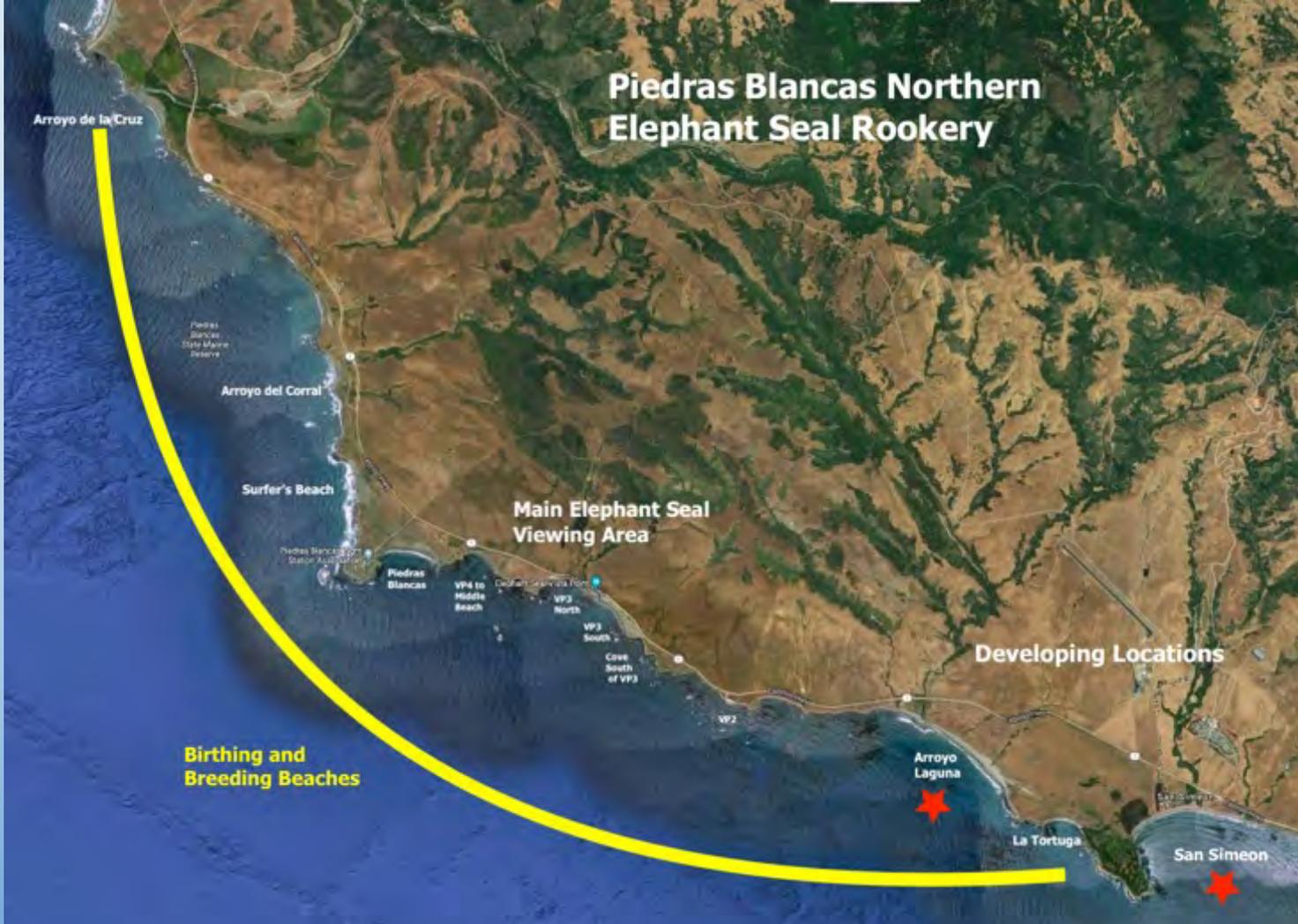
Developing Locations

**Birthing and Breeding Beaches**

Arroyo Laguna

La Tortuga

San Simeon



A photograph of a man in a blue jacket and a young girl looking at a book together on a cliff overlooking the ocean. The man is smiling and pointing at the book. The girl is looking intently at the book. In the background, other people are visible, and the ocean with waves is in the distance under a clear blue sky.

# Friends of the Elephant Seal Docents

- Greet almost 200,000 of the 1 million visitors to the main viewing area each year.

- Provide 10,000 hours of direct contact with the public, annually.

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# Locations in Development 2019

## (1) Arroyo Laguna

- Birthing and breeding beach with high visibility from CA Hwy 1
- Closed to the public annually, except for water sports from December 15-April 30



## (2) William R. Hearst Memorial State Beach

- “Bachelor Beach” populated by over a dozen exiled sub-adult males from Dec-March
- Popular beach for locals/tourists, fishing, water sports, hiking, dog walking; open year-round



A photograph of a seal resting on a dark, pebbly beach. In the background, a long wooden pier extends into the ocean under a cloudy sky. A tree is visible on the left side of the frame.

# **WINTER 2019 WILLIAM R. HEARST MEMORIAL STATE BEACH**

**Goodwein, A. & Peck-Burnett, T.**

California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo  
2019 Interns, William J. Goodger Memorial Internship Program



# William R. Hearst Memorial State Beach

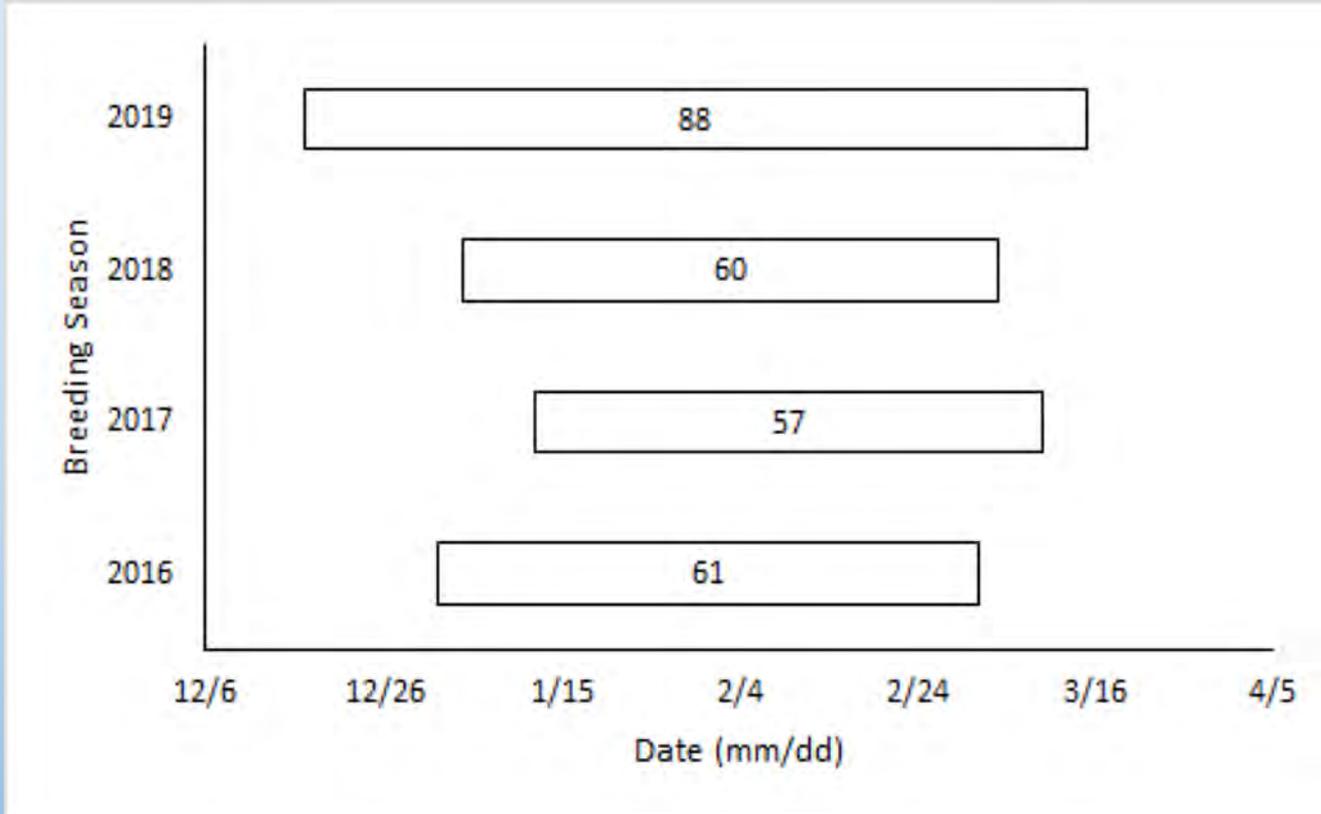




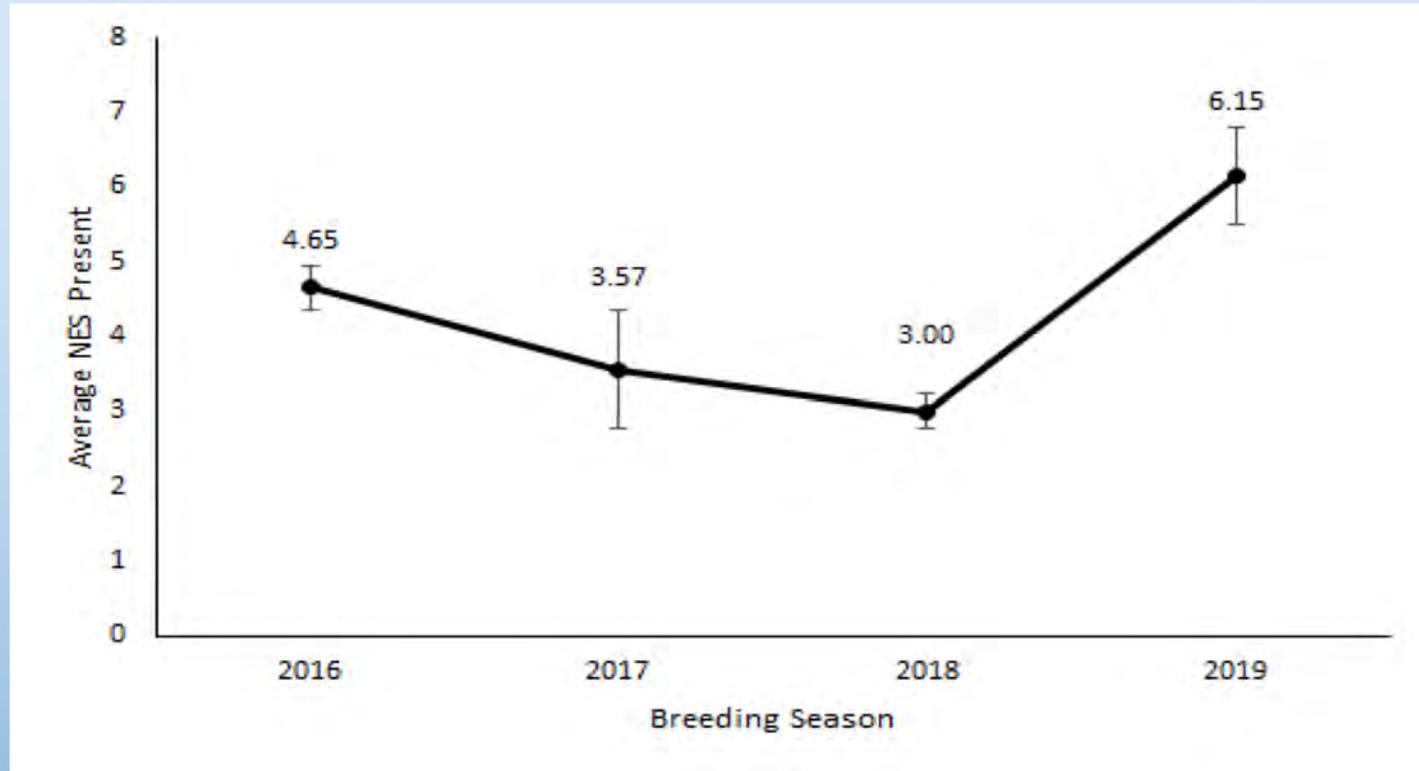
# Needs Assessment

1. Census
2. Disturbances and Safety Issues
3. Recommendations

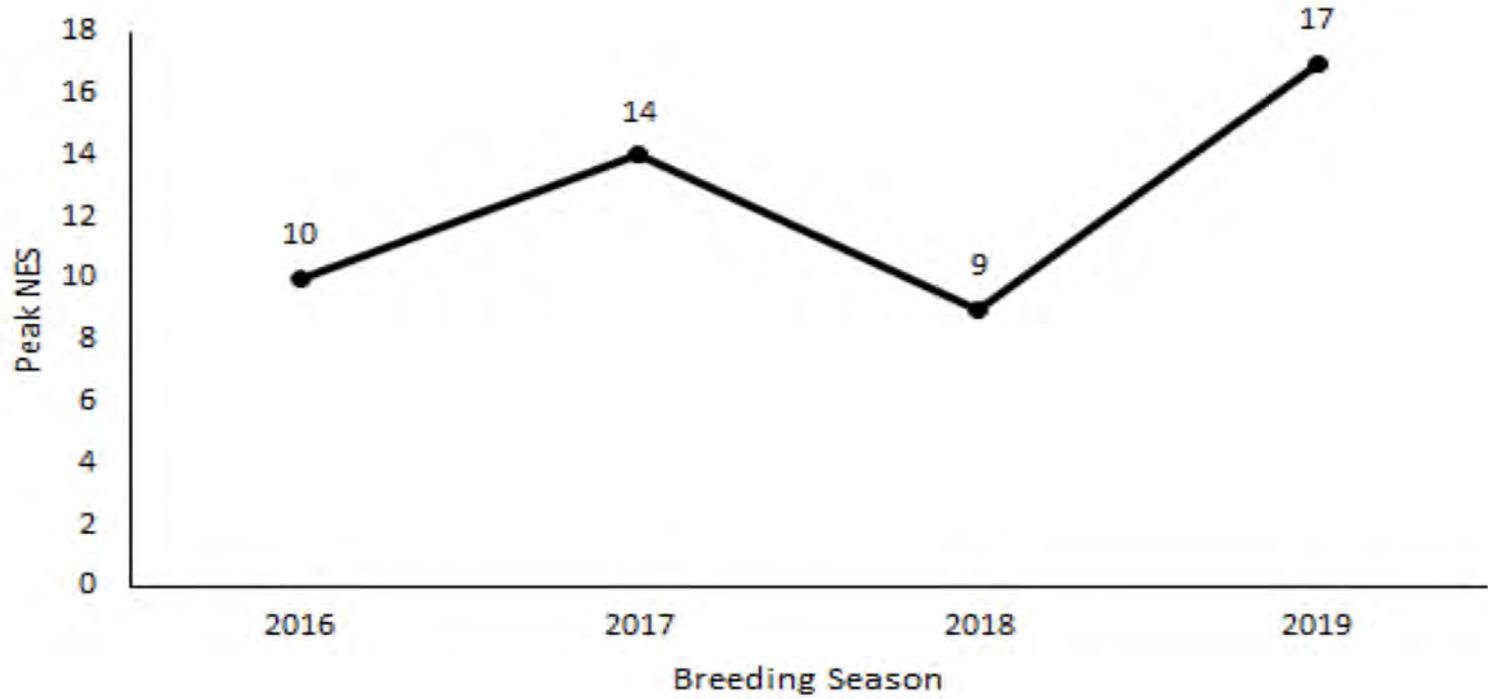




Longer Duration in 2019 from First to Last Sightings  
(Numbers of Days that seals are on beach)



Average number of seals on the beach per day was higher in 2019 than in past years



Peak number of seals on the beach was higher in 2019 than in previous years

William K. Hearst Memorial State Beach



Hearst

5

SS

9

BB

3

Peak of 17 Seals on Beach on Feb 22, 2019

Slo San Simeon Rd

# William R. Hearst Memorial State Beach

Entrances to beach often blocked by seals

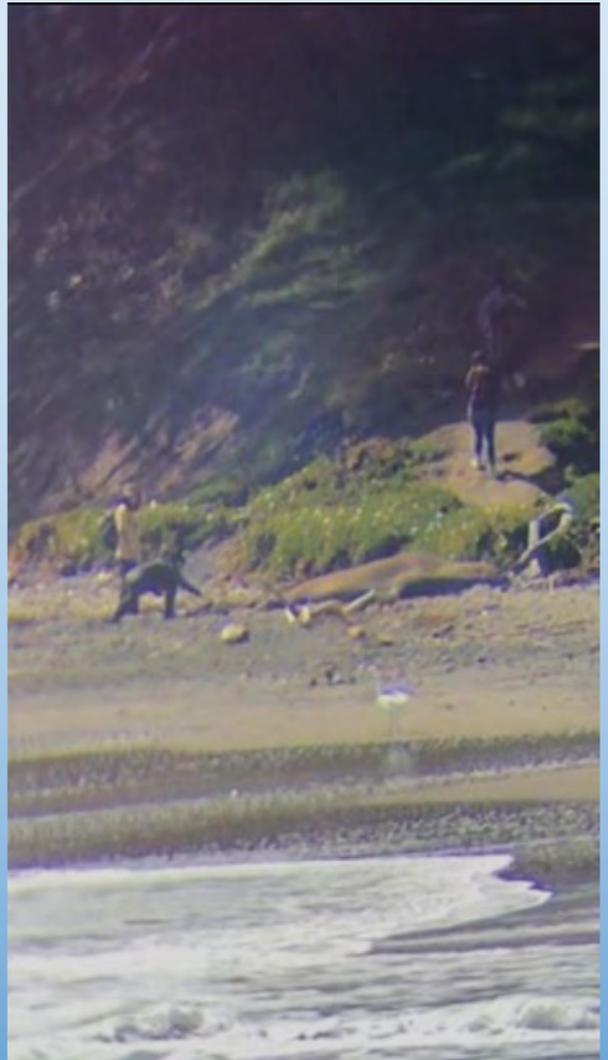






# San Simeon Point Trail

Popular  
destination  
for visitors







Boy throwing rocks  
for seal reaction



Photographer  
unaware of  
seals



Disregard for barriers



Family was observed petting this seal through chicken wire fence

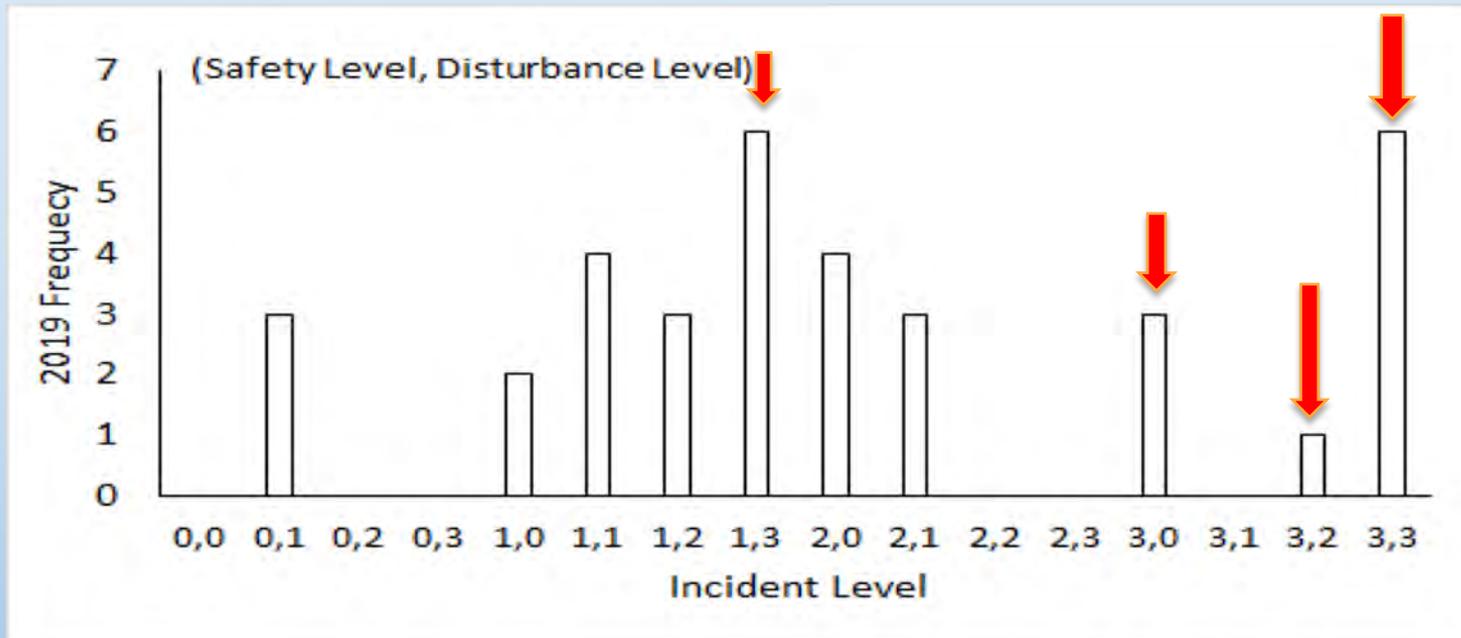
## Disturbance Criteria:

- 0 - No Disturbance
- 1- Seal lifts or turns head
- 2 - Seal moves from a resting position
- 3 - Seal flushes *or* changes direction in movement *or* any physical contact with the seal



## Safety Criteria:

- 0 - No human safety concern
- 1 - Within one (seal) body length
- 2 - Between two seals *or* ocean and seal
- 3 - In water with seals *or* in the path of charging seal *or* within 50 feet of a fight



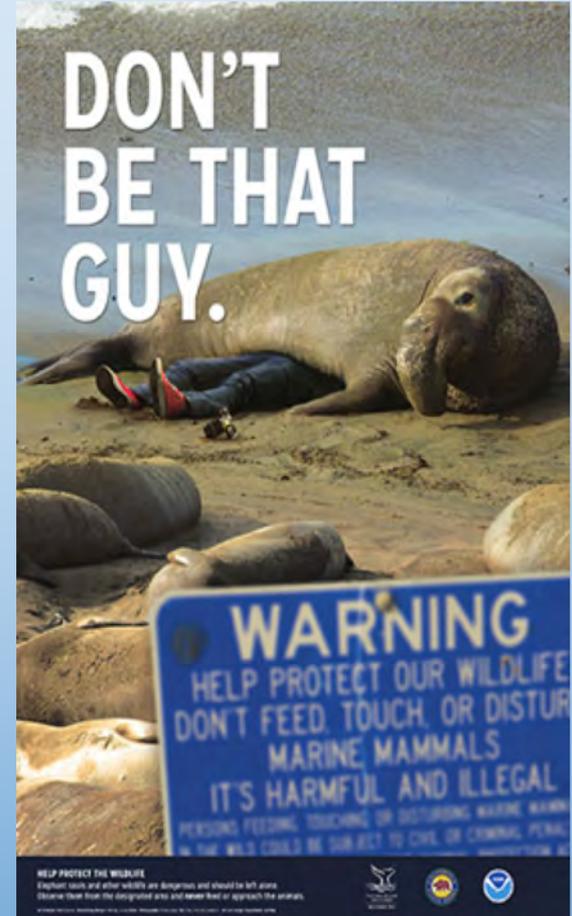
Of 35 observed interactions, 32 (91%) raised human safety concerns; 26 (74%) caused seal disturbances.

➔ 15 (43%) were Level 3 concerns or disturbances ←

# What Does This Mean?

- Longer duration of elephant seal presence in 2019
- Daily census higher in 2019
- Consistent presence of seals in areas with highest human traffic (parking lot, stairs and trailhead)
- Continuous concerns for human safety and wildlife disturbance

**\*DYNAMIC SITUATION WITH HIGH POTENTIAL FOR CONTINUED HUMAN INTERACTION**



# Recommendations for Hearst State Beach

*A Multifaceted, Multi-agency,  
Collaborative Response is Needed  
i.e. A WORKING GROUP!*

- Education and Outreach
- Signage
- Symbolic Fencing
- Directive Fencing
- Social media conservation marketing
- Policy & Enforcement



# Arroyo Laguna State Beach

Visibility of seals from Hwy 1 and accessibility from the parking lot attracts passing motorists to stop.





Current roadside signage inadvertently attracts visitors to stop at this vista point

Visibility of water sports entices visitors to access.



Closed to the public  
December 15-April 30



# Recommendations for Arroyo Laguna State Beach

Will require a different approach than those practices recommended for Hearst State Beach, since a visible docent presence on the beach would only exacerbate the opportunity for visitors to cross the fence line.



# Recommendations for Arroyo Laguna State Beach

Docents do not have authority to restrict access but can offer an educational program (in the parking area) and provide redirection to the main viewing area.

Training and seasonal assignments will be developed, with new sources of volunteers.



# Acknowledgments



The Marine  
Mammal Center



**CAL POLY**  
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& Mathematics



**NOAA  
FISHERIES**