



THE CALIFORNIA COASTAL PRAIRIE OF
POINT REYES
NATIONAL SEASHORE

FROM PREHISTORY TO RANCHING -- AND BEYOND

Bruce Keegan

This Book Will Show

- * How Point Reyes National Seashore could become one of the nation's finest national parks by restoring the natural ecology of the coastal prairie.
- * How endangered species could benefit.
- * How the visitor experience could be improved.
- * Why 20,000 acres of national park lands are closed to the public and are subject to wild animal removal.
- * That cattle operations result in land erosion, overgrazing and water pollution.
- * How some ranchers received generous compensation for their lands but never left.
- * That the National Park Service can offer existing ranchers an opportunity to invest in the future of the coastal prairie.

Special Thanks

To Richard Baker-Lehne for his intensely critical and productive scrutiny of this work, to those individuals who have assisted in the editing, proof reading, and provision of wise advice, and for the enthusiasm and support of those with whom I have shared this information.

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Dedicated
to the memory of

BEULA BATES EDMISTON
1909 - 1993

Mrs. Tasker (Beula) Edmiston founded the Committee for the Preservation of the Tule Elk in 1960, after attending a meeting where state officials were planning a special hunt of the elk. At that time only a few hundred survived.

Her tireless work testifying before Congress and the California State Legislature on behalf of the tule elk, a subspecies found only in California, resulted in the U.S. Department of the Interior listing the tule elk as an endangered species in 1964.

Her continued efforts led to two significant laws:



The California Legislature unanimously enacted the Behr Bill in 1971 to restore the tule elk to 2,000 animals before they could be hunted again.

President Gerald Ford signed a law in 1976 providing for federal and state cooperation to insure habitat for at least 2,000 tule elk in California.

Although progress has been made, the tule elk are still struggling. Only numbering 3,800 in the wild, and scattered in 21 herds statewide, most are again hunted.

At Mrs. Edmiston's recommendation, some elk were reintroduced to Point Reyes National Seashore where they are safe from sports hunting and easily viewed by the public.

A Threatened National Park

Throughout the years, there have been, and will continue to be, special interests who demand the right to live in, log, graze, mine, drill, hunt and otherwise use our special places for their personal gain.

One example of this behavior is the private ranching occurring on more than 20,000 acres within Point Reyes National Seashore.

The National Park Service purchased 64,000 acres at a total cost of \$57,700,000 in 1960s dollars to create this unique park, a place with sweeping grasslands, upland forests, freshwater and saltwater marshes, estuaries, wild surf and calm bays, tide pools, and marine mammals in close proximity to large land mammals -- all within a short distance from the San Francisco Bay Area's seven million people.

After the initial land purchases, a nine-year hiatus delayed the purchase of the vast grasslands, the coastal prairie. This part of the park offers wide biological diversity and ultimately much potential public benefit.

When the additional 38 million dollars, including 15 million dollars to purchase all the prairie, was released by the Nixon White House, arrangements were made to allow the ranchers on the prairie to enter into limited leases. Most signed 20-year leases and received their purchase money up front. During those years, lobbyists were hired on behalf of the ranchers to allow them to remain indefinitely. This is the story of what happened over the past forty years and what could be done to create a far more effective outcome for the American public.

On November 29, 2012, Secretary of the Interior Kenneth Salazar decided not to extend the lease of the *Drakes Bay Oyster Company*, citing the 1976 law passed by congress designating wilderness status to Drakes Estero at the end of 2012.

The Secretary, upon making this decision, directed park service officials to pursue extensions of agricultural permits from 10 to 20 more years within the seashore.

California's Original Landscape

Prehistoric California was a land of plenty. On the coastal prairie of the Point Reyes Peninsula, elk were the dominant large herbivores, in company with pronghorn and blacktail deer. Grizzly abounded there, feeding on the abundant carcasses of whales, sea lions, seals, elk, and huge runs of steelhead trout and coho salmon. Ground squirrels created "prairie dog towns" that housed and fed burrowing owls, badgers, coyotes and foxes. The condor, a great Pleistocene vulture, fed upon the abundance and flourished. The puma (mountain lion) was a dominant predator, as it remains today. All these species, and many more, flourished on the peninsula.

Native Americans, then Spaniards, Mexicans, and Americans moved into the region, each group modifying the land for its own purposes.

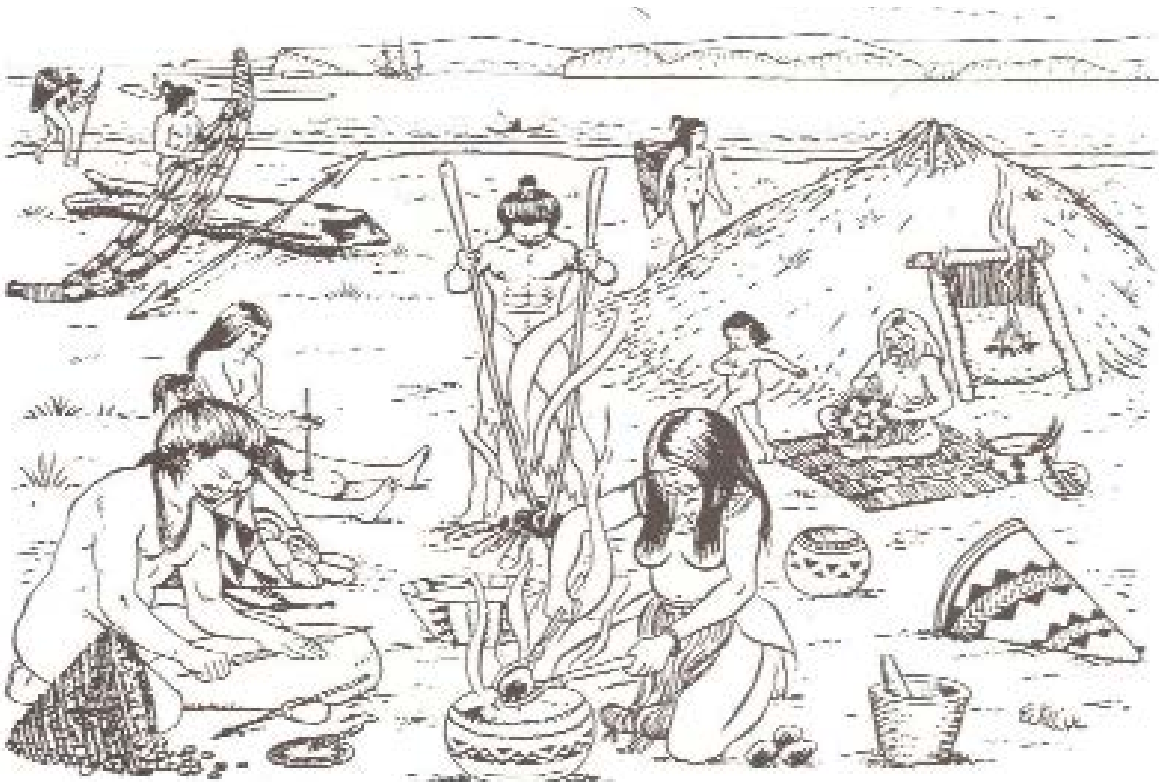
These successive immigrations affected the land and its varied inhabitants. Now, the National Park Service will determine the ways this coastal prairie will be used in the decades to come.



Human Impact The Miwok

The Coast Miwok People inhabited lands from the Golden Gate through Marin County to Southern Sonoma County for millennia. They lived by hunting and gathering. In spring, they would revisit seasonal villages within the Point Reyes Peninsula for birds, deer, elk, shellfish and salmon. Frequently, upon leaving for the season, they would burn off the countryside to reduce brush and to create favorable conditions for new growth of grasses favorable to game animals. These were the people who greeted Francis Drake in 1579 and Sebastian Rodrigues Cermeño in 1595 whose Manila galleon, the *San Agustin*, was wrecked in Drakes Bay by a November storm.

Two hundred years later, the Miwok way of life was shattered by the northward expansion of the Spanish mission system. From San Francisco, the missionaries sent parties of soldiers and Franciscan monks to found missions in San Rafael and Sonoma. By persuasion and coercion, the Miwok were brought to the missions, and by 1820 their villages in the peninsula were abandoned.



Coast Miwok Life

Drake's chaplain Francis Fletcher described the Native-American men as very strong, great runners and skilled hunters and fishermen. The women gathered plant foods and shellfish, and were superb basket weavers. Miwok activities included (clockwise from upper left) placing a reed canoe on a log to dry, carrying shellfish in burden baskets, weaving a basket in front of an earth-covered dwelling, cooking with hot stones in water-tight baskets, and grinding strings of clam-shell beads.



Mexicans and Americans

The padres ranged longhorn cattle as far west as Point Reyes to be used by anyone who wanted hide and tallow.

The Mexican Revolution against Spain created an independent Mexico in 1821. Eventually, the new Mexican Government secularized the missions and freed the native peoples. The governors of Alta California granted numerous land grants to Mexican citizens, and individuals claimed lands in remote areas more informally.

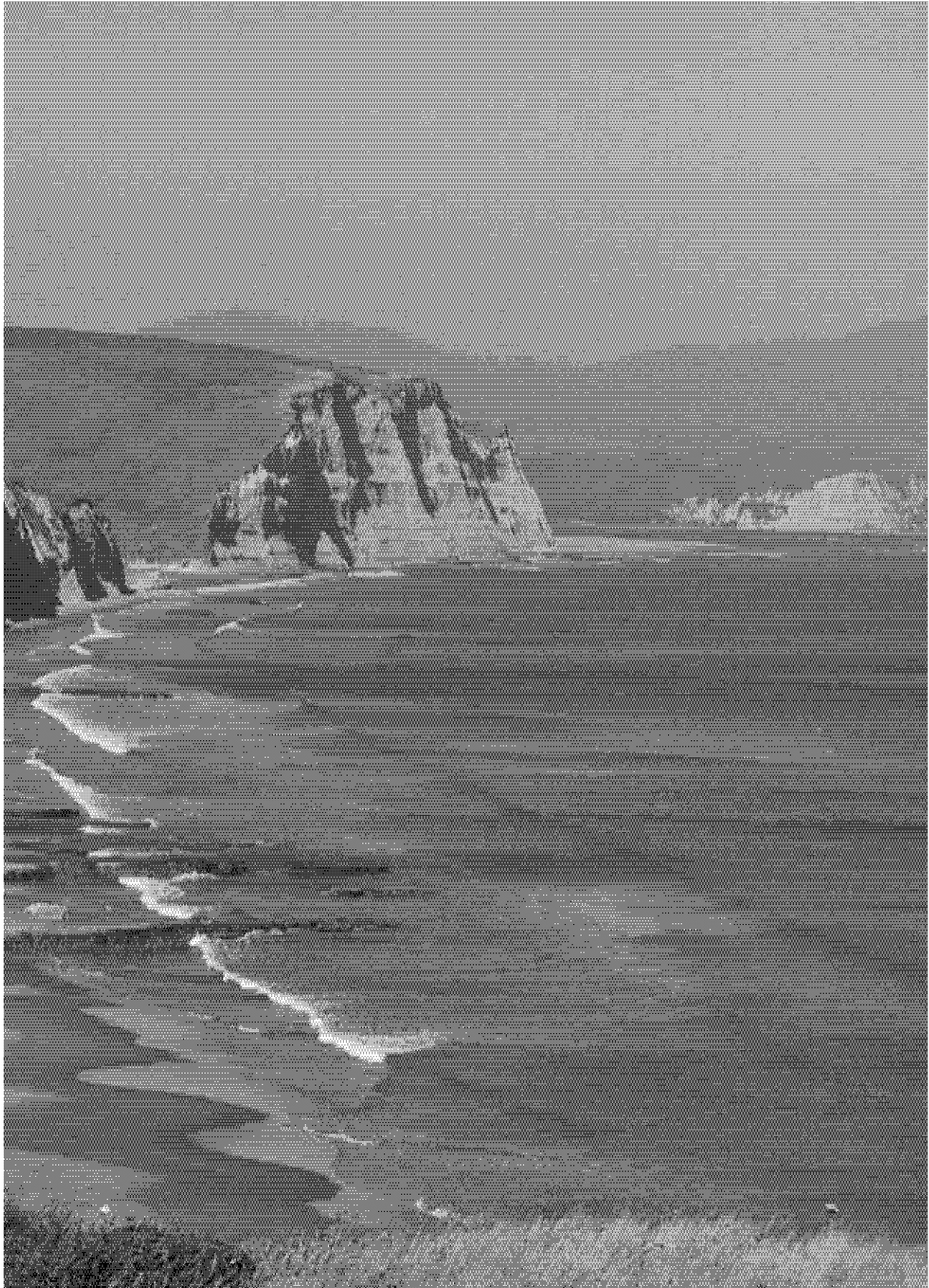
The earliest claims to the Point Reyes Peninsula were by Rafael Garcia, a former corporal in the Mexican Army, who laid claim to the lands surrounding Bolinas Lagoon, and Colonel James Richard Berry, who claimed the Olema Valley, both in 1836. Berry later claimed additional land north to the present town of Inverness.

For the next two decades, through the 1846 Bear Flag Revolt and the Mexican War and well into the new American era, legal and illegal land sales, gifts and trades of land, encroachments, mortgages and loans, lawsuits, three murders, and a Vigilance-Committee hanging created legal chaos for landholding in western Marin County. However, few people lived on the lands that they claimed. Hunting clubs staked claims in the region and killed all the larger game animals and predators.

Land Division

The law firm of Shafter, Shafter, Park and Heydenfeld took control of Point Reyes in 1857. After selling off 2,200 acres at Tomales Point, the firm began to split the rest into ranches which it leased to four families who left after a short time, taking their livestock with them. Park and Heydenfeld sold out to the Shafter brothers and O. J. Shafter's son-in-law, Charles Howard, in 1865. The Shafter and Howard split the land into smaller ranch units, labeling them A through Z and then adding names to complete the designations of the 30 units. The partners built houses and barns and stocked the land with dairy cattle and sheep, then leased the ranches, buildings and livestock to Irish, Swiss and Portuguese immigrants.

From 1919 through 1939, the former Shafter-Howard lands were bought by land speculators and resold to the former tenants. During the Great Depression, some of the land was converted from dairy farming to beef ranching and vegetable farming. As time went by, more and more ranches sold off their dairy stock and converted to beef-cattle operations.



Point Reyes National Seashore

By the mid-1930s, the Point Reyes Peninsula was beginning to attract attention as a potential recreation area. Conrad Wirth surveyed the coast for the National Park Service and stated that the Point Reyes Peninsula would be a prime location for a national park. Local fundraisers purchased fifty-two acres at Drake's Beach and donated the land to Marin County for a park in 1939, which was followed by Margaret McClure's donation of McClure Beach to the county in 1942 in exchange for a paved road to the beach and her ranch. A year later the county planning commission proposed a Point Reyes Scenic Reservation to be reached by paved roads throughout the peninsula.

Wirth's concept was revived in 1958. The National Park Service announced plans for the 35,000-acre Point Reyes National Seashore. Support came from the Sierra Club and the newly-formed Point Reyes National Seashore Foundation. Opposition came from ranchers in the coastal prairie zone and from real estate developers who hoped to build vacation homes on the ranch lands.

President John F. Kennedy signed the legislation to create the Point Reyes National Seashore on September 13, 1962. It authorized the acquisition of 64,000 acres, to which the State of California added 11,416 acres of tidelands and the County of Marin deeded Drake's Beach and McClure Beach.

The Seashore was formally established at Drake's Beach by Lady Bird Johnson on September 16, 1972. Land purchases, totalling \$57,700,000, slowly filled in the acreage controlled by the Seashore, and additions to the original boundaries occurred over the next decade. Today, the Seashore encompasses just over 71,000 acres. On the prairie, more than 20,000 acres are used by beef and dairy operations under lease-back from the Seashore.





The Ranches Today

The Department of the Interior purchased all the ranch lands in the 1960s and 1970s. Many of the former owners moved out of the Seashore. Some families which were on the land when the Seashore was established were lessees, not landowners. Seventeen ranchers on the coastal prairie entered a lease-back program which provided them with twenty- to thirty-year leases. All these leases have expired. Two lessees have given up their interests to the land. The others have obtained short-term leases. Six are still dairy operations, an historic use which is in sharp decline because of competition from Central Valley corporate dairies. The other ranches are sheep or beef-cattle operations. Some families control more than one ranch, and nearly all range livestock on thousands of private and public acres outside the Seashore.

The National Park Service has set up signs in front of all the ranching operations within the park, declaring them historic. However, land use has been in constant flux since the arrival of Europeans 179 years ago. Ranching in its current form has only existed since 1919 and continues to change.

Dairying, the purportedly historic use within the seashore, is declining and now makes up less than one percent of dairy operations within Marin and Sonoma Counties. Continuing the ranching within the Seashore on the grounds that it is of historic significance is not supported by its history.

On vast tracts of the prairie, the land has been compacted by heavy grazing and impacted by the removal of animals needed for soil health.

Exotic Axis and Fallow deer had been introduced into the peninsula in 1948 and had become part of the landscape. Half of them, 1,000 animals, were shot in 2008.

Tule elk, a federally registered endangered species, were reintroduced into natural areas in 1978. Some ranchers have requested that the Park Service remove elk that are coming onto ranch lands and eating their grasses and drinking their water.

An often-heard reason for keeping deer and elk away from cattle is that the wild animals spread Johne's (yo-nees) Disease, a wasting disease of confinement, which infects an estimated two-thirds of the nation's dairy herds. The reality is that cattle introduce disease to wildlife, and that the pathogens that cattle shed into the soil will die within a year unless the soil is reinfected. Once cattle are removed, the land becomes safe for deer, elk, and other wildlife in a short time.



The Future

The Potential for the Coastal Prairie

Point Reyes National Seashore holds the potential for a renaissance of the ancient coastal prairie at the border of the San Francisco Bay Area. With 10,000 prairie acres already set aside as wilderness, and the 20,000 acres of ranch land added to it as leases expire, the coastal prairie to the west of the Inverness Ridge could become a large nature preserve with sharply defined natural boundaries.

Although much of the coastal prairie has been changed by artichoke, bean, and potato farming and by the introduction of European and North African grasses, the wild California grasses, flowers and soft-bodied plants and herbs survive. Given a chance, they will reclaim their historic range. They evolved with the elk and pronghorn and columbia blacktail deer, along with the pocket gophers that so fascinated Chaplain Fletcher of the *Golden Hind* in 1579. The elk and deer would thrive.

We should allow the ground squirrels, chipmunks and voles to repopulate the grasslands. This would benefit the coyotes, foxes, badgers, pumas and bobcats. We would see the return of resident hawks, eagles, and burrowing owls.

Pronghorn could be reintroduced, following the successful elk program of the 1970s.

Restoring this native mix of plants and animals would restore the natural balance of the prairie.





The Visitor Experience

This *Island in Time* could become a living lesson in restoration and sustainability of a natural area that will enthrall visitors from around the world.

Hikers, bird watchers, animal watchers, and researchers could work together on a project that will see a return of a large natural system. Scholars could study how wildlife can thrive near a major metropolitan area.

Point Reyes is huge and would give urban citizens a chance to see part of their natural world, which would be open to the public through hiking and horse trails from trailheads throughout the region.

Outside the Seashore, but closely tied to it, there is the Golden Gate National Recreation Area that stretches to San Francisco's Golden Gate and provides further ecological regions for wilderness experiences.



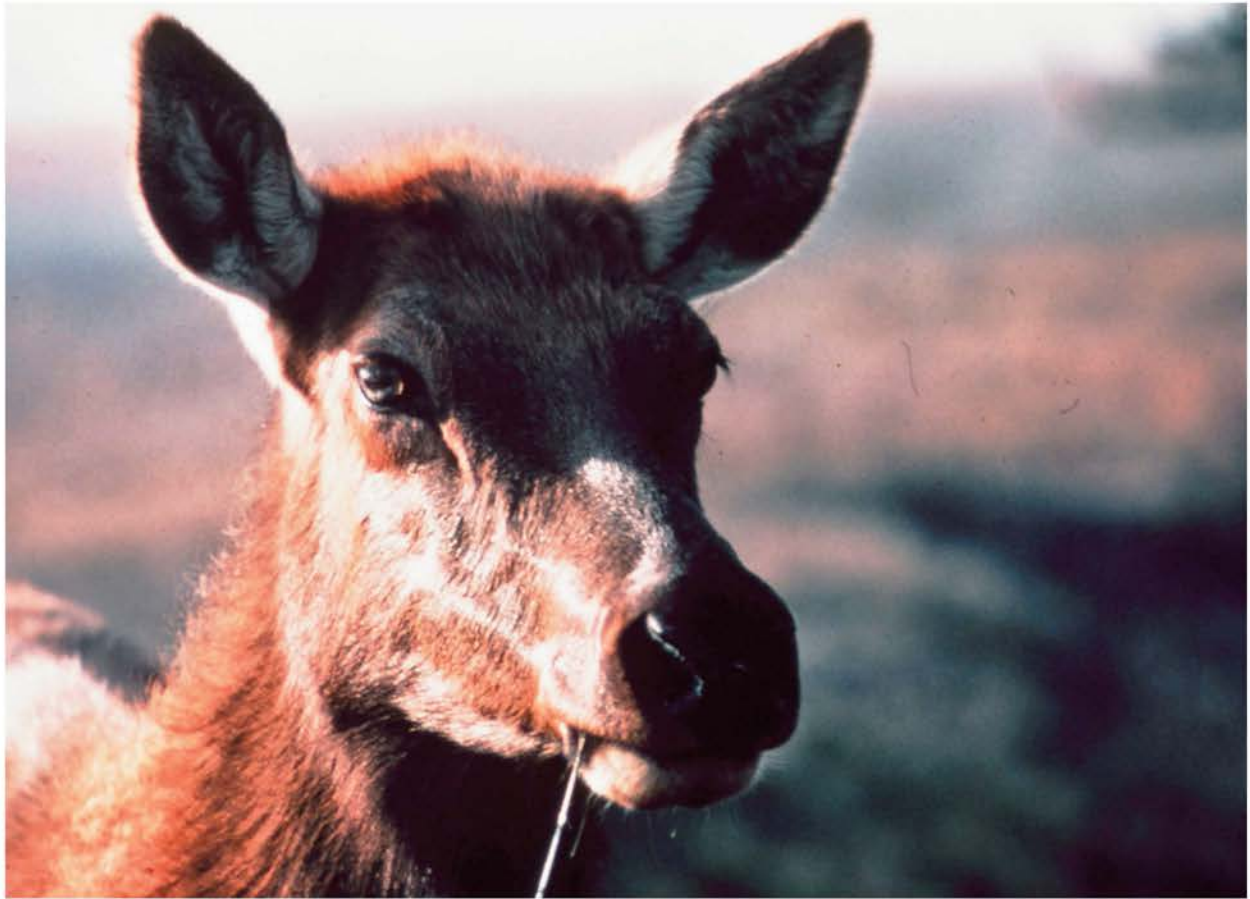


The Economic Potentials for Marin County and Beyond

The Point Reyes National Seashore attracts two million visitors each year, with an economic effect on the immediate region estimated at fifty million dollars per year in restaurant sales, hotel stays, and shop sales, generating 650 jobs outside the seashore. The small towns of Olema and Point Reyes Station benefit significantly from the presence of the Seashore. Areas farther from the Seashore provide support services for those going to and coming from the coast. These numbers will increase as the Seashore offers more varied experiences.

Some of the rancher families already benefit from tourism and they could be encouraged to invest in additional tourist facilities, such as a full-service lodge and a bed-and-breakfast within the prairie.





Tule Elk

Found only in California, this unique and beautiful animal is now the official emblem of Point Reyes National Seashore.

Once found throughout the California Central Valley grasslands and Central California coastal prairies, they were nearly exterminated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In 1960, the Committee for the Preservation of the Tule Elk was formed, dedicated to finding lands where the elk could be reintroduced and allowed to roam free. Today there are an estimated 3,800 tule elk scattered in 21 herds within state wildlife refuges, all of which permit hunting.

The vast grasslands of the coastal prairie at Point Reyes offer the best chance for their survival in large numbers within former habitat.

In 1978, a small herd was reintroduced to Tomales Point on the northern edge of the prairie. Here they thrived, and in 1999 the park moved 45 elk south to the Limantour Wilderness within the park. To insure that they were healthy, blood and fecal samples were taken and the animals were all inoculated against disease.

Today, some lessees are protesting against the elk within the park.

The *Marin Independent Journal* headlined, "Rebounding Tule Elk Causing Headaches for Point Reyes Ranchers. Ranchers are concerned the elk are too often getting on their lands and eating grass and drinking water supplies intended for their dairy cattle and other agricultural operations."

The *Wall Street Journal* reported that Marin Agricultural Commissioner Stacy Carlsen said, "It's a major problem for these ranchers."

The Point Reyes Light stated, "Ranchers foresee elk crisis, fear park inaction." The article then went on to articulate the growing anger among the lessees.

So far, they are only talking about 50 animals on 20,000 acres.

Point Reyes is the only place where the elk can thrive unmolested for the public to enjoy.



Pronghorn

Once common throughout the Bay Area, the pronghorn is America's "antelope."

The beautiful pronghorn has evolved here, in Western North America and is unrelated to the true antelopes of Africa and Asia.

During the Pleistocene, a now extinct American cheetah evolved here with the pronghorn. Over the past three million years, this small herbivore became arguably the fastest land mammal in the world.

The cheetah can do 65 miles per hour on short pursuits but then becomes exhausted. The pronghorn can do 65 miles per hour and keep loping along at a reduced 40 miles per hour.

Found in family units dominated by a territorial buck, they make a striking sight for those looking across the grasslands. Ultimately, if not hunted, they can become as accessible as the elk.

Natural predators include coyotes which sometimes catch newborn fawns.

Within California, only about 6,000 animals are found in the extreme north-eastern part of the state where they are selectively hunted.

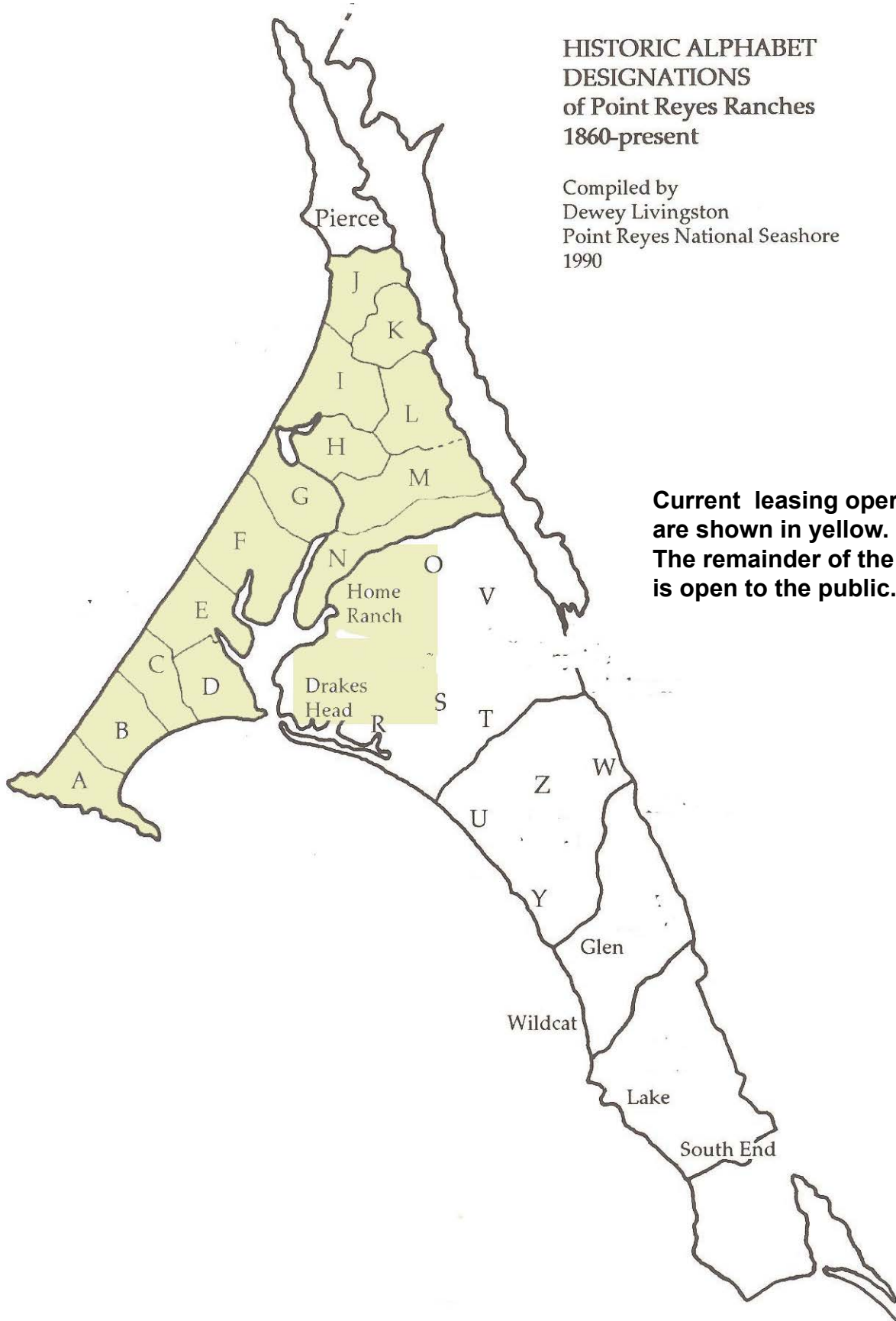
Small herds have been reintroduced to areas where the range is poor and thus they are not flourishing. They need native grassland abundant with soft-bodied plants and herbs.

The coastal prairie at Point Reyes offers the best chance for this special animal to flourish and for people to see living examples of a species that many had never heard of.

Benefits of pronghorn restoration include the fact that pronghorn feed on plants that other animals consider undesirable. Because pronghorn do not jump and live on open grasslands, it will be possible to confine them to the Seashore's prairie west of the Inverness Ridge with something as simple as a woven wire sheep fence.

**HISTORIC ALPHABET
DESIGNATIONS
of Point Reyes Ranches
1860-present**

Compiled by
Dewey Livingston
Point Reyes National Seashore
1990



**Current leasing operations
are shown in yellow.
The remainder of the park
is open to the public.**

The Lessees

The National Park Service purchased all the ranches on the prairie between 1963 and 1978. Many of these ranches were leased back to the former owners and previous lessees for 20 and 30 years. All of these leases have expired. Since then, lessees have been operating private ranches on the prairie grasslands under short-term leases.

A, B and L Ranches. Joseph Mendoza sold **A** Ranch, of 1,084 acres, **B** Ranch of 1,353 acres, and **L** Ranch of 1,132 acres, a total of 3,569 acres, in 1971 for \$8,000,000. Mendoza signed a twenty-year lease back for all three ranches, which expired in 1991 and has been followed by short-term lease backs to the present day. These ranches are now operated by Joseph Mendoza, Jr.

C Ranch. Thomas and Virginia Gallagher sold 958 acres in 1964 for \$656,500. Jim Spaletta, a relative of Virginia Gallagher, never owned the land but was leasing and operating this ranch as a dairy. Spaletta Dairies now operates the ranch under a short-term lease. There also are Spaletta dairies outside the park.

D Ranch. Alice C. Hall sold 1,192 acres in 1971 for \$1,060,000. Because of family tragedies, this ranch was surrendered to the National Park Service. One third is fallow and designated wilderness, while the other two thirds are grazed by an adjacent lessee.

E Ranch. Theresa Brazil sold 1,471 acres in 1971 for \$1,224,300. A twenty-year leaseback was signed which expired in 1991. The dairy business moved to Sonoma County, ending dairy operations at this ranch. Today a relative raises young stock and grows silage (livestock feed) on the land under a short-term lease.

F Ranch. Edward Gallagher sold 1,566 acres in 1967 for \$1,135,000. Today, heirs raise beef cattle under a short-term lease. All buildings have been demolished and no one lives there.

G Ranch. The Trust for Public Land sold 1,191.5 acres in 1978 for \$1,370,000. A tenant, the Lunny family, had been leasing the land since 1947. Today, the Lunnys operate a beef-cattle operation under a short-term lease.

H Ranch. Alfred Grossi sold 1,148 acres in 1971 for \$909,800. Grossi signed a twenty-year lease, which expired in 1991. In 1976, Grossi sold his dairy herd, moved to Nicasio, and retired to beef ranching. Grossi

heirs raise beef cattle on the ranch under a short-term lease.

I Ranch. James McClure and Trustee under will of Helen L. McClure, Alma Kehoe, and executors under the will of James V. sold 1,692 acres in 1971 for \$1,345,000. Today the McClures operate a dairy and grow silage (feed) under a short-term lease.

J Ranch. The Kehoe family sold 1,263 acres in 1968 for \$1,261,850. The family signed a thirty-year lease which expired in 2002. Today the Kehoes operate a dairy and grow silage under a short-term lease.

K Ranch. James Lundgren sold 337 acres in 1977 for \$353,850. His lease was bought back by the National Park Service in 1992. Today, these lands are leased to outside interests.

L Ranch. Refer to A and B Ranches.

M Ranch. Domingo jr. and Richard Louis Grossi sold 1,193 acres in 1971 for \$921,000. The Grossis negotiated a twenty-year lease which expired in 1992 and has been replaced with a short-term lease. Today heirs run beef-cattle on the property.

N Ranch. Edward and Hildegard Heims sold 1,135 acres in 1963 for \$850,000. The Heims took the money and left. Today, the Heims house is used for park ranger housing. The land is leased to the family of Marshall Rancher Merv McDonald for cattle grazing under a short-term lease.

Home Ranch. The heirs of the Leland Stanford Murphy estate sold 3,012 acres in six different transactions between 1968 and 1975 for a total of \$550,328 and in exchange for 1,800 acres of land in San Diego for residential development. The Murphys signed a twenty-year lease on 20 acres around the ranch complex, which expired in 1988 and was replaced by a short-term lease. The remainder has continued to be leased to the heirs for cattle grazing under a short-term lease.

Beleaguered Farmers ?

The ranching families at Point Reyes range from well to do to wealthy. Nearly all range livestock outside the seashore on both private and public lands, controlling thousands of acres. Some of these ranchers never owned land within the seashore but were leasing from the owners who sold to the National Park Service.

Almost immediately after the land was sold, the tenants within the seashore hired lobbyists and attorneys to plead their case to allow them to remain within the seashore in perpetuity. Even a Marin County supervisor travels to Washington to lobby on behalf of the ranchers.

Because of lack of public knowledge and organized opposition, these leases have been automatically renewed through year-to-year or longer leasebacks. These graziers have been allowed to remain long after their original leases expired.

It is time for the people to demand that private ranching operations within Point Reyes National Seashore be discontinued as current leases come to an end.

With the livestock gone, the restored prairie will become the true focus of this special part of the national park system. The prairie wildlife will add significantly to the Seashore's natural spectacle, which complements the rich history of the Native Americans, Francis Drake, and the Manila galleon trade, all within a scenic forty-mile trip through the Golden Gate National Recreation Area from San Francisco.

Some ranching families may be interested in investing in the prairie's future. The Park Service could approach the old ranching families and ask them to be a part of the restoration projects.

Perhaps the families who wish to remain within the seashore would invest in a full-service hacienda-style lodge that would place visitors in immediate touch with the natural world of the coastal prairie. A bread-and-breakfast inn might be desirable for those who want to visit the lighthouse and see elephant seals and whales. The infrastructure is already installed on some of the best locations for such projects. Private money is there too, in the hands of some of the resident ranching families.

During the long-term restoration process, and afterward, the public will have full hiking and horseback-riding access to enjoy the variety of life that will become increasingly manifest. Students and researchers will be deeply involved in this process, benefitting both themselves and the park.

