

A C O N V E R S A T I O N W I T H POINT REYES SUPERINTENDENT DON NEUBACHER

By the editor



Popular with staff, passionate about natural resource management, and savvy about science, Don Neubacher is a park superintendent for the century. With an undergraduate degree in environmental planning and management, he set out on a National Park Service career that took him initially to Glacier Bay National Park, Alaska—then a national monument—then to Point Reyes National Seashore, California, as a seasonal employee. Following his pursuit of a Master's degree in resource management and a teaching stint at Humboldt State University, Neubacher became the Chief of Visitor Services at Point Reyes. Later, his planning skills were put to the test during a four-year assignment with the Denver Service Center working on the general management plan for the Presidio. After serving as Deputy Manager of the Presidio, he became the Superintendent of Point Reyes in 1995. Regional Director John Reynolds describes him as a "leader in everything that has do with resource management and science in parks." Winner of the 1998 regional superintendent of the year award, Don is co-chair of the Natural Resource Challenge implementation committee. The affable superintendent sat down with the editor recently for a conversation about the use of science in park management, the Natural Resource Challenge, and the future of resource preservation at Point Reyes.

Q. In his book *Preserving Nature*, Richard Sellars detailed an appalling historical lack of park management based on science and ecological awareness within the National Park Service. Are we making any progress?

A. I honestly believe a change is occurring. A lot of the newer superintendents are coming from a broader selection pool. I and a couple others in the Pacific West Region come from a resource management background, and that is somewhat atypical. I think more and more of this is occurring, and it brings a different perspective. Over time—if we continue this—we can start managing a little bit differently.

Q. How?

A. Our decision making is a lot more complex than before. More people are knowledgeable about park resources and park values, so that you have to make decisions these days that are based on science or some background that gives you a footing to make decisions correctly. In the past we made decisions primarily towards visitor services, tourism, and on the politics of the moment. I think we're heading towards ecosystem management decisions based on science. The complexity of our society today dictates that. But the second thing is that the Park Service has evolved. Before, most of our money went into visitor services and maintenance, activities that really weren't perpetuating the natural integrity of Point Reyes. Now, because we have a professional resource program, many superintendents talk about ecosystem management, ecological principles, and making sure the ecosystem is intact over time. That's changing now, although it's not easy to accomplish internally.

Q. Give me an example of scientifically informed resource management at Point Reyes.

A. We just restored native Tule elk to the park's wilderness area. When we started the process we were blown out of the water at our first public meeting—I mean, there was very little support. The community wanted us to back up and get good information. So we collected three years of data, and when we came forward with a new plan based on good science, good population dynamics, and good information, we quickly went through the public process. The elk are restored to a wilderness area now and with a lot of public support. There is a major difference if you have good information that can actually back up what you're trying to accomplish.

Q. What specific information was helpful?

A. The public wanted information on population dynamics, disease, and future population control, if necessary. Our experts overcame some of the concern about elk moving out of the park by sharing their research on elk home ranges, which showed that the animals were fairly sedentary. So far, so good. They're staying where we thought they would. We spent about \$300,000 trying to get the information so that we could overcome those obstacles.

Q. Point Reyes is a good example of a park that exists in a complex landscape of multiple jurisdictions, in-holdings, infrastructure, and bordering communities. How do you grapple with that?

A. Clearly, management of Point Reyes cannot be done in isolation. We have two national marine sanctuaries offshore, the State Department of Fish and Game, the Marin



Open Space District, and the water districts; we're even adjacent to Golden Gate National Recreation Area. Altogether, we manage about 90,000 acres in Marin County, which is a fairly progressive and very environmentally aware community. The problem with Marin, however, is that it's adjacent to the San Francisco Bay Area, which has 7,000,000 people and is projected to grow to 9,000,000 by 2030.

Q. What are the implications for Point Reyes?

A. When you look at this regional system, you see major problems ahead. Currently, a big corridor called Highway 101 is being developed all the way up to Santa Rosa. If you look 30 or 40 years down the road you see that we are getting cut off, that there's severe habitat fragmentation. There is not good statewide planning in California or even good county planning. I think in the future, having good science is the only way we're going to be able to move forward in a systematic and strategic way to save the park's integrity over time.

Q. In October 1995, you had a serious fire in the park. What was the park's experience with this?

A. The Vision fire occurred up on Inverness Ridge by Mount Vision. For us, it was a massive fire, about 13,000 acres. It started just outside the park by an illegal campfire on state parkland. Because of the urban interface with this park, the damage to adjacent housing in the wildland-urban interface was really phenomenal—\$50,000,000 worth of damage. The interesting part about the fire is that while it was a human disaster, there was very little damage to the natural system. For example, we have a Bishop pine forest, which is a fire-prone pine. The fire removed a lot of the adults that were about 30 or 40 years old, but now they're replenishing. In my mind, the fire helped make the system healthy, and that's pretty much what the science has shown us. We have been completing extensive research since the fire occurred.

Q. Were there any negative resource impacts?

A. A subspecies of beaver called the Point Reyes mountain beaver is experiencing a very slow recovery time. That's about the only thing that still lingers as a negative event. As a matter of fact, nesting success among birds was higher. Monitoring after the fire has shown that most natural systems, even some of the endangered plant species, have responded positively to the fire.

Q. Didn't the fire suppression effort cause concern for the welfare of certain resources?

A. Yeah. We had bulldozer lines and some watershed issues that needed attention. We brought in the Burned Area Emergency Rehab Team to respond to the work that the firefighters had done. We got funding over a two- or three-year period to do the rehab. They also helped us work with the public. Because they were so professional, so good, and knew exactly what they were doing, the team helped build confidence in the community about the National Park Service's ability to respond to fire and rehab after fire.

Q. How did that event affect fire management in the park generally?

A. It focused the attention of the public on the potential good of fire in terms of hazardous fuel reduction. And it also made them realize that you can survive a fire, too. Today that has really paid off because we are updating our fire management plan. We burn maybe 500 to 1,000 acres per year. Before the Vision fire, I don't think we would have gotten any public support for prescribed fire. Now we get tremendous public support. And we learned a tremendous amount, too, in terms of regeneration.

Q. Your elephant seal population is increasing. Why is this a concern?

A. Elephant seals are a great conservation success story. They were driven to the brink of extinction and were restricted to one island off Mexico. Over time, they've recolonized the California coast. We got our first pup, I believe, in 1980. We now have a population that's growing and is currently between 1,500 and 2,000. They haul out during the wintertime, pup their young, and molt. We have tremendous habitat for them, dunes and open beach, and a productive system offshore. So there are good food sources nearby. We're not sure, but the population could grow to 10,000 seals. We have two sites that they use a lot—the headlands of Point Reyes and Drakes Beach—but they're starting to colonize Point Reyes Beach. And the question is: How willing is the public to give up their beaches to elephant seals?

Q. Has it gotten to that point yet?

A. No, but it's just around the corner.

Q. How are you preparing for the inevitable confrontation?

A. We're trying to build support through our educational outreach and elephant seal docent programs, but there are definitely some management problems ahead. It takes time to grow public acceptance that elephant seals deserve to have this beach. Dr. Sarah Allen, the park's Science Advisor, has done a phenomenal job of collecting information on the elephant seal populations, monitoring them, and observing their population dynamics. We can share this information with the public and build a constituency for the seals over time, till people are willing to give up a beach space.

Q. Your resource management staff has grown during your tenure. Is it adequate now?

A. When I came on board, there wasn't a Division of Resource Management; it was a component of the Ranger Division. There were only two full-time resource managers and maybe a seasonal. Since then we've gone up to almost 20 FTEs [or full-time equivalents] and they're doing superb work. We've created a Resource Management Division and a Division of Science and Research. We've hired a wildlife biologist and a plant ecologist. We have active vegetation management and habitat restoration programs. Sarah is doing good work with outside institutions. We probably have, right now, 60–70 research projects being conducted by outside insti-

tutions. We also have significant cultural resources, so we've created a Cultural Resource Division. They're just in the beginning stages. So we're in pretty good shape.

Q. How did you fund the increases?

A. You have to get on the regional priority list, which gets combined at the Washington level in the budget proposal. We argued very strongly that Point Reyes had significant resources. We've got 23 federally listed species in the park and we needed a professional staff to do the job well. We've gotten a couple base increases for the resource program. We also received some outside private funding and reallocated park funds.

Q. How did you foster interdivisional support for building up resource management?

A. After the Vision fire we spent time going through a strategic planning process. We set some overall park goals, vision statements, and everything else. It probably took us a year to get through that process. But it brought all of the divisions around to our primary mission, which is preservation of these resources, the nation's heritage, for eternity. Are some staff feeling that the resource divisions are getting most of the funds these days? Yeah, for sure. However, they were the smallest division for so long; they're just finally catching up. You know, it takes a lot of work on the superintendent's part to make sure that all divisions are feeling good about these overall goals and feel part of the team and get rewards, too, when there is additional funding.

Q. Do other divisions get involved in resource management?

A. Yes. During the Tule elk project, we had a major effort with helicopters to capture the elk and relocate them (see photo this page). We invited the administrative staff to certain events because they were doing the contracting. Obviously, law enforcement was very good at keeping areas closed when we were moving elk. Maintenance blindfolded the elk and assisted in the processing. It takes a lot of muscle to lift the animals into the processing area so we could do the blood testing. So maintenance literally wrestled with these elk as we processed them, and they did a great job. All divisions participated, including me. I was out there helping to hold down the elk and moving them into the horse trailer so we could take them to the relocation site.

Q. Was interpretation involved in the elk project?

A. Yeah, they were on site and did great public information officer work. We needed a strategic effort to get information out to the public. They've done everything from publications to integrating information into their programs, displays, and exhibits on site. They've also helped us build a strategy to inform the public on other critical

resource management issues—elephant seals, wilderness issues, and coho salmon—and have done a wonderful job.

Q. Describe your relationship with Sarah Allen, your Science Advisor, and Bill Shook, your Chief of Resource Management.

A. First, I want to say that we have a superb management team overall, and Sarah and Bill are core members of that team. I use the advice of Sarah and Bill almost on a daily basis, and that's why I don't like the idea of centralizing this expertise. They need to be on site near the resources so that superintendents have this expertise available to them on a daily basis.



Q. Most people believe that, certainly.

A. We've got to have those people standing next to superintendents to make sure we at least have good information and make the right decision at the right time. You still have to have political will to do the right thing, but overall, if you don't have information, don't know the options, and are not doing good compliance, then you're potentially making some big mistakes long term.

Q. Your region has established several science advisor positions in the past few years. I think you recognize how technical assistance needs to be easily accessible.

A. As a superintendent, I don't see how we could live without individuals like Dave Graber at Sequoia—I mean, he's phenomenal in terms of his knowledge of the Sierras. And Gary Davis at Channel Islands is recognized internationally for his work on marine systems. Sarah is well known because of her expertise in the Gulf of the Farallones on bird distribution and elephant seals, and all the productivity that occurs out there. I'm just hoping that the Park Service will continue to build a cadre of these great minds that can give us really good information and lead the nation in terms of how we should accomplish research not only in the parks but also in the regional context. Because we need partners and I think this approach is very complementary to BRD, [the Biological Resources Division of the U.S. Geological Survey]. We all need to work together to get the science we need to properly manage these important national resources.

Q. Who are some of your primary research partners?

A. We have a BRD field station at Point Reyes and Gary Fellers is integral to the park management team, too. He's internationally recognized for his work on amphibians, including red-legged frogs. Judd Howell at the Western Ecological Research Center at Sacramento State University provides us other expertise. We also work with Stanford and have great connections with the University of California Bodega Marine Lab and Tiburon Marine



Lab operated by San Francisco State. Sarah has brought all this expertise together.

Q. How so?

A. Sarah knows the options and she speaks the right language with the universities. She probably has five graduate students working for her now. This year alone, because of her expertise in bringing talent to the area, we have probably leveraged a half-million dollars of research that we're not even paying for. We just give them access to the resource and assistance to get the work done. Having Sarah to get these people in and do good research has been phenomenal in terms of getting stuff done.

Q. It sounds like you're describing a function of the learning center network, which is in development across the country. Tell us about that.

A. There are two major concepts behind the learning center. One is that you get researchers on site and give them the essentials: a laboratory, a classroom, office space, and access to your park information. You facilitate their work with great benefit to the park. We probably have a backlog of \$20,000,000 worth of research and resource management needs. If we can get them in, help them do the research, and leverage a half-million dollars a year or whatever, we're starting to lower that backlog. The second concept is that students or our staff would work side by side with researchers and there would be a learning component. You would get these school kids hooked and, over time, build the next generation of scientists. There are five prototype learning centers now: Point Reyes, Cape Cod, Great Smoky Mountains, Rocky Mountain, and Kenai Fjords in southern Alaska. We're hoping to have money to add five to ten per year over the course of the Natural Resource Challenge, which goes to 2005. If we get 32 centers across the country funded and working together it's a great vision for moving natural resource stewardship forward.

Q. Does it involve housing?

A. Yeah. One of the biggest problems we have in Marin County is that housing is way too expensive. If you want a grad student that's just barely surviving to do research in your park, you've got to provide housing.

Q. When will your facility be ready?

A. We're taking a former historic complex and rehabilitating the buildings; you know, wiring them for GIS and Internet access, creating office space and a comfortable living situation. Over the last three years, we have had to upgrade the sewage treatment facilities. We still need about \$80,000 to finish up the classroom. But we've got public and private support. We're pretty close. We hope to inaugurate it in fiscal year 2001.

Q. Your park is one of 13 units in the Golden Gate Biosphere Reserve. What significance does this designation hold for your operation?

A. All of us know that parks will never survive as islands, that our resources are integrated into regional ecosystems and, for air and water, broader systems. The biosphere reserve designation gives us a higher status internationally and it encourages us to work cooperatively with the other entities that are part of the biosphere. We meet on a regular basis and look at joint programs like controlling exotic species or coho salmon restoration. We're also trying to look at the offshore systems. California right now has major problems with overfishing and degradation of coastal and offshore resources in general. So, we're trying to work with the Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary, which is part of the biosphere, too. The biosphere helps us focus on a larger context and create partnerships; it's really good for that purpose.

Q. What does the restoration of coho entail?

A. A number of streams drain into Tomales Bay and we've got a major effort going to restore them. We had a lot more fish at one time, but this land was all ranched heavily. There are a lot of dams and stock ponds that we hope will all be removed. Our system is still pretty intact even though there are dams outside the park that won't ever allow the populations to get back to historical numbers.

Q. You're a central figure in the implementation of the Natural Resource Challenge. How's this going?

A. It's interesting that this coincided with the millennium. We started the Challenge in 2000 and it goes to 2005. The real test was whether we could actually generate some funding, and we got approximately \$15 million to launch the Challenge in fiscal year 2000. In FY 2001, we had about \$18½ million in the President's budget and received about \$16 million in funding. The Department has been very supportive and Deny Galvin, Mike Soukup, Bruce Sheaffer, Abby Miller, the Director, and others have done a great job of getting broad-based support. But we could lose it at any moment if we don't keep the momentum heading in the right direction. We have to make sure that we're accountable for the money being spent well. I'm very optimistic. I think that \$100 million in funding and new staff could actually change the culture of the Park Service toward more resource stewardship.

Q. What do you hope to accomplish regarding resource preservation while at Point Reyes?

A. I'm fully committed to ensuring that the Natural Resource Challenge is implemented. I think it's ours to lose, and we need to make sure that across the nation there is continued support for this initiative. I really want to accomplish that. The other thing I'd like to do is ensure that parks have the right staffs to make the right decisions. Often superintendents get so focused on their own area they forget it's okay if somebody else gets money. I'm hoping that five or ten years from now we can say that we systematically enabled these parks to become environmental leaders. 