

BALD EAGLE REINTRODUCTION PROJECT

POINT REYES NATIONAL SEASHORE

Background

Initial discussions regarding this project began over two years ago. Late in 1987, Jules Evens (local biologist), Laurie Wayburn (PRBO), park staff and others began informal discussions regarding bald eagle reintroduction efforts at other locations and the possibility of one in West Marin. These discussions were prompted by the fact that the Pacific Bald Eagle Recovery Plan (USFWS 1986) and a research study by Detrich and Garcelon (1986) had identified Point Reyes as one of the most suitable areas for a reintroduction program. Detrich and Garcelon utilized several criteria for making the selection: compliance with the Bald Eagle Recovery Plan, examining past and current occupancy of eagles, and evaluating availability of foraging and nesting aspects.

For the Point Reyes--Tomales Bay area, the factors identified which favored a reintroduction effort were productive estuarine waters, the availability of potential nesting sites, the distance to Point Reyes from existing populations of eagles, and the federal and local protection of resources. As one might expect, the Bald Eagle Recovery Plan discourages reintroduction in any areas where the population might re-establish itself on its own accord. Since Point Reyes is relatively isolated from current areas of eagle nest concentrations, it is considered an ideal location for reintroduction. It is almost midway between the Catalina Island reintroduction project and northern California where limited nesting activities occur.

Once preliminary information indicated that reintroduction would be a potentially positive program, discussions were started with the biologists on the Bald Eagle Recovery Team, which is composed of private and public sector biologists who have been associated with hacking reintroduction projects. Inquiries were also made with similar programs on the East Coast. After many meetings, the park service received the preliminary approval of the Bald Eagle Recovery Team to start a feasibility study to examine some minor and major concerns.

To accomplish the feasibility study, the park has contracted with the most respected eagle biologist in the state, Dave Garcelon of the Institute for Wildlife Studies. Mr. Garcelon's feasibility study entails the following: 1) determine whether there is appropriate nesting habitat, 2) determine a suitable hack site, away from human activity and osprey flight paths/nesting areas, 3) determine whether pesticide levels in prey will harm the health of bald eagles and hamper their reproduction, and 4) examine effects on other species including the osprey. If that report is favorable and final approvals are received from USFWS, the National Park Service will solicit additional funding to proceed with the project.

The release phase will take three years with 10 - 12 birds released each year starting in July of 1990. The park service expects to use a number of volunteers at several points, including for the construction of two hack towers.

To allow for public input, this plan has been discussed at the last two public meetings of the Point Reyes Citizen's Advisory Commission. Park staff will continue to encourage and provide the opportunity for public comment. We are currently in the process of actively soliciting comment from local community groups and members.

Osprey and Eagle Interaction

Osprey and bald eagles coexist in many areas throughout North America. We have information from individuals in several states, Arizona and Florida, for example, that indicate eagles and osprey can exist quite well together. Stalmaster (1987) states "a pair of territorial eagles can force ospreys to relocate their nests and can reduce the osprey's nesting success, but after the two species have nested near each other for many seasons, they show some mutual accommodation. In most cases, bald eagles ignore other species, but they sometimes drive other birds of prey from the nest, along with crows, gulls, and other large birds." Ogden (1975) in his paper "Effects of Bald Eagle Territoriality on Nesting Ospreys" also concluded that "a pair of eagles only exhibits territorial behavior toward Ospreys in the year when eagles first nest on a key, and that his behavior is not maintained in following years due to adjustments made as pairs learn to recognize adjacent pairs, a process that is possible because of the site tenacity and pair fidelity of both species."

In addition, in conversation with the Alabama Department of Fish and Game, park staff have learned that osprey and bald eagles coexist so well that they hack both from the same tower (at different times of year) with no adverse effect encountered.

In regard to foraging, where bald eagles and osprey coexist, 1 - 2% of osprey foraging attempts are interrupted by the eagles. Prevost (1979) documented in his study in Nova Scotia that "the consequences of food-robbing were minimal to the ospreys; only 2 of the 1,793 captures observed were lost because of Bald Eagle attacks." Rossman et al. noted that bald eagles were never seen taking fish from osprey during 10 years of research at Chippewa National Forest in Minnesota. Osprey have been observed to steal food from young bald eagles and to drive young eagles from a local feeding area.

The local osprey population is substantially larger than earlier this century. Osprey were listed as uncommon in 1933 on an Audubon Society checklist. It seems clear that the local population of osprey has increased primarily around artificial lakes such as Kent Lake. Point Reyes Bird Observatory in their proposal prepared for the National Park Service (1988) to conduct the feasibility study also concluded that osprey and eagle interaction will not produce significant harm. The PRBO proposal states:

"As a predator of estuarine and anadromous fishes, the eagles would probably compete with osprey. It is also possible that eagles will pirate fish from osprey (Franzel 1984). Because the local population is apparently so vigorous (Evens 1987) and the ultimate target goal of three eagle territories (USFWS 1986) is relatively small, this should not cause significant harm to the osprey population."

Park staff will continue to investigate the potential impact and effects of the bald eagle reintroduction program on other species. However, to date there is no evidence that osprey will be significantly harmed.

Historical Presence

Bald eagles were present during the breeding season in the 1800s (e.g., Lagunitas Creek, August 16, 1868). Bald eagles also have historically bred along the coast of central California. The best historical records are for the Russian River where at least two nests have been documented. Grinnel & Wyke (1927) also indicated the presence of breeding eagles in the San Francisco Bay Area. Since nesting sites historically have been within close relative proximity to the Point Reyes area, it is highly probable that Point Reyes is within the historical breeding range. Investigation will continue, however, in search of any additional information. Park staff are looking at 1800's newspapers and mission documents, for example, for any records of bald eagles. Dewey Livingston, a local historian, has been searching for us on a regular basis.

Status of Eagles

The bald eagle is still regarded as endangered or threatened in all of the lower 48 states. The breeding population is less than 60 pairs in California. The population in all the lower 48 states, experts believe, once numbered more than 25,000 in pre-colonial times then declined to a low of 3,000 in the early 1970s. Careful management, including hacking efforts, have helped to increase the population to approximately 5,000. The growth of the population has been credited to cooperative efforts by government agencies, private organizations, industry, and universities. We hope that Point Reyes National Seashore, working with all these groups, can help lead the bald eagle back towards its former population level.

Success of other Programs

So far, two California projects have had limited success. However, it is too early to judge the final success of these programs since it takes 4 - 5 years for bald eagles to mature. The success of these programs on the east coast has been unequivocal. In New York State, hacking was started in 1976 and done annually. At that site, 50% of the birds have remained and successful nesting has occurred. Because of the success in New York, hacking programs have been begun in Georgia, Missouri, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, North Carolina, and Ontario. It is clear that a reintroduction program can be successful, if implemented carefully and correctly.

Public Awareness of Endangered Species

Finally, this project has the potential for helping other endangered species in the area and throughout the State. The project will generate numerous media and educational opportunities which we will utilize to stimulate additional support for habitat preservation and the protection of other threatened and endangered species. Thus, the National Park Service feels this project will go well beyond helping bald eagles to activating public concern for our threatened resources.

For More Information

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