

POINT REYES LIGHT

Tribe pays for mineral licks, elk troughs

By Ike Allen

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Officials at the Point Reyes National Seashore are providing more water and nutrition sources for the fenced tule elk herd at Tomales Point, harnessing funding from the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria to install three more water troughs and, for the first time, mineral licks at the north end of the elk reserve.

Graton donated \$20,000 to the seashore to help fund the new set of troughs and mineral blocks. “The tribe, working in consultation and coordination with P.R.N.S., believes these interventions will help to maintain the vitality of this herd and sacred species,” tribal chairman Greg Sarris said in a statement. He declined to be interviewed this week.

The park consulted with Graton in accordance with a new agreement signed between the two bodies that guarantees the tribe will have a say in matters of wildlife management and historic preservation in the park. The seashore lies on Coast Miwok ancestral land, and the tule elk are considered a sacred animal.

Elk behind the fence have been dying, to the alarm of environmental and animal rights activists.

While the free-ranging Limantour and Drakes Beach herds have remained relatively stable in size since they were introduced more than 20 years ago, the original, fenced Tomales Point herd has vacillated in number. Last year, it shrunk by a third. Activists began illegally bringing water to the reserve last summer and have since staged protests to demand the fence be taken down.

In June, the Harvard Law School’s Animal Law and Policy Clinic sued the park over the elk deaths, which the plaintiffs alleged were the result of the park’s failure to update its management policies. A federal judge denied the clinic’s preliminary injunction last month, but the lawsuit is ongoing.

Park spokeswoman Melanie Gunn and wildlife ecologist Dave Press both declined to comment on the park’s elk management decisions, citing the pending litigation.

Park officials have contended that the recent drought-year die-offs were predictable. In their 1998 tule elk management plan, they anticipated that their policy of “minimal intrusion” in managing the fenced herd would lead to “boom and bust” population cycles: The elk population would grow during rainy years and then shrink as forage quality deteriorated during drought periods.

In the 1998 plan, wildlife management experts working with the park wrote that these population cycles wouldn't necessarily affect the herd's long-term viability. "The maintenance of the herd's health does not imply an artificial condition where no animals would be unhealthy as might be attempted in a domestic or captive herd," they wrote.

Last year, the park identified malnutrition, not thirst, as the cause of the elk deaths, and found that the herd's water supply was adequate. But drought conditions have entered uncharted territory, and many of the seeps and springs the elk rely upon for water have dried up. In June, Mr. Press told the Light that the 1998 plan needed to be updated to reflect the impacts of climate change.

Out of what Mr. Press called an "abundance of caution," officials placed three 250-gallon water troughs at the southern end of the reserve in June. It marked the first time the park had provided water to the fenced elk herd, though officials have used artificial ponds to steer the free-ranging Drakes Beach herd away from cattle grazing areas. The park's recently amended general management plan allows for culling the Drakes Beach herd, but does not address the fenced herd.

Last week, the park added three more 250-gallon water troughs at White Gulch, the adjacent plateau and the lower Pierce Point Ranch site, bringing the total number of troughs in the elk reserve to six. All the troughs will remain in place at least until the winter rains. The park plans to use tribal funds to install another trough at Avalis Beach, near the mouth of Tomales Bay.

At each water trough, the park is providing mineral supplements in the form of licks, a move meant to address copper and selenium deficiencies resulting from poor forage quality.

Jack Gescheidt, a vocal elk advocate and plaintiff in the Harvard lawsuit, said he thought the park's actions were contradictory. The mineral blocks are consistent with the park's finding that the elk had died from malnutrition, he said, but the water troughs are not.

He speculated that the park was making its decisions based on public pressure, rather than science, and said the only long-term fix would be to let the elk roam the entire peninsula. "All of these actions are Band-Aids," he said. "The wound is the fence."

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