



A coastline worth celebrating

SEA RANCH

We are hiking the Bluff Trail that meanders north from Walk-On Beach. Harbor seals sun themselves on the rocks below us, and cormorants pose on rocky perches just offshore. Puffy, white clouds drift across an azure sky, and the Pacific Ocean, bluer still, stretches to the horizon.

On the Sonoma Coast, the most spectacular days wait until October to come around, and this is one of those days. We feel lucky to be here.

We are at The Sea Ranch, the iconic development that is celebrating its 50th anniversary. The beauty of this place and architecture that respects the natural surroundings have made this coastal enclave famous all over the world.

In the September/October edition of Sonoma Magazine, a story by Meg McConahey reminds us: "Fifty years ago, a visionary development on an old sheep ranch ... changed the way Californians see their coast."

The Post Office at Sea Ranch Lodge will sell you a T-shirt that reads: "Sea Ranch — 50 — Still Making Waves."

The rules for building are strict here. If you want to paint your house purple — or any other color — you have come to the wrong place. If you want to build a colonial mansion, well, you're just not paying attention.

As happens, I have history. As a young reporter in the 1970s, I covered the marathon sessions that introduced Sea Ranch developers to something that was new and untested — a voter-approved initiative called the California Coastal Zone Protection Act.

These would be acrimonious meetings, but years later, standing on this coastal bluff, we can say the conflicts might have produced a happy ending. After all, we're only walking on this trail because people found ways to compromise their differences.

Our successes have allowed us to take for granted the beauty of Sea Ranch and of all of the Sonoma Coast.

Sure, there are miles of beaches, state and regional parks, protected lands, redwood canyons, craggy rock formations, picturesque villages and coastal shelves that overlook a vast sea.

But isn't that the way it's supposed to be?

Well, it almost wasn't.

Imagine the cooling tower of a nuclear power plant casting its shadow across Bodega Bay. Construction was underway before people figured out it wasn't such a great idea to

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Thankful for bill that imposed compromise

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build a nuclear plant on top of an earthquake fault. (See Gaye LeBaron's column on Page B3 for more on that.) Imagine subdivisions here, there and everywhere. Many were proposed.

Or imagine Sea Ranch with more than twice as many homes and a prohibition against folks like you and me hiking this Bluff Trail. In the beginning, the developers of Sea Ranch wanted to build 5,200 homes and deny public access to all 10.6 miles of shoreline. Forever.

It's a much longer story, but the short version goes like this: In the aftermath of controversies involving a proposed nuclear power plant at Bodega Bay, the attempt to shut off public access at Sea Ranch and an oil spill in the Santa Barbara Channel, the California Legislature was asked to provide special protections for the California coast. State residents looked at what had happened in parts of Southern California, and they declared, enough is enough. We only get one coastline.

Under pressure from development interests, the Legislature failed to respond. So, as they promised they would, sponsors of a coastal protection initiative succeeded in gathering 480,000 petition signatures in 30 days.

On Nov. 7, 1972, voters approved Proposition 20, a confirmation that Californians were determined to protect the coast and send a message to their political institutions. (Four years later, the Legislature would make these protections permanent.) Proposition 20 created a statewide California Coastal Commission and six regional commissions assigned to develop coastal plans.

For the fledgling North Coast Regional Commission, many long nights were dedicated to figuring out what to do about Sea Ranch. In the end, the commission, the homeowners' association and the developers couldn't agree.

Eventually, litigation gave way to legislation, forever known as the Bane bill (which took effect in 1981). Its author was a Democratic lawmaker from North Hollywood named Tom Bane.

The measure imposed a compromise: About 2,400 homes could be built at Sea Ranch — fewer than half those proposed by the original developer (and blessed by the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors). In return, the public would be guaranteed six coastal access points and the trail extending from Walk-On Beach north to Gualala Point Regional Park.

And so here we are on the Bluff Trail, enjoying this beautiful day.

Sea Ranch began to develop as public sensibilities were changing. (Indeed, the design philosophy that guided Sea Ranch from the beginning was an expression of those new sensibilities.) Today, not many people would wish there were twice as many homes occupying the meadows at Sea Ranch — or more cars on the long, narrow and winding road that extends north from Jenner and connects Sea Ranch to the rest of the world. And not many people would wish to replace the beauty of the Sonoma Coast with what

might have happened.

Maybe it's just me, but I like Bodega Bay without a nuclear power plant, and I like a coastline that isn't blanketed with strip malls and subdivisions.

Looking west across The Sea Ranch to the Pacific Ocean.

CHRIS HARDY / For The Press Democrat



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