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*Liz Fox:* Hi, this is Positively Ocean where we celebrate the ocean and look at what's working well. I'm Liz Fox. 'Tis the season of competing for prime parking spots and not just at shopping malls anymore. Spaces can be limited at Drake's Beach Visitor Center at Point Reyes National Seashore, where you might even lose out to a 1600 pound elephant seal. That's because northern elephant seal colonies are on the rebound after near extinction due to hunting over a century ago, and it's a change that humans will have to get used to. Sarah Codde is a marine ecologist for the Point Reyes National Seashore.

*Sarah Cody:* That is a good problem to have that we're dealing with a population that is rebounding. It's so successful that we don't know what to do about it, whereas other resource managers are dealing with "how do we save a species."

*Liz Fox:* Scientists don't know if elephant seals populated Point Reyes' shores before their population crisis, but they seem to be here to stay. The first breeding pair of elephant seals were cited in Point Reyes in 1981. Since then, the colony has grown to more than 2000 members. What's particularly complicated is that the goliath squid and fish eaters spend months at a time hunting thousands of miles from shore, and they need to haul out onto land, specifically to rest. So when a beach goer sees one, it may look like a bloated lazy log, and it would be hard to imagine the behemoth capabilities. Elephant seals can be fast and furious, outpacing a human, even on land.

*Sarah Cody:* When they're fighting, they don't care what is around them or what's in their way. They will trample over anything.

*Liz Fox:* And it's not just males in battle. Females with cubs can be fiercely protective, just like bears with cubs. Cody wants the public to enjoy observing elephant seals in a way that protects people and the animals.

*Sarah Cody:* It is an amazing experience. There are not many locations where you can see elephant seals. We do want people to enjoy that. We just want to make sure we're protecting humans and seals.

*Liz Fox:* Elephant seals need land for other life necessities too. Males' dramatic competitions for harem drive visitors by the droves to a lookout Chimney Rock. Outside of mating season, mature elephant

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seals return to land in the summer to molt. Females and pups need land to nurse and grow. Juveniles come to shore at different times during the year to strengthen their bone development and develop habits that will help them mate in the future.

That's why Chimney Rock Beach is closed permanently to foot traffic. The restrictions in that location work well since there's only one narrow access path that can be easily chained and clearly marked as closed. Cody said the public generally understands and respects the parks limits, which are similar to other breeding areas in California State Parks.

Recently though, the colony has expanded down the coast and into areas of Drake's Beach that are accessible to curious or unaware beach goers. Several females have found refuge for themselves and their pups in beach areas that humans are accustomed to enjoying. Intense storms made some individuals leave the colony area in search of safety.

*Sarah Cody:*

It went from like 20 females to 300 in like three years, and it went from a small little area to like a mile and a half of the beach.

*Liz Fox:*

Coupled with the threat of beach loss due to rising sea levels in areas that are backed by towering cliffs, elephant seal territories are only more likely to overlap with human recreation areas in the future.

That's why Point Reyes National Seashore runs a winter wildlife docent program. Their goal is to educate visitors about these animals and how to safely view them. Last month, Cody even met with counterparts from an Año Nuevo State Park and Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary to share best practices about how to keep animals and humans safe, especially during this year's mating season, which is in its very beginning.

*Sarah Cody:*

There's a lot of comparisons between elephant seals and soap operas because there's so much drama during the breeding season. You know, the male's fighting, the females fighting, the females trying to steal pups from other females. It's pretty fun.

*Liz Fox:*

If you plan to come to the park, please make sure to check-in at the visitor center and find out the areas to avoid to protect yourself and the seals. Always respect posted signs. And that's an example of how you can do right by the ocean. Until next time, I'll be searching for all things Positively Ocean. For

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Ocean Currents and KWMR radio, this is Liz Fox reporting from Point Reyes National Seashore.

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