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The Sea Ranch: Unforeseen Failures and Statewide Successes of an Ecologically Conscious Coastal Community

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The Sea Ranch: Unforeseen Failures and Statewide Successes of
an Ecologically Conscious Coastal Community

A senior project submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Bachelor of Arts in
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Table of Contents

<i>Table of Figures</i>	3
<i>Abstract</i>	4
<i>The Sea Ranch</i>	5
<i>Appendix 1</i>	33
<i>Works Cited</i>	36

Table of Figures

<i>Figure 1 Sea Ranch Lodge & Restaurant, 2017</i>	6
<i>Figure 2 Bihler's Point Looking South, 2017</i>	7
<i>Figure 3 Sheep Fence and Path, 2017</i>	9
<i>Figure 4 Ohlson Ranch Barn that inspired the design vocabulary of Sea Ranch, 2017</i>	12
<i>Figure 5 Condominium One, 2017</i>	13
<i>Figure 6 Condominium One & Cliff, 2017</i>	14
<i>Figure 7 Demonstration "Hedgerow" Houses, 2018</i>	15
<i>Figure 8 Hedgerow House with Sod Roof, 2018</i>	16
<i>Figure 9 Grasses and Homes in a Hedgerow, 2018</i>	17
<i>Figure 10 Sea Ranch Store, 2017</i>	18
<i>Figure 11 Sea Ranch Lodge Courtyard, 2017</i>	19
<i>Figure 12 Sea Ranch Restaurant, Looking Southwest, 2017</i>	19
<i>Figure 13 North side of Sea Ranch Store with Rams Head Logo, 2017</i>	20
<i>Figure 14 Sea Ranch Lodge & Restaurant, 2017</i>	22
<i>Figure 15 No Trespassing Sign, 2017</i>	22
<i>Figure 16 Coast Trail, 2018</i>	24
<i>Figure 17 Sheep Ranch Fencing, 2017</i>	26
<i>Figure 18 Fence and Trail, 2018</i>	27
<i>Figure 19 Low tide with Bull Whip Kelp Covering the Rocks, 2017</i>	28
<i>Figure 20 Shoreline and bluff of Sea Ranch, 2017</i>	28
<i>Figure 21 Bluff edge of Sea Ranch, 2017</i>	29
<i>Figure 22 Sunset at Sea Ranch</i>	31

Abstract

The term “residential development” or “planned community” brings to mind images of a stereotypical suburbia. The planned community of The Sea Ranch, along the Sonoma County coast in Northern California is a direct challenge to the suburban ideal. Construction of the nearly 1500 homes began in the late 1960s and continues to present day. All of the homes must meet specific design requirements including being ecologically sound and they must fit within the landscape. The strict architectural elements is what provides the distinct look of the community. The construction of a housing development along a ten-mile strip of untouched and inhospitable California coastline was challenged by conservation groups. One result was the formation of the California Coastal Commission, which gained regulatory powers for all coastal developments in California. This paper is an interdisciplinary examination of The Sea Ranch community. Through the humanities disciplines of art and design, landscape response, philosophy, history, and the legal challenges faced by this community, these findings show how the Sea Ranch overcame the obstacles to provide a thriving ecologically minded community.

The Sea Ranch

A two-seater-plane propels itself back and forth along a ten mile stretch of the Northern California coast line in 1963. The passenger, Al Boeke (1922-2011), a land developer from Hawaii, surveys the location of his next development. From the air, the flat, barren stretch of land is dotted with “funny little things”, Boeke asks the pilot what they are and he answers, “those are sheep, must be thousands of them” (Boeke 17). He notes the cliffs that drop off straight into the sea and the great rocks that jut up to catch the crashing waves. The land above the cliffs is terraced and runs back to the redwood filled mountains a mile or so inland. He turns to the pilot and says, “here is a piece of property with identity,” Boeke had made his decision, “I don’t want to look at anything else. Let’s fly back to the airport” (Boeke 18). This 5200-acre sheep farm will become The Sea Ranch: an ecologically compassionate development which gives prominence to the landscape while allowing the buildings to reside naturally in place. The Sea Ranch has grown to over two thousand homes since Boeke took his initial survey flight over a half century ago. The homes are all designed to specifications outlined by the original architects: natural woods, natural exteriors, no overhangs, no fences dividing lots, and no giant homes. The symmetry of the buildings is immediately noticeable when one drives along the Coast Highway in Sonoma County.

Building an entire community at once was an international fad during the 1960s. Oceanic California, the firm Al Boeke worked for, had recently completed a planned community in Mililani, Hawaii and wanted to do something similar along the California coast (Lyndon, Sea Ranch 23). Other complete cities, such as Reston, Virginia, had sprung up from the architects drafting table ready for people to move in, replete with homes, parks, cultural attractions, schools, industry, and places of worship. The remote location of Sea Ranch made building a

town of full-time residents unrealistic. Boeke had a very different idea for this special stretch of coast: he convinced Oceanic California, a subdivision of Castle & Cooke, to build a second home community. Boeke believed he could attract people from the San Francisco Bay Area who would travel the hundred miles north along Highway 1's winding path to experience the rugged beauty of meadows, forests, river, and the ever-present crash of the Pacific Ocean into the sandstone cliffs.



Figure 1 Sea Ranch Lodge & Restaurant, 2017

Boeke was not the only one interested in access to the coast at Sea Ranch. The announcement of the sale and development of long-time sheep ranch Rancho Del Mar, as the land was then called, caught the attention of a group of environmentalists living in Sonoma County. These women and men were not your run of the mill “tree huggers,” some of them had been instrumental in stopping Pacific Gas and Electric from completing a nuclear power plant in Bodega Bay, California. The plant was located fifty miles south of Sea Ranch and just two miles west of the active San Andreas Fault. PG&E had already started construction and the remnant of its aborted project is a seventy-foot-deep hole locally named “Hole in the Head,” which is now filled with water from the rains and used by birds and other wildlife as a pond. A lengthy legal

battle ensued between the developers, who expected exclusive access to the secluded beaches, and the environmentalists who expected access to the state coastline. The results of which would have statewide ramifications on how the California coast could be developed and who could access to the thirteen-hundred-mile shoreline.

This paper explores the creation of The Sea Ranch and the cultural clash that arose between several groups who all stated the same goal: the right to access ten miles of the most beautiful coastline on the West Coast. Can community and culture be constructed or must it grow



Figure 2 Bihler's Point Looking South, 2017

organically? By using a variety of lenses to examine The Sea Ranch, I hope to uncover how people come together and build culture and community, either by building something up or by tearing something apart.

Before any of protests could organize or any lawsuits could be filed, The Sea Ranch had to be designed and built. Boeke contacted Lawrence Halprin (1916-2009), whom he had previously worked with on a development Hawaii, to explain his vision for land of respecting the land. “We would put people on the land in a way that they were inconspicuous. We would build architecture that was not architectonic, that seemed natural in this place. Contemporary

architecture, but urban architecture, and not destination architecture. And we weren't going to build a recreational community for destination and play, but a meditative – a quiet, meditative community for “just folks,” as I called them. Not special folks, just folks” (Boeke 28). At the time, Lawrence Halprin was one of the “foremost landscape architects” working in America (Lyndon, Sea Ranch 23). Halprin attended the Harvard Graduate School of Design where he studied under Walter Gropius (1883-1969), the founder of the Bauhaus School and who is considered a master of modernist architecture. Coincidentally, the designer of the planned community of Reston, Virginia, James Rossant, also studied under Gropius. Halprin earned numerous awards for his work, including the Thomas Jefferson Medal in Architecture and the National Medal of Arts given by the President of the United States (TCLF). His major design projects include the FDR Memorial in Washington DC; Embarcadero Plaza and Ghirardelli Square in San Francisco; Freeway Park in Seattle; and Lovejoy Plaza in Portland, Oregon.

Lawrence Halprin created an innovative design process known as the RSVP Cycles (Resources, Scores, Valu-action, Performance). The process includes workshops that are designed to create a creative consensus among the participants. In his book, *The RSVP Cycles: Creative Processes in the Human Environment*, Halprin explains that “the significance of the RSVP cycles lies in the fact that as an ecological designer I have always been interested in pluralism and the generative force of many contributions to solutions” (3). During the initial creative sessions, Halprin invited graduate students from UC Berkeley to Sea Ranch, which was still a sheep ranch named Rancho Del Mar, where they camped and built villages out of the driftwood in an attempt to understand how to live with the land and the elements. His wife, the dancer Anna Halprin, was a part of these excursions and helped infuse the design process with movement and new possibilities of expressive collaboration.

Lawrence Halprin also hired in a wide-ranging planning team of professionals which included engineers, foresters, hydrologists, climatologists, geologists, and geographers, before he hired a single architect. Halprin wanted to understand the land, the sea, and the air, as well as the “impact of man on the land from a geological perspective” (Halprin, Diary 19). The goal was for Sea Ranch to become a place where “nature and human habitation could intersect in the kind of intense symbiosis that would allow people to become part of the ecosystem” (17). The people, the land, the environment, and the buildings would all need to reside with each other and without the usual domination common to the suburban landscape for Sea Ranch to be successful. Richard Reynolds, a cultural geographer and geologist, joined the team to help Halprin understand the climate and landscape of the sheep ranch. Reynolds “analyzed soil patterns, drainage and forest conditions” as well as cultural patterns such as “fishing, ranching and forestry practices” (19). Reynolds used a voice recorder so he could move around the property and document the rapidly changing conditions.



Figure 3 Sheep Fence and Path, 2017

One of the things he observed was the relationship between the wind and the grazing sheep. The sheep preferred to graze on the leeward--less windy—side of the long cypress hedgerows which were planted perpendicular to the coast as windbreaks. The rows of trees created a micro climate that allowed less hardy, but more succulent plants to thrive, which attracted the sheep. This relationship between sheep, wind, and trees would serve as the model for human occupation of the land (John-Aider 56). Reynolds was the one who suggested planting more hedgerows and keeping the brush cleared. The hedgerow trees were shaped by wind erosion and produced a distinctive angle to the canopies which sloped away from the wind (Treib 211). “The slant of the trees was applied to the roof angles of the first houses which deflected the strong winds and “as a byproduct, established the character of the buildings” (211). This approach to examining the site conditions can unearth the processes that are at work in the region, be they positive or negative, then the developer can decide to conform to the process or not making any necessary accommodations (Progressive Architecture 137). Once Halprin and his planning team had the data they needed to create the master plan, they could hire the architects and begin construction.

Boeke hired the renowned Bay Area architect, Joseph Esherick to build the first set of homes called the Hedgerow Houses as well as the store, and Boeke also hired the relatively unknown firm of Moore, Lyndon, Turnbull, and Whitaker (MLTW) from Berkeley, to create a series of condominium units. MLTW was an “adventurous choice” because at the time they had “only designed a few modest houses” (Lyndon, Sea Ranch 23). Hiring MLTW would turn out to be a fortuitous choice as they created the multi award winning structure Condominium One that would become the epitome of architectural design in Sea Ranch.

In 1964, the first structures went up, the ten-unit Condominium One complex located on a point of open land overlooking the Pacific Ocean, Esherick's Hedgerow houses, which are clustered at the end of a hedgerow, and the store, which served as the Post Office. Each building was designed in a manner that would "complement and draw advantage from the land" (Lyndon, *Sea Ranch* 35). Halprin's master design plan called for a series of condominiums with units that shared common spaces, and for houses to be built in clusters to create a sense of community and unity. The intention was to make the land more habitable "without destroying the very quality that attracted people" to this segment of the Sonoma County coast (35).

The original plan had the homes on the meadow built back from the coastline in order for all to enjoy an unimpeded view of the ocean. If any houses were built on the edge, it would be "only where they can't be seen by others" (Halprin, *Notebooks* 82). Likewise, the homes built on the mountains were to be "kept back from the ridge face" so only the silhouette could be seen and no roads were to be built up the face of the mountain (83). There are thirty-six architectural design elements listed in the *Sea Ranch Design Manual and Rules* detailing everything from roof design which must avoid the look of a "hat" placed on top of the building, to meter boxes that must be recessed into the wall, to the prohibition on all external ornamentation such as flagpoles, "garden sculpture", and decorative plant containers. The type of expressive individuality common to suburban communities -- a new flag for each holiday, yard ornaments -- detract from the character of Sea Ranch which honors the tradition of the rural buildings of the Sonoma coast. (Figure 4)



Figure 4 Ohlson Ranch Barn that inspired the design vocabulary of Sea Ranch, 2017

Part of the reason for the unpainted exteriors, according to Halprin, was to create a feeling of incompleteness. “Incompleteness allows for addition and subtraction, which enables a person to feel a part of it. The static complete design can only be seen from the outside, viewed as if through a viewer. A person cannot feel a part of it because it does not need his participation” (Halprin, Notebooks 81). The goal of the development was to create a “nature oriented outdoor recreational community” that attracted a wide spectrum of people who would want to participate (Halprin, Diary 33). During a dance workshop given by a 98-year-old Anna Halprin in 2018 at the De Young museum in San Francisco, she said, “A thing I learned from my husband was about positive and negative space. Dancing in positive space is two people dancing next to each other, but not touching, dancing in negative space is when the dancers touch each other and become one.” The design of Sea Ranch is about negative space, with the buildings connecting with the landscape and the elements. They do not exist next to one another, they are

meant to become one thing, like the entwined bodies of dancers who do not know, or need to know, where one ends and the other begins.

To attract a wider variety of residents to Sea Ranch, the original plans called for a series of condominiums to interspersed along the coast. These would provide space for people who did not wish to live in a free-standing home, even if it were clustered to provide a sense of community. The first and only complex built was the ten-unit Condominium One. The other units never materialized because Oceanic California felt they would be too difficult to sell.



Figure 5 Condominium One, 2017

At the time of planning, the property was divided up by individual property lines, therefore, the architects, Moore, Lyndon, Turnbull, and Whitaker had their choice of locations. The condominium had to not only fit into the greater landscape of the northern coast, but had to “compliment and draw advantage from the land” (Lyndon, *Dwellings* 45). In *The Place of Houses*, Moore and Lyndon noted “there are four ways of siting houses: merging, claiming, surrounding, or enfronting” (188). For Sea Ranch, these can be expressed as houses that enfold a place, houses that connect with their environment, or even, houses that inhabit their sites. The

buildings themselves were to become active agents in the environments they share with the human inhabitants, neighbors, animals, and plant life.



Figure 6 Condominium One & Cliff, 2017

The site selected was a point of land on the southern part of the property that is completely open to the elements. The building would have to thrive in the full brunt of the winds and draw warmth from the elusive southern and eastern sun. With this in mind, MLTW designed a large simple form of ten connected units, all under a single roof which slants away from the ocean. The winds push up and over the structure leaving a protected area on the leeward side in the way the hedgerows create a respite for the sheep to graze on the meadow. The architects struggled with how to provide each of the ten units with the views and access to the sunlight they required. While out to dinner, one of them dumped out the bowl of sugar cubes on the table realized each cube could perfectly represent the twenty-four by twenty-four-foot spaces they were creating. From these sugar cubes came the niches, crevices and projections that help fashion the distinct look of Condominium One.

At the same time that Condominium One was being constructed Joseph Esherick and Associates were creating a different type of dwelling experience at Sea Ranch: small single

homes, called the Demonstration Houses, but commonly referred to as the Hedgerow houses. These six houses would be clustered at the end of one of the hedgerows and connected. The houses all share a similar design vocabulary to that of Condominium One, slanted roofs, no eaves for the wind to become trapped, large windows allowing for natural solar heating, each house has an ocean view, and natural wood exteriors inspired in part by the barns of the area and the materials used at Fort Ross a few miles to the south. The exterior look of the houses did not come exclusively from the barns, they were already part of Esherick's style. "Esherick houses were almost always constructed of wood, and they were often left unpainted to expose the qualities of the structural beams and columns and the raw plywood that sheathed them (Treib ix). Esherick's influence and style greatly affected the design motif moving forward. The Hedgerow Houses had sod roofs to link the buildings even closer to the land. Over time, the sod roofs were not sustainable and have been replaced on all but one home.



Figure 7 Demonstration "Hedgerow" Houses, 2018

An essential feature of the Hedgerow Houses was not anything Esherick & Associates designed, but was the cypress hedgerow itself. Originally planted by rancher Walter P. Frick,

who rarely visited the land, the hedgerows began at the coastline and ran perpendicular to Highway One. Frick purchased the land from William and George Bender in 1912 for an unknown amount, but the assessed value was \$42,400. Ed Ohlson, who was the last owner of the 5200-acre ranch before Oceanic California paid him 2.3 million for it in 1963, was able to purchase the property at a courthouse sale in 1941 for \$140,000 because Frick had stopped paying the property taxes. While Ohlson owned the land, he continued planting the hedgerows for added protection for his sheep. During an interview with Ed Wells in 1974, Ohlson recalls the planting of trees: “Those hedges or those trees were brought up here in little flats and were no bigger than that. They had fences around all sides of them. To keep the animals from eating them” (Ohlson qtd in McNamee 5).



Figure 8 Hedgerow House with Sod Roof, 2018

By the time Oceanic took possession of the ranch in 1963, the landscape was in poor condition due to decades of overgrazing, over farming, and lack of proper forestry methods. Oceanic began an immediate program of landscape restoration as part of their vision for

responsible and ecologically compassionate land development. Areas eroded from rain runoff were graded and replanted, the hedgerows and forest areas in the hills were thinned and replanted responsibly, the fields were reseeded transforming them into meadows. The land has a long history of preservation and conservation. The Kashaya Pomo, the first known inhabitants of the region, used burning methods to keep the understory clear and revitalize the soil. Julia Richardson (1917-1994), who was born in the area and owned about three thousand acres just south of Sea Ranch, describes the land as “absolutely barren, rocky outcroppings and almost no grass” (Richardson qtd in McNamee). She and her husband would drive their old pickup truck down the coast to Petaluma and shovel fertilizer out to the chicken coops, then drive it back up the coast and spread it out across the land. She explains the grass was “about waist high” by time she was thirty-five years old (Richardson qtd in McNamee). Richardson and her husband prevented the soil from eroding and helped maintain the natural character of that part of the northern coast.



Figure 9 Grasses and Homes in a Hedgerow, 2018

Another way the natural charm of the area was preserved is by not building large structures that dominated the landscape. The third building erected was the Sea Ranch Store which was designed by Esherick & Associates. This two-story building sold basic sundry items, hosted a small café, acted as the real estate office, as well as the post office. The northern face is two stories high with the Sea Ranch logo emblazoned in white upon its north and east sides. The southern side of the building includes bank of windows that provide access to ocean views sunsets into the Pacific. The design elements are similar to the Hedgerow houses, unpainted vertical exterior boards, slanted shingle roofs, and a style that partners with the landscape in a way that is ecologically respectful. The store was enlarged by Esherick & Associates to include a full restaurant with a large dining room, a good-sized bar, a twenty-room lodge, and administration offices upstairs. Today, the store is a gift shop that sells Sea Ranch memorabilia with the rams head logo prominently displayed. The restaurant and lodge will close for the winter season this year on November 4, 2018 and reopen on March 15, 2019, according to their social media posts on Facebook. Not too surprisingly, the announcement has caused some



Figure 10 Sea Ranch Store, 2017

speculation as to the “real” reason they are closing. Some people who claim to have “heard” that the restaurant, lodge, and land is up for sale. There is even a speculation of a price tag of 1.4 million dollars which includes fifty-four acres of land, which seems very low compared to a home in Sea Ranch which can easily cost a million dollars.



Figure 11 Sea Ranch Lodge Courtyard, 2017



Figure 12 Sea Ranch Restaurant, Looking Southwest, 2017

The iconic Sea Ranch logo of a rams head was crafted by Barbara Stauffacher (1928-), a graphic designer working in San Francisco at the time. Boeke was taken by her work when he saw it in a graphics exhibit at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, so he tracked her down, got an appointment with her at the large advertising firm where she works, and he subsequently hired her away from the firm. Stauffacher created all the graphics for Sea Ranch from the road signs to matchbook covers. The original logo design was an entire sheep which was “just beautiful” according to Boeke, but “too complex” and they “evolved it down to the present logo” (Boeke 32). Boeke and Stauffacher worked together on all the designs with Boeke rarely disapproving of any of her creations. After completing the Sea Ranch designs, Stauffacher went on to work for Oceanic on Mililani Town in Hawaii, replacing the existing graphic design team.



Figure 13 North side of Sea Ranch Store with Rams Head Logo, 2017

By 1969, Lawrence Halprin, Joseph Esherick, and MLTW were all dismissed by Oceanic. Donald Canty writes in *The Sea Ranch*, that the “shift in staff designers, according to Boeke, stemmed from the fact that the basic planning work had been done and Oceanic did not want to continue to pay the high fees that the consultants expected” (Lyndon, Sea Ranch 29). The version Al Boeke gives in the 2008 Smith interview is slightly different, when asked by Smith if there was “some reason Halprin wasn’t continued”, Boeke describes a unit that was, in his opinion, “laid out superficially and wrong” and he felt Halprin “just wasn’t paying attention” (Boeke 100). Halprin’s office, according to Boeke in the same interview, had swelled from a few people to forty paid staffers who had “never been a part of the evolution of Sea Ranch” (101). Al Boeke terminated Lawrence Halprin. He was replaced by Lou McClain from the Los Angeles firm of Victor Gruen.

At this time, around 1969, several buildings had been completed and the distinct look of Sea Ranch was fixed into the local landscape and into the minds of people around the world. The awards were numerous, including the American Institute of Architects National Honor Award, 1967, “Homes for Better Living” Award, 1966 and the Progressive Architecture Citation, 1965 for Condominium One. Sea Ranch was featured in architectural and travel magazines as a unique and inspiring place to behold. Boeke credits a woman by the name of Marion Conrad, who handled all the public relations, for “putting Sea Ranch on the map worldwide” (30).



Figure 14 Sea Ranch Lodge & Restaurant, 2017



Figure 15 No Trespassing Sign, 2017

In 1973, after several homes were built, and many more were in the planning stages, all new construction came an immediate stop because permits were being denied by the newly formed California Coastal Commission. The Commission found the Sea Ranch Association in violation of affordable housing and public access regulations. The common area property of Sea Ranch is jointly owned by the Sea Ranch Association and individual property owners. “If you

own a house at The Sea Ranch, you are an owner of 2800 acres of common. And you belong to an Association that provides stewardship over that common that you pay for” (Boeke 64). The common areas are managed by the Association who set and enforce the design and community standards. The California Coastal Commission stopped individual property owners from building their dream homes by charging the Association with violations. The individual property owners had no ability to acquiesce to the findings of the Commission because the Association manages the common areas of the property. Construction at Sea Ranch halted for seven years while the Oceanic battled it out in court.

Bill Kortum (1927-2014), a veterinarian from the small inland town of Cotati helped formed the group, Californians Organized to Acquire Access to State Tidelands (COAAST), who opposed Oceanic California’s efforts to sequester thirteen miles of coastal access at Sea Ranch from the rest of society. In 1968, Kortum met with small group of concerned and dedicated environmentalists including Peter Leveque, in whose biology lab at Santa Rosa Junior College where they first gathered to form COAAST. At that time of their gathering, only one hundred miles of California’s “1300-mile coastline was accessible to the public” (Lyndon, Sea Ranch 29). The initial efforts of COAAST to gain access in the tidelands in Sonoma County were ultimately responsible for opening up the entire coast of California and protecting several seaside communities from becoming private property and inaccessible to the public.



Figure 16 Coast Trail, 2018

COAAST placed Measure B on the 1968 Sonoma County ballot in an effort to create public access trails through Sea Ranch. The measure ordained the creation of public access corridors to publicly owned tidelands for property developed for nonagricultural uses. Measure B sought one public corridor for each mile of development and that these corridors be required as a condition of the permitting process. Corridors such as those would damage the overall goal of living lightly on the land according to the Sea Ranch developers, who were committed building a unified community. The initiative failed, but it gave rise to a movement called the California Coastal Alliance, a group who, in 1971, placed Proposition 20 on a statewide ballot. Proposition 20 was backed by more than one hundred groups, including the Sierra Club, Longshoreman's Union, and the League of Women Voters. Proposition 20 passed even though the environmentalists were outspent by developers and oil companies 100 to 1. The law created The State Coastal Conservation Commission (SCCC) and six regional commissions who were tasked with the planning of how coastal lands were used.

The Commissions had the power to approve or deny building permits and established the permit area within coastal zones as the area between the seaward limits of state jurisdiction and 1000 yards landward from the mean high tide line. The Commission prohibited any development within the permit area without a permit by a state or regional Commission. The commission also had the power to prescribe the standards for issuance or denial of permits without conversations with property owners. For the people who had purchased lots, but who hadn't built in Sea Ranch yet, this was a big problem.

For some people, it was a decade before they could build their homes and all the while construction costs continually rose. Guy and Diane Atwood had purchased a lot in Sea Ranch and had their plans all drawn up, they even had a dishwasher and stove they bought in anticipation of the new house. In 1978, they had everything they needed "except the okay from the coastal commission," according to Mr. Atwood who gave a statement to then Senator Nejedly explaining that "in the last two years building costs have gone up and that's one of the things that have made people give up" (Atwood).

Long before the access to the beaches became a legal issue, Oceanic had gifted the County of Sonoma 140 acres of land for use as a public park in lieu of creating access through the private Sea Ranch property. The donated land, where the Gualala River meets the ocean, is in the northernmost section of Sea Ranch and contains the flattest and most accessible access to the coast. Boeke describes the deal as such: "The County was, just to be brief about it, clearly gleeful. They were seeing our tax dollars and they liked the sound of our voices and our thoughts and so forth" claims Boeke (McNamee 2). As far as Oceanic and the county government was concerned, the issue of access to the coast was settled with the 140-acre gift. What the northern donated land did not provide access to was the abundant abalone rich waters to the south. It was

the denial of access to these tidelands that caused consternation to the people who formed COAAST. Once Oceanic took over the property they hired security guards to keep people from trespassing. Boeke asserts that “people had been ripping off the land and animal life here. And we just had to be tough and straight arm them and send them packing” (McNamee 7). Boeke learned quickly that the North Coast of California was like most other rural and frontier areas, in that people were very conservative and did not take kindly to being told how to live their life. The Ohlsons had been lenient with the locals who dove for abalone and only told people to leave when they camped or if they damaged the sheep fences.



Figure 17 Sheep Ranch Fencing, 2017

Al Boeke tasted abalone for the first time at the Ohlson’s dinner table. Ed Ohlson told Boeke that he had to “learn to eat abalone” as he was “going to live” at on the coast, and he would have to live there in order to develop it (Ohlson qtd in Boeke 26). Al Boeke died on November 8, 2011, at the age of 88, after living many years in his home at Unit 20 of Sea Ranch.



Figure 18 Fence and Trail, 2018

In *The Sea Ranch*, original architect and Sea Ranch home owner, Donlyn Lyndon writes, “The experience of the coastline was to be shared, not sequestered in separate private ownerships, and there would be large areas of commonly held land that would ensure the perpetuation of the coastal ecology (19).” Oceanic California’s 1975 advertisements in San Francisco’s newspapers were selling a different experience: “The Sea Ranch is a private development, for the exclusive use of Sea Ranch residents and their guests. Access is guarded by full time security patrol” (Conrad). Not very welcoming to all. Tidelands and beaches are state



Figure 19 Low tide with Bull Whip Kelp Covered Rocks, 2017

property and are supposed to be accessible to all. The Sea Ranch was blocking access and people took notice.



Figure 20 Shoreline and bluff of Sea Ranch, 2017

Sea Ranch resident Harold Wendorf let his opinion be heard in the March 22, 1972 Press Democrat editorial section where he wrote; “Public access means that everyone should have access, including very young children to Octogenarians, not everyone is able to walk along the

fragile cliffs and unpredictable ocean surf. People who are demanding public access to the private property are full of self-interest and are thinking only of what they, themselves, can gain from these tidelands rather than public safety (Wendorf). Wendorf makes the point that the shoreline of Sea Ranch is dangerous. The bluff is made of conglomerate, which is a sedimentary rock like sandstone, but with large rocks embedded in it which tend to give way when disturbed. The bluff edge is constantly changing and is being eroded at the rapid rate of one to ten inches per year as the ocean relentlessly attacks the coastline (Cochrane 9). Walking carelessly close to the edge could precipitate a fall of twenty feet or more into the rock crashing surf. The undertow of the Pacific Ocean in Sonoma County is infamous for taking risktakers and the unaware out to sea and never returning them to shore.



Figure 21 Bluff edge of Sea Ranch, 2017

An initial compromise occurred in 1973 and some construction could continue if some conditions were met, including public access; view easements; limitations on the size of buildings in scenic view areas; and limitations on septic systems and water supply usage. Many of these conditions required landowners to give their land, which was jointly owned with the Sea

Ranch Association to the County, but the individual landowner was powerless to force the Association to comply. “They’re just trying to take our land without paying for it” says John McChesney who was president of the Homeowners Association at the time (qtd in Mikkleson). The State Commission proposed another compromise which was for the lot owners to pay \$1,500 fee to the state in lieu of complying with the conditions that affected the Homeowners Association. A total of 118 lot owners made deposits over the next six years before a final compromise arrived.

The final compromise came the State Legislature in 1980 in the form of Assembly Bill 2706 (the “Bane Bill”), named after Tom Bane of Van Nuys. The bill allowed for housing construction along the coast as long as the views were protected and public access was provided to the coast. The bill gave the Homeowners Association a cash payment of \$500,000 to settle all the lawsuits that had been filed over the years. In return, the association was to build a blufftop trail running the entire length of Sea Ranch, provide five public accessways to the shoreline with parking spaces and roadside signage, reduced the total number development parcels by half, and assist in funding of improvements to Highway 1. The moratorium on construction that lasted for nearly a decade coupled with the reduced number of parcels available to sell, forced Oceanic to abandon their clustered-housing design concept for larger lots and larger houses in order to make money.

On November 2, 1985, six new Coastal Access signs were unveiled along Highway 1 and jubilant group of politicians, environmentalists, and nature lovers released several dozen helium filled plastic balloons into the air before walking the brand-new coastal trail from north to south. The Press Democrat newspaper quotes Bill Kortum as saying “We’re happy with what we have now, because we had nothing before,” and quotes Ron Dolph, supervisor of park planning for the

County as stating, “The issue of access has been overblown. Once you get the trail in you won’t be able to tell if a person walking on it is from the Sea Ranch or the public” (Swartz).

It is ironic that a group of people trying to preserve a natural area littered plastic balloons into the air and it is also ironic that the density reduction forced upon Oceanic by the environmentalist diluted the open-space, ecologically conscious design principles of Halprin and Boeke (John-Aider, 2012). Although the original goals were never wholly implemented, the Sea Ranch won numerous awards and brought fame and fortune to the architects and builders.



Figure 22 Sunset at Sea Ranch

The fundamental change that occurred at Sea Ranch due to the commissions denial of building permits was a move away from the goal of building for middle and middle upper income people. Due to inflation and the cost of construction over ten years, only the wealthy and successful could afford to build and that “sometimes spoils things,” according to Boeke, then The Sea Ranch “gradually shifted gears to the really rich. And that’s where we are today” (Boeke 21).

Sea Ranch failed to achieve the original goals set by Lawrence Halprin of an ecological community. Halprin would later write in *Diary of an Idea*, that the “Sea Ranch still needs a heart” (Halprin, *Diary* 59). By this he means the community he envisioned, one populated by ecologically minded people living in small farm style groups and interacting with the environment in a way that honored and valued the landscape as a partner, never materialized. The commitment to a design concept that worked with the landscape was mostly abandoned. Large homes were built on suburban style curved roads and the long legal battles escalated cost so much that only the rich could afford to build at Sea Ranch.

Appendix 1

Sea Ranch Timeline

90 Million Years Ago: The rocks of Sea Ranch were formed near Monterey, California.

25 Million Years Ago: The rocks moved 225 miles north along the San Andreas Fault at the rate of one-half inch per year to their present location. Along the way the rocks detached from the North American plate and attached themselves to the Pacific plate.

3 Million Years Ago: The Pacific plate pushed against the North American plate creating the hills.

10 Thousand Years Ago: Sea level was low and the shoreline extended several miles west of its current location. As the Wisconsin glacier began to melt, the sea level rose cutting a bluff into the meadow. The edge of the sea cliff is shrinking at the rate of ten inches per year.

1811: Kashaya Pomo band of people make contact with the Russians who have entered the region in search of the fur trade. The Kashaya are the oldest known inhabitants of the region dating back several thousand years.

1846: Ernest Rufus receives 17,580-acre Mexican land grant from Gualala River to Ocean Cove and sends Frederick Hugal to make improvements to what becomes "Rancho de Hermann."

1860: Chris Stengel and Adam Knipp raise cattle, log timber and ship from their Walhhala Ranch, or Gualala.

1904: William and George Bender buy the 5,200-acre Knipp Stengel Ranch and rename it Rancho Del Mar.

1910: Walter P. Frick buys the land after the Bender's Del Mar Mill burns down, Frick raises cattle and sheep, and plants the cypress hedgerows.

1941: The Ohlson family of Annapolis buys the ranch at auction because Frick didn't pay the property taxes.

1961: Lawrence Halprin begins camping on the land and living with the weather.

1963: Oceanic California, a subsidiary of Hawaiian developers Castle & Cooke, purchase the Del Mar Ranch from the Ohlsons for 2.7 million dollars. Lawrence Halprin is hired as the landscape architect.

1964: Sonoma County Board of Supervisors approves plans for the southern edge of Sea Ranch. Condominium One and the Demonstration Houses begin construction.

1965: Sea Ranch is born with the publication of 111 rules of guiding principles for the community.

1966: Sea Ranch begins to earn world wide recognition for architectural design.

1968: Bill Kortum forms COOAST to fight for public access to the tidelands in Sea Ranch.

Places Measure B on county ballot but it is defeated. The measure would have required all new coastal development to provide public access to the beach.

1969: Lawrence Halprin, Joseph Esherick, MLTW are let go from the project by Oceanic who hire their own architects.

1972: California voters approve Proposition 20, establishing the California Coastal Commission to oversee coastal development and ensure public access.

1973: The Coastal Commission begins denying permits, leading to a virtual building moratorium. Many lot owners cannot build and construction costs steadily rise.

1980s: The Bane Bill is approved by the Legislature, settling the fight.

2014: Plans are announced for a yearlong 50th birthday celebration of The Sea Ranch.

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