

Farallon National Wildlife Refuge and Public Access Fact Sheet

Prepared by:

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1- PRBO Conservation Science, a non-partisan, scientific research organization, opposes the opening of the Farallon National Wildlife Refuge-“California’s Galapagos”- to public access.

- Opening FNWR to the public could put one of our country’s greatest natural treasures at risk by threatening sensitive wildlife populations to excessive human disturbance.
- In addition, there are serious safety issues involving accessing the FNWR as well as on the island which preclude the feasibility of opening the refuge to the public.
- The USFWS allows rare visits by others under special use permits when the purpose of those visits are compatible with Refuge goals (e.g., a once a year on-island media visit to share a glimpse into the wealth of the Farallones with the public).

2- PRBO Conservation Science has been conducting research on, and stewarding, the island’s abundant and unique natural resources every day and night since 1968.

- PRBO Conservation Science (PRBO), founded as Point Reyes Bird Observatory in 1965, has been conducting year-round, continuous wildlife research, monitoring, and stewardship at the Farallon refuge (on Southeast Farallon Island) since 1968 in cooperation with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS).
- PRBO is a non-profit, non-partisan, award-winning scientific research organization whose mission is to conserve wildlife and ecosystems through innovative scientific research and outreach, for the benefit of wildlife and our communities.
- PRBO’s 120 staff and seasonal biologists work throughout western North American and the northern Pacific with hundreds of partners including all the major agencies responsible for managing wildlife and habitat.
- PRBO’s 2005 annual operating budget is approximately \$6 million; its annual budget for conducting research and stewardship activities at the Farallones is \$300,000.
 - PRBO raises 66% of its annual Farallones budget from private foundations and donors.

- PRBO contracts with the US Fish and Wildlife Service through a cooperative agreement for the remaining 34%.

3- The Farallon Islands- “California’s Galapagos”- are a uniquely valuable part of America’s precious natural heritage, hosting the largest seabird breeding colony outside of Alaska and Hawaii.

Long important to marine wildlife, the significance of the Farallon Islands was recognized in 1909 when President Theodore Roosevelt established the Farallon National Wildlife Refuge (FNWR).

- **FNWR hosts the largest seabird breeding colony in the continental United States.**
- FNWR is located 28 miles west of San Francisco (and is actually considered to be within San Francisco County and within San Francisco's city limits).
- FNWR sits on the edge of the continental shelf amidst an unusually rich marine food web, where the ocean floor plunges from 300 feet to more than two miles beneath the water’s surface.
 - Seabirds, whales, sea turtles, marine mammals and large fish exploit the abundant and diverse food resources of this geography, one of the most abundant in the world.
 - Cold water upwelling in the California Current System (CCS), from British Columbia to Baja California, is the key to this rich and variable marine ecosystem that makes it so valuable to marine wildlife, fisheries and other users of the ocean.
 - The CCS is one of only 5 rich eastern boundary currents in the world’s oceans. Together they comprise about 5% of the oceans’ area but provide 50% of their fisheries.
 - Rockfish that spawn near the Islands’ rocky shores are food for breeding guillemots and cormorants as well as for commercially valuable fish such as salmon.
 - The islands above mean-high-tide fall within the refuge; the waters surrounding the islands are under the jurisdiction of the NOAA’s Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary
- **The islands serve as nesting habitat for more than 250,000 birds of 12 species.**
 - The 12 seabirds species are the Common Murre, Tufted Puffin, Rhinoceros Auklet, Cassin's Auklet, Pigeon Guillemot, Brandt's, Double-crested and Pelagic Cormorant, Black Oystercatcher, Western Gull, Leach's Storm-petrel and Ashy Storm-petrel.
 - 30% of California’s breeding seabirds are found within the Farallon NWR.
 - Half the world’s population of Ashy storm-petrels (which can live to be at least 35 years old) breed on the Refuge.
 - The largest colony of western gulls anywhere nests here.
 - 50% of the seabirds that breed on the Refuge produce 1 egg per year. Of those roughly 50% survive making them very vulnerable to any human disturbance.
- **Increased human disturbance to the FNWR would likely increase negative impacts on federally and state listed protected species.**

- Four California bird species of special concern breed on the FNWR: Rhinoceros Auklet, Cassin's Auklet, Ashy Storm-petrel and Tufted Puffin.
 - In addition, federally listed Brown Pelicans use the island as a major roost site. All bird species on the island are protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.
- The island also is the wintering ground of several species of migrants and regularly attracts vagrant birds.
- **Increased human activity would have negative impacts on the five species of pinnipeds that rely on the Farallon Islands: Northern elephant seals (*greatly depleted over the past century*), California sea lions, Northern fur seals (*a significantly at risk species*), Pacific harbor seals, and Steller sea lions.**
 - Steller sea lions, have declined over 50% since the 1960s, were listed as a threatened species throughout their range under the federal Endangered Species Act in 1990. The Farallon Islands are the second most southerly breeding ground for Steller sea lions where numbers are on the rise for the first time in decades. Steller's sea lions once numbered about 1000 at the Farallones; current population is now about 100.
 - Northern fur seals once numbered upwards of 50,000 and were hunted to local extinction. They recolonized Southeast Farallon Island in 1996 and the population is slowly increasing. Human disturbance during the summer/fall could disrupt this important new rookery as others in the Bering Sea and elsewhere have experienced precipitous declines in recent decades.
 - All marine mammals on the island are protected from harassment or take by the Marine Mammal Protection Act.
 - Increased human activity and landing on the FNWR would significantly increase the level of disturbance for pinniped species.
- The Refuge is one of the best places to study Great white sharks in the world.
 - Great white sharks gather here in large numbers each fall to feed on juvenile pinnipeds.
 - PRBO's long-term project exploring the population dynamics and predatory behavior of white sharks resulted in the passage of a 1993 law protecting white sharks in California waters because of their value to fisheries as a top level predator.
 - Much of the shark's life cycle is still unknown today. Current studies employing satellite telemetry are helping to determine where the sharks go when they leave the Farallones each fall and what physical oceanographic parameters they inhabit during their four to eight months away.
- **New cutting-edge models developed from PRBO's data on productivity and diet of Farallones seabirds are now shedding new light on methods for measuring return rates and population numbers of commercial fish including salmon, herring and rockfish.**
- The Farallon Islands have been rightly called "California's Galapagos". Every effort should be made to protect this invaluable and quite unique natural resource from increased public disturbance.

4- Human disturbance severely threatens Farallone's wildlife and their habitats.

- The islands have a legacy of human disturbance.
- Wildlife populations were decimated in the 19th century due to hunting.
- Heavy disturbance of wildlife continued into the 20th century, but when the USFWS began active stewardship in 1968, human disturbance was greatly reduced due to steps taken by PRBO and USFWS, including:
 - Closing off sensitive areas to all human contact (including biologists)
 - Controlling introduced (non-native) flora and fauna.
 - Installation of boardwalks to prevent walking on sensitive habitat and limiting the activities of human residents to only a few established trails.
 - Night lighting is minimized and screened from view so that nocturnal species are not disturbed.
 - Removing all unneeded structures to maximize natural habitat available to wildlife.
 - Limiting the number of people allowed on the island at one time.
- **Wildlife populations on the Farallones, particularly seabirds, are extremely sensitive to disturbance as they have evolved in the absence of predators.**
 - Most seabirds nest on the ground and have a slow rate of reproduction, which make them especially sensitive to human disturbance
 - Common Murres on the Farallon Islands numbered about 1 million prior to removal of eggs from nests for residents in the San Francisco region from the 1850s to 1870s. Oiling brought the population down to ~10,000 by about 1910.
 - Tens of thousands of murres were drowned in gill nets between 1979 and 1985, reducing the population from about 110,000 in 1982 to about 30,000 by 1987.
 - PRBO and the USFWS sponsored legislation which ended the gillnet mortality by the early 1990s.
 - Current Murre population is approximately 170,000.
 - Common Murres lay their single egg on bare rock or soil. If the egg is moved even a few inches (which can easily occur when the birds are flushed), the parent may not recognize its own egg when it returns
 - Gulls are predators and rush into a disturbed colony devouring exposed eggs and chicks.
 - Crushing by adults is the most common cause of death for seal pups. Chances of crushing increases when animals move into the water hastily following a disturbance.
 - Common Murres are very vulnerable to human disturbance and while their population is expanding on the island, increased human disturbance would likely have a negative effect on their ability to return to historic population levels.
- **Seabird colonies can be quite easily flushed and breeding attempts destroyed when gulls or other avian predators swoop in on abandoned eggs and chicks. Some species when disturbed will abandon their nests**

- entirely for the season.** Since many seabird species only lay one egg per year, this can be devastating to efforts to rebuild populations of seabirds.
- Underground burrows are found throughout the island, and untrained visitors to the island can easily bury birds or destroy habitat by traveling off trails even for a moment.
 - Maintaining adequate protection for wildlife resources on the FNWR requires close scrutiny of all activities of untrained visitors who are not trained research personnel.
 - **Public access could result in the introduction of non-native species,** both animal and plant, that can pose serious threats to the native flora and fauna. For example, non-native mammals (e.g. rats) are an extreme threat to island ecosystems which have evolved without predators, especially those with breeding seabirds, and millions of dollars is spent at other important colonies around the world to attempt to alleviate this problem.
 - FNWR and the PRBO staff who serve as it's stewards are not equipped with the time or resources that would be required to ensure wildlife protection if the refuge were opened up to the public.
 - Most of the wildlife on this refuge is there because of the absence of heavy human impacts; therefore this refuge is more sensitive to disturbance than most.
 - **Increased human visitation would be destructive to the natural values of the island and surrounding areas, and therefore should not be allowed.**

5- Human access to the Farallones is extremely difficult and dangerous.

- Accessing the FNWR is extremely difficult. While close to San Francisco, the FNWR lies in the open Pacific Ocean, and 40 knot winds and 15 foot seas can, and do, occur at any time of year.
- There is no dock on Southeast Farallon Island; it would be easily destroyed by winter storms.
- Landing on the island requires a derrick system similar to that found on an offshore oil platform. While all measures are taken to ensure the safety of this process, and there have been no safety incidents, it can be very challenging for those inexperienced with these procedures.
- Landing conditions are often rough, and experienced personnel are required to ensure this process is done as safely and efficiently as possible. Public access would make this process even more difficult and increase potential safety risks.
- Boat landings deliver supplies to the handful of biologists on the island every 2 weeks, and they require a great deal of effort and time to ensure their success.
- Numerous boat trips and landings are aborted due to poor, unsafe conditions.