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EDITORIALS

The Farallones are for the birds

THE FARALLON Islands should stay just as they are: remote, rocky and off limits to human visitors.

A nascent plan to open the windswept landmarks 28 miles off the Golden Gate would unhinge a thriving world of seabird nests, sea lion rearing areas and fish life on the rebound. It also sets a bad precedent by bending restrictions on federal refuges in the name of public access.

Aside from a handful of biologists, next to no one steps ashore on the 211 acres of wilderness islands. It's for good reason. Human visitors, no matter how careful and well intentioned, disrupt life on the natural nursery, nicknamed "California's Galapagos."

Yet this intrusion is contemplated in a bill (HR298) by U.S. Rep. Richard Pombo, R-Tracy. He wants to allow visitors back on the rocks.

Fortunately, this misguided idea has already lost steam. Democratic Rep. Nick Rahall of West Virginia dropped his support for opening up the Farallones when he learned of naturalist objections. Also, Rep. Tom Lantos, D-San Mateo, whose district reaches out to sea to include the islands, opposes the plan as unnecessary and harmful to bird and sea life.

What is the need for this bill? Pombo's staff explains that ham radio operators, who enjoy operating from the ends of the earth, want to send a few messages from the windswept granite outcroppings.

But that is not a sufficient justification for further human intrusion on the Farallones sanctuary.

In the early 1900s, human activities had devastated the islands. Since becoming a federal refuge, nature

has surged back. A total of 250,000 birds nest there. Endangered Stellar sea lions rest on the rocks. Great white sharks patrol the waters in season.

Ellie Cohen, executive director of the Point Reyes Bird Observatory, says that even a few visitors can disrupt life. Three scientists live on the atoll in winter, and the number rises to only eight during prime breeding seasons.

Cohen said stepping off trails can crush bird burrows. Other species take flight at the appearance of humans and leave nests unprotected for marauding gulls who eat eggs and hatchlings. The biologists themselves hunch down to a near crawl when taking notes, she said.

The public already has a form of access. Visitors can cruise out on day trips and observe the islands from beyond a 300-foot limit. Getting ashore, even if allowed, would be a dicey experience, because there's no harbor or dock, only a hazardous crane-and-hoist system that picks up small boats and swings them ashore.

Why is Pombo pushing this measure? He isn't saying for now, beyond a staff member who grumbled that the islands are "not a country club for an elite group of bird watchers."

Pombo, who heads the House Resource Committee, is a powerful and polarizing figure in environmental politics. He has warred with outdoors groups by pushing oil drilling in Alaska and by opposing conservation measures for the ocean and protections for endangered species.

This is a battle he doesn't need. The Farallones should be safeguarded as a refuge.