

Sea stars: 'More than anything, it's just a sigh of relief'

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Commission to consider banning all harvest on sea stars. For local conservation and education groups, the commission's vote is welcome news.

"More than anything, it's just a sigh of relief," said Kelli Ennis, the director for the Haystack Rock Awareness Program in Cannon Beach. "Kind of positive reassurance that it won't be happening."

Ennis and volunteers and staff with the awareness program regularly monitor sea stars in and around Haystack Rock, looking for signs of the wasting syndrome. No harvest of any animals is allowed on the iconic rock, but Ennis has heard about people shucking off sea stars at other locations. Any little bit of protection will help, she said.

In recent years, the Haystack Rock Awareness Program has seen positive signs of improvement among sea stars around Haystack Rock.

In survey data from September, 12% to 15% of the sea star population around Haystack Rock still showed signs of the wasting syndrome, but nothing severe, Ennis said. They saw minor lesions, not the full jelly-like disintegration of years past. None of the sea stars were actively missing limbs.

"We're kind of optimis-



Sea stars cluster on a barnacle and mussel-covered rock near Cannon Beach.

Katie Frankowicz/KMUN

tic," Ennis said.

Sea stars are considered a keystone species, a major predator in their corner of the intertidal ecosystem. When sea star populations drop suddenly, there are downstream effects on the entire ecosystem. When sea star wasting syndrome hit British Colum-

bia in Canada in 2015, the sudden die-off of sea stars showed researchers exactly how important the animals were to kelp forests and in keeping sea urchin populations in check.

For the Fish and Wildlife Commission and staff, it doesn't matter that recre-

ational harvest of the sea stars is very low. There is high public interest in sea star conservation and, Rumrill told commissioners, "This is a prudent management action at this time to demonstrate the commitment to conservation."

The state has also contributed original data to the

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration as the agency considers possible listing for the sunflower sea star under the Endangered Species Act.

The state hopes to hear back from NOAA by mid-summer about what type of status might be assigned to

the sunflower sea star.

Mary Wahl, the chairwoman of the Fish and Wildlife Commission, asked if the sunflower species belongs on Oregon's endangered species list, regardless of what NOAA decides.

"I personally believe that it does at this point," Rumrill answered.

Sunflower sea stars live farther out than the five-armed ochre sea stars many people are used to seeing in tide pools on the North Coast. The large sunflower sea stars can have as many as 24 limbs and are rare visitors to the intertidal zone. They might show up in crab pots, but there has not ever been recreational harvest of the animals.

Still, Rumrill assured Wahl, there are internal discussions about how to address this particular species' declining numbers.

Rumrill also pointed to hopeful news coming out of the University of Washington, where researchers have successfully reared sunflower sea stars in captivity.

The team responsible for the work wrapped up a fundraiser this month and hopes to work on experimental wild reintroduction of captive-raised juvenile sea stars this year.

This story is part of a collaboration between The Astorian and Coast Community Radio.

Port: 'I think the cruise industry could be one of the slowest to get back'

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been big for the Port.

"It's definitely been a struggle," Isom said. "There have been a number of ways that we've tried to mitigate some of the negative effects."

Since the pandemic started, the Port has significantly reduced administrative and maintenance staff. The Port is working with

Business Oregon to get a deferment on some outstanding debt.

As the cruise ship industry slowly returns, the Port is also working through a number of logistical challenges.

"In some ways, it feels like we are starting new and even as we, hopefully, get on the back end of COVID, there are some considerations that we haven't really had in the past," Isom said

at the Port's finance meeting last week.

In the past, the Port has relied on the Sunset Empire Transportation District to provide buses and drivers for cruise ship passengers that flow into Astoria. But the transit district, which is working through a bus driver shortage, does not have the capacity this year.

Isom added that the Port has also heavily depended

on Clatsop Cruise Hosts, a volunteer group dedicated to welcoming cruise ship passengers into the community. But many of the volunteers are retired or older, so he is unsure of their plans amid the pandemic.

"We're doing our best to proceed as if it's best-case scenario, but we also understand that we may not completely be out of the woods and of all industries, I think

the cruise industry could be one of the slowest to get back to whatever normal is," he said.

Conner reiterated his assurances about safety as thousands of cruise ship passengers are set to enter the community, noting that

cruise lines have high vaccination rates and virus protocols.

Looking ahead, even with this year's cancellations, Conner has faith that 2023 could be as strong as ever, with people eager to go on cruises again.

Simmons: 'It's going to be there forever'

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Simmons had discovered the skeleton of what turned out to be an extinct giant ground sloth. The creature, *Megalonyx jeffersonii*, likely roamed the area 12,000 years before the first Starbucks. It gets its name from Thomas Jefferson, who, before he was president, wrote a scientific paper in 1797 about a similar find in a western Virginia cave, erroneously thinking it a tiger-like cat. In fact, the sloths were herbivores which evolved from creatures in South America.

It is among prized exhibits at the museum, which adjoins the campus of the University of Washington in northeast Seattle. The fossil has been on display since 1977, but it was only recently that museum staff decided to officially name it.

"Gordy" was the inevitable choice.



'THE GUYS WERE MAD AT ME BECAUSE WE LOST THREE DAYS' WORK!'

Gordy Simmons | 1961 fossil finder

cent complete, only missing the skull that was destroyed in the discovery.

"When I have guests, or do a tour, I always stop there and connect people to this amazing prehistory and recent history."

Simmons attended Ilwaco High School, where he had four years' success in football and excelled in track, earning kudos for long jump and sprints. He married his high school sweetheart, Irene, and they had five children who all still live in Washington state, plus nine grandchildren and four great grandchildren.

After he graduated with the Class of 1954, he spent a year studying at Grays Harbor while Irene completed her senior year, and then they were married. His career took him to the greater Seattle area, which

boomed with the Century 21 Exposition of 1962 and construction of landmarks, including roads and bridges that shaped today's city. He recalls watching construction of the Space Needle, although that was not one of his projects.

Now 87 and retired in Skamokawa, he treasures memories of his Ilwaco days, growing up in a house near the city ball field, and later the tale of his dramatic fossil find.

Daughter Dianna Johnson, who lives in Kirkland, remembers growing up with the family legend. "He has talked about this several times over the course of my life," she said. "He is great at telling stories and there are so many wonderful tidbits about this."

Having the fossil named for him had significance. "That was one of his dreams," she said. "It meant so much to him."

'Claws'

A carefully researched article by David B. Williams published in 2010 on the Seattle-based history website www.historylink.org highlighted how Simmons, then working for the Sellen Construction Co., spotted the bones sticking out of a recently excavated 14-foot-deep hole dug for an anchor for a lighting tower.

Museum experts dug and discovered a significant portion of the skeleton — but no intact head. A plaster skull was added to the real bones to give the museum display more visual impact. The pelvis, which was recovered, was reported to be 45 inches wide, but scientists have not established its gender.

Williams quoted a Seattle Times story in which Howard A. Coombs, chairman of the University of Wash-

ington geology department, commented about its condition. "You can even see the tiny scars left by muscles," Coombs told the newspaper. "All we have to do to clean them is to put them under the faucet. Usually you have to chip old bones out of hardened soil."

Williams' article highlighted how the creatures lived in a period that followed the last ice age. "A post-glacial habitat of forests, lakes and bogs provided a diverse food supply for large herbivores such as giant ground sloths," he wrote. "They chewed twigs and leaves with short and stout grinding teeth. They could have used their large claws for hooking branches or possibly for defense."

The museum has 73,000 fossils in its collection, gathered from all seven continents, including mammals, birds, dinosaurs, reptiles, amphibians and fish. Its staff posted about the sloth on its Facebook page on Valentine's Day in February, the anniversary of the find in 1961.

Simmons recalled it was a while before he saw the exhibit displaying his fossil at its full height. Originally, it wasn't displayed as an 11-foot tall beast. "When I did get to see it I thought, 'Gee, what a deal!' It looks like a big deer, except it has a claw."

His conversations with staff, when he revealed he believed he was the only surviving member of the crew that found the bones, led to close links with the museum and eventually the naming decision.

"It's going to be there forever," Simmons said. "But that's not my greatest achievement in this world. Marrying my wife was. We have been married 66 years. What a wonderful time we have had all these years."

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