

Editorial: Montaña de Oro deal is a brilliant plan

The Public Works Board should approve the purchase of land to add to popular state park

By Opinion of The Tribune

Wed, Aug. 06, 2008

Montaña de Oro already ranks as one of the most scenic of California's state parks. Now, through a combination of public and private funding, this unique gem could become even more spectacular with the addition of 5,500 acres of ruggedly beautiful coastal land.

It's premature to celebrate—we'll wait until all the t's are crossed and the i's are dotted—but we do want to acknowledge the hard work that's gone into the acquisitions.

Several individuals and organizations have been involved in the effort, including the Land Conservancy of San Luis Obispo County, State Parks staff, the Nature Conservancy, the American Land Conservancy, and conservationist Kara Blakeslee, who is volunteering one day a week to work on the project.

The proposed acquisitions—which include three large parcels and several smaller ones—will not only greatly expand Montaña de Oro, they also will allow construction of a 20-mile segment of the California Coastal Trail that would link Los Osos with Avila Beach.

This would be a huge boost to San Luis Obispo County's burgeoning eco-tourism industry. As much as we brag about our wineries, beaches, restaurants and shops, many visitors and locals alike are looking for more active recreation opportunities. A 20-mile stretch of nearly pristine trail overlooking the Pacific would fill that bill.

The land acquisitions have yet to be finalized, though an important step could occur as early as Friday, when the state Public Works Board meets in Sacramento to consider spending \$5.7 million to buy some of the properties—part of the \$13 million earmarked for land acquisitions in the area.

We strongly urge the Public Works Board to approve the purchase.

While that may seem like a lot to spend at a time of fiscal crisis, keep in mind that the money isn't coming from the state's general fund. Rather, it's part of the \$2.1 billion Proposition 12 approved by voters in 2000.

Granted, acquiring new parkland is just a first step; the state also must come up with the money to develop trails, parking areas and other amenities, and unfortunately there isn't always money in the cash-strapped state budget for such projects.

As Tribune writer David Sneed reported recently, the Harmony Headlands State Park near Harmony, acquired by the state in 2003, has yet to open because of lack of revenue for a parking lot and other improvements there.

That isn't expected to be the case with the Montaña de Oro expansion, however, because several facilities already are in place.

Even if the land does have to sit idle for a while, it's well worth the investment. We should not lose out on this opportunity to permanently preserve this beautiful stretch of coastline for future generations.