

Should the city of San Diego dredge Children's Pool Beach for 'joint use' between harbor seals and humans? Yes!

Pollution is keeping families from the beach

By Scott Peters

June 23, 2004

Seventy-four years ago today, Ellen Browning Scripps made a breathtaking \$60,000 donation to fund the breakwater that formed the Children's Pool. That same day, the San Diego City Council passed a resolution extending appreciation "for her public spiritedness in making provision for a children's swimming pool at La Jolla." At the dedication, newspaper articles heralded it as the "only plunge of its kind in the world."

Soon after, the state of California deeded the land to the city, requiring "that said lands shall be devoted exclusively to public park (and) bathing pool for children." And for nearly seven decades, families in the area enjoyed this unique and generous gift as a favorite place for birthday parties, snorkeling, swimming and diving.

However, in 1997, the county Health Department closed the Children's Pool to swimming because of fecal contamination from the growing seal population. Once families were excluded, the number of seals grew from a few dozen to several hundred, further increasing bacteria levels beyond those healthy for human contact. In my campaign in 2000, I was surprised how many people told me that this was the first place they had touched the ocean and learned to love it and how saddened they were that they can't swim there with their children or grandchildren.

This morning, a City Council committee will consider a plan to lower the pollution levels at the pool by dredging the beach back to its 1940s configuration, cleaning the contaminated sand, allowing more water to circulate and naturally flush the area of bacteria. The city should pursue this plan so that families can once again use the pool as Miss Scripps intended.

Nobody is, as some claim, trying to "get rid of the seals." People and seals co-existed in this area for decades, and seals will continue to frequent the area as always, although perhaps in lower numbers. But the proposed project will address a pollution problem that is keeping families from using this man-made beach that was specifically created for their use.

The Children's Pool is unlike any beach in San Diego. The wall shields small children from the rough waves that bash the shoreline on either side and from the crowds of big kids and adults at other beaches in La Jolla and San Diego. This is a unique and irreplaceable resource for families and kids.

By contrast, **there are many places for harbor seals. There are over 1,200 haul-out sites along the California coast, and the Children's Pool is not biologically necessary to protect their robust and growing population in California.**

Harbor seals are not "endangered," "threatened" or "depleted" under federal law. The Children's Pool is neither a natural nor a necessary habitat for the harbor seals.

There is no question about the intent of the donor. We can argue today about what Miss Scripps would think today. Maybe she would like seeing children watch the seals; maybe she would fret that they need more exercise. That's all speculation.

What's certain is what she wrote in her gift – it's a place for kids to swim. As the State Lands Commission reaffirmed in 2000, "the Children's Pool area was to be devoted to recreational use by the public, with an emphasis on providing a safe bathing area for children."

Some still claim that we should surrender the Children's Pool, and convert its recreational use from swimming beach to animal exhibit. I think this shows unacceptable disregard for our donor.

Can you imagine what people would say if the soccer fields at the new \$87 million Joan Kroc Center were overrun by coyotes? Would we abandon those fields so kids could watch the coyotes? No. Would we keep the coyotes on the fields because they became a tourist attraction? Of course not. We would find a humane way to honor the donor's intent and move the animals to get the kids playing soccer again, and the same should be done to get the kids swimming at the Children's Pool.

And if not, what's next? Now that some biologists have suggested that the seals at the Children's Pool may be reaching their capacity for the area and may begin colonizing other beaches, will we close La Jolla Cove to diving, swimming and snorkeling?

Finally, I understand that any change would cost money, and that the city has little of it. But fiscal challenges are no excuse for surrendering recreational parkland or ignoring the intent of our generous donors. If the City Council approves today's plan, and there is not money in the budget to implement it, I will seek private donations to make the situation right.

Let's find a way to reduce the pollution and regain the historic balance between people and seals so children can once again enjoy the gift Miss Scripps intended.

Peters represents the 1st District on the San Diego City Council, which includes La Jolla.