Somewhere between old age and hospice, thereâ??s a phase called â??docent.â?? Iâ??m fulfilling mine at Point Lobos.

Description

Through college and grad school, I successfully avoided science courses. I took only two: astronomy and natural history, which my husband called â??Our Friend, Mr. Sun,â?• and â??The Chicken: A Natural History.â?•

A SENIOR BEAT COLUMN

When he met me, I was 32, and he was incredulous Iâ??d survived that long, given my complete lack of understanding of how the natural and physical worlds are put together (this after Iâ??d poured hot water into a glass pitcher).

Yet here I am, nearly 70, and immersed in intensive tutorials in geology, botany, marine biology, natural history, ornithology and climate science. Why, you might well ask.

Because, dear reader, Iâ??ve reached that stage in the life cycle, somewhere between old age and hospice, called â??Docent.â?• And todayâ??s docent is not your grandmotherâ??s docent.

First off, you donâ??t walk in and just sign up. Oh no, no no, no. (Maybe to a museum, but not at Point Lobos State Natural Reserve, where I volunteered.) Itâ??s competitive. Thereâ??s a group interview, then a one-on-one with park officials, then fingerprints, background check â?? a weeding out of inferior grannies. If selected, a half year of intensive trainings ensue.

This outcropping at Point Lobos is composed of 80 million year-old granite.

Which is where I find myself now. We put on our down vests: â??POINT LOBOS DOCENT.â?• We walk all the trails. We keep a docent journal. We are issued a docent lanyard (free parking.) We have docent mentors.

Citizen scientists

We meet enrichment opportunities at every turn: learn the monarch butterfly habitat; study the grey whale migration patterns; monitor the black oystercatcher population; understand plate tectonics.

We must know the names of the flowers, the rocks, the kelp, the birds, the marine mammals. Because our mission, should we choose to accept it, is to â??interpretâ?• the park for visitors.

Tidepools (above and below) at Point Lobos.

We become citizen scientists and we are highly encouraged to arm ourselves with an arsenal of apps: Merlin Bird ID, iNaturalist, iBird Pro, leafsnap, FlowerChecker.

But somewhere along the way, all the subtlety, the intangible stunning beauty of the park is reduced to a series of lists. I want to cry out, â??Where is the poetry?!â?•

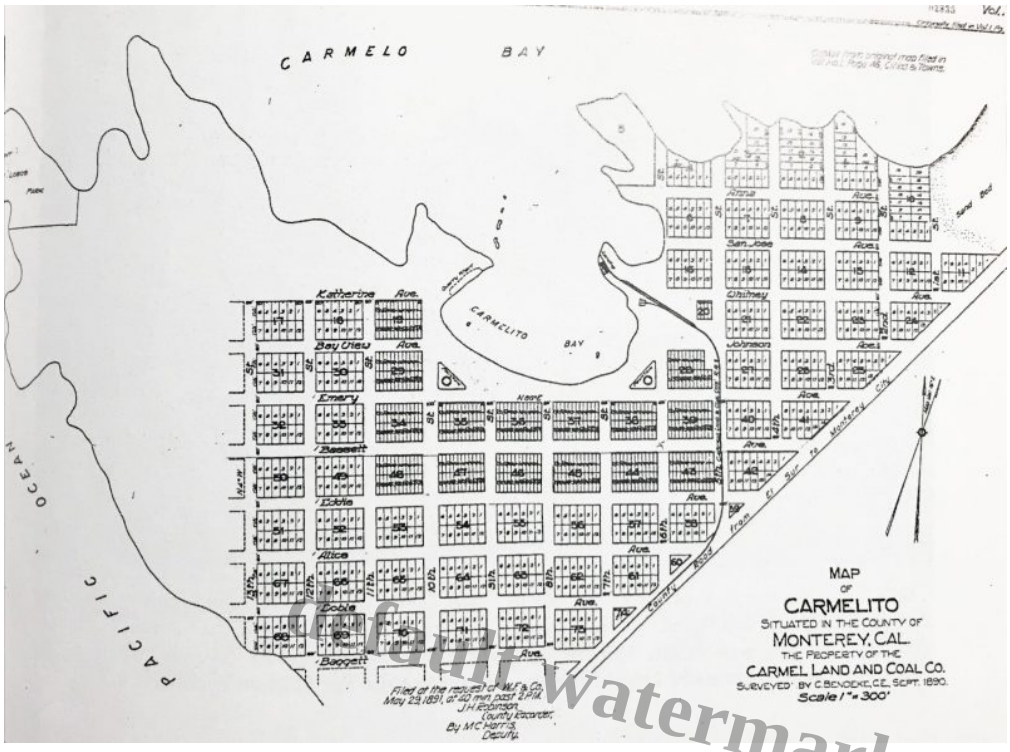
We are given flashcards and cheat sheets and lectures and slide shows.

We are shown videos and taught how to deal with abalone poachers or bluff lettuce harvesters (Call Fish & Game) and tree climbers (Blow our whistles, â??Come Down From There Immediately!â?•)

We learn important life skills like â??never turn your back on the ocean.â?•

We learn there was once enterprise in the park. In the 1800s, Japanese abalone divers set up a cannery, and Portuguese whalers killed and dragged whales into a cove, where they carved the carcasses to render the fat for oil lamps.

We learn that the Reserve could have been a subdivision like Carmel. In 1888, numerous claimants to the land banded together to form the Carmelo Land and Coal Company, starting a real estate development at Whalerâ??s Cove, and subdividing the reserve into buildable lots. Ten years later, A.M. Allan, a mining engineer from Pennsylvania was brought in to improve the coal mining there, but found there was not enough to sustain the operation.



His family had fallen under the spell of the reserve though, and he bought 640 acres in 1898. He then proceeded to buy back the lots that had already been sold, erected a fence around the property, added a toll gate, and charged 50 cents to picnickers.

His wife Sadie, in fragile health after barely surviving the 1906 earthquake while visiting San Francisco, said: â??No. This beauty must be preserved. You must not build here, darling.â?•

Finally, after three months of training â?? some poetry.

Personal stories

I chose to be a docent here because I love the luminous beauty of the park, the orange monarchs kissing the wild lilac, the fireworks explosions as waves burst over the granodiorite boulders. The fog drifts among the cypress. The lace lichen (trentopholia) dappling the pine branches like orange tinsel.

I know I will get to interpret the park my way, once I am assessed and tested and approved for service. Once I know enough not to embarrass my fellow docents.

Then, I can lead school walks and public walks, or work at the Information kiosk or set up telescopes out on the bluffs. I can do trail watch, or Gate Greet or ride the Mobile Information Van around the park.

Or I could tell visitors about how I grew up around here. How I celebrated my first birthday at China Cove (so my mom tells me) with a cake she put on a styrofoam float to drift poetically, majestically, through the tidepools. How a boy I loved at 17, in his overwhelmed enthusiasm at seeing Point Lobosâ?? beauty for the first time stripped naked and climbed the tallest Cypress at Whalerâ??s Cove, beating his chest and bellowing like Tarzan.

China Cove, Point Lobos

Or maybe I wonâ??t tell that. I could sing instead.

Some days, the park makes me want to sing.

One bright March day, I shadowed Nelson, an experienced docent, as he led a school walk for 30 Salinas 4th-graders. This was the first school walk since the pandemic suspended them in March 2020.

The kids were joyful, engaged, avid. Nelson, a retired airline pilot whose passion is Pt. Lobos, led them on a 90-minute traipse through the park, telling them about certain plants and birds and mammals.

At the end, there was this exchange:

Nelson: â??Well kids, we have come to the end of our walk. Thanks for being such great listeners and participants.â?•

Black-haired girl: â??Do they pay you for this? â??

Nelson: â??I get paid in smiles.â?•

Black-haired girl, looking worried: â??You Must Be Broke.â?•

Pure poetry.

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