

# Casino, hotels once planned for East Shore park



Year-round people can be seen in scuba gear at Divers Cove. Photos/Kathryn Reed

**By Kathryn Reed**

INCLINE VILLAGE – If it weren't for George Whittell's desire to keep out private developers, it is possible Sand Harbor State Park might not exist. In fact, the recluse is the reason much of the East Shore is undeveloped.

That's not to say he didn't have grand plans. His vision was to develop a huge casino with several hotels where the park now sits.

But in 1963 per court order Whittell had to sell 5,000 acres for \$3 million.

In 1971, it became a state park. Nevada owns 14,000 acres, which encompasses Sand Harbor and Spooner Lake, in what is officially called Lake Tahoe Nevada State Park. Much of the

land is in the backcountry.

This history is some of the wisdom that is imparted during ranger led hikes. This is the third December the park has been putting on these free excursions.



In a normal year this boulder field would be under water.

Down the road and visible from the main beach is a corner of Whittell's Thunderbird Lodge, which is operated by a nonprofit.

Most of the trees are second-generation growth; the original forest was wiped out during the Comstock. Lumber was needed in the silver mines of Virginia City.

The sophisticated flume system with inverted siphons was used to get the wood across the mountain range.

At that time the land was mostly in the hands of the Hobart family, who were lumber barons.

Walking along the footpath, the group of 10 from Incline, San Francisco, Georgia and South Africa, stopped above Divers Cove. Lines on the boulders indicate how low the lake is.



Ranger Allen Wooldridge, center, talks about the history of Sand Harbor.

Fresh water and high elevation divers are often found here – including last Sunday.

“There are some submerged boulder gardens, but not much biology,” Alisa Johansson with state parks said of what’s under the water.

While there are interpretive signs along the path, Johansson and Ranger Allen Wooldridge share more details than what’s written and they can answer visitors’ questions.

For those unfamiliar with Tahoe’s formation – tectonic and glacial – the park employees explain how it came into being and that seismic activity is still very real here.

Wooldridge said a common question he gets asked is if all the sand is natural or if it’s trucked in. He explained how the prevailing southeast winds push sand toward the park. There is a logical reason the park is named Sand Harbor.

While boulders are a common sight on the north side, more areas are becoming exposed as the lake level declines.



Few people visit the beach  
in winter.

On this chilly, overcast day not many of the park's residents are out. Chipmunks, squirrels, jack rabbits, bobcats, deer, gulls, ducks, magpies, mountain chickadees and bears are some of the critters that call this park home.

But people also heavily use it, with more than 1 million visitors a year.

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### **Notes:**

- Dec. 27, 10-11am, Before It Was a Park History Talk, free. Meet at visitors center.
- Dec. 27, 1-2pm, Hike the Point with Rangers, free. Meet at visitors center.
- Dec. 28, 10-11am, Christmas Heritage Talk, free. Meet at visitors center.
- Dec. 28, 1-2pm, Hike the Point with Rangers, free. Meet at visitors center.
- Weekends through Jan. 4 there will be sleigh rides (with wheels if necessary) and the restaurant will be open.
- The park will be open on weekends through March, including the visitors center, which has a fireplace where people may get warm.

- For more info, call 775.831.0494.
- The park is three miles south of Incline Village on Highway 28.
- It costs \$8 to park.