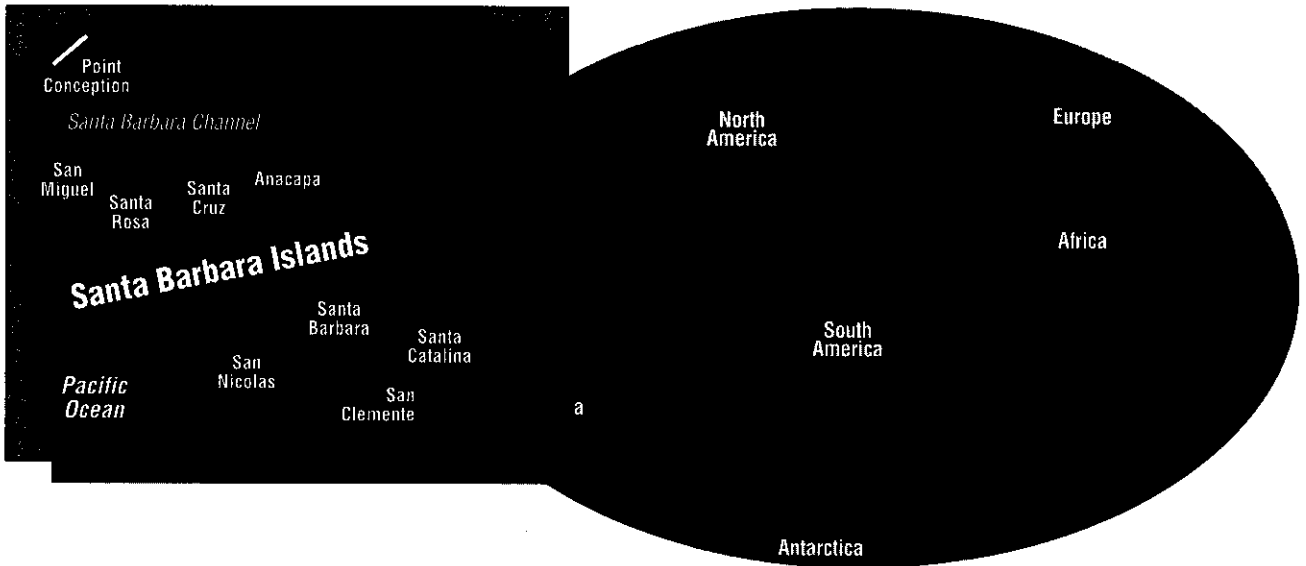


CALIFORNIA'S CHANNEL ISLANDS

A wilderness salvaged

KEN AND COLEEN BONDY



Life began on Limuw, a beautiful island. There Hutash, the Earth goddess, made the first men and women from the seeds of a magic plant. The men and women gathered seeds for food and huddled together against the cold nights. They struggled to carve a life from the rugged cliffs and valleys of Limuw, but life was hard, and their children perished.

So the Milky Way, known to the people as Sky Snake, sent a bolt of lightning that started a fire on the island. The people used the fire to keep warm and cook food. And their life was better. They produced many healthy children, and their children had children, and soon the people crowded the little island.

The noise from all the people on Limuw kept Hutash awake at night, so she built a great rainbow bridge stretching from Limuw's tallest mountain to the vast uninhabited land to the east, and she invited the people to cross the rainbow.

Many people crossed, drawn by curiosity and the hope of a new life on the other side. But a great fog came up, and some of the people looked down into the fog and became dizzy and fell, plunging into the sea below.

Now Hutash felt great sadness, for she believed it was her fault the people had fallen. She did not wish the people to drown, so she transformed them into dolphins. And ever since then, the Chumash people of Central California, whose name means "The Islanders," have regarded dolphin as their brothers and sisters.

Today, dolphin regularly race boatloads of humans to Limuw, now called Santa Cruz, and the seven other Channel Islands off the Southern California coast. Boat travelers scanning the horizon may spot the distant joyful splashes that mean dolphin are on their way. The boat's human cargo typically rushes to

the railing and the dolphin arrive at incredible speed, surrounding the boat and taking turns surfing the wave formed by the boat's bow.

While the humans watch, the dolphin turn sideways, looking straight up at them with intelligence and curiosity. Few can resist wondering what it would be like to dive into the blue-gray water only to swim, play, eat sushi, and make love for the rest of your life.

These humans have come to the right place. At the Channel Islands, divers will experience a rich, diverse, amazingly healthy world underwater and above.

LOCATION AND HISTORY

The Channel Islands, sometimes referred to as the Santa Barbara Islands, consist of San Miguel, Santa Barbara, Santa Rosa, Santa Cruz, Anacapa, Santa Catalina, San Nicolas, and San Clemente Island. They are found just



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off the west coast of Southern California. All are part of the United States. San Miguel, Santa Rosa, and Santa Cruz are part of Santa Barbara County. Santa Catalina, San Nicolas, and San Clemente are under the jurisdiction of Los Angeles County.

These picturesque islands remain rel-

atively undisturbed and undeveloped today, although they lie just off one of the most heavily populated areas in the world. This is especially surprising when you realize Anacapa is a mere 11 miles from the hustle and pollution of the Los Angeles basin.

Santa Catalina is the only settled is-

land, with a population of about 3,000. Every year 800,000 people visit this tourist-oriented island, yet only 6,000 to 7,000 people set foot on any of the seven other islands.

The islands support plant, marine, and animal life ranging from the house-cat-sized island fox to the magnificent blue whale. All the islands are home to a wide variety of birds, including the endangered brown pelican, seagulls, cormorants, and other water and land birds. Each island is unique in geographical design. Santa Barbara is the smallest at 640 acres; Santa Cruz is the largest at 25 miles long and 3 to 9 miles wide. The terrain varies from Anacapa's sheer, dangerous cliffs, weatherbeaten arches, and narrow, windblown body to Santa Cruz' rolling hills, gentle valleys, and mountain peaks.

To a large degree, fresh water determines what and who can survive on the islands. Although Native Americans settled Anacapa, the lack of fresh water made it less attractive than nearby Santa Cruz, which is gifted with three rivers,



A bright red "blood" starfish (above). In the top photo, California Sea lions catch the afternoon sun.

KEN BONDY



Sea caves on East Anacapa Island

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several springs, and rich black soil for agriculture. For thousands of years the larger islands were home to different Native American groups, most notably the Chumash, who crossed the channel to the mainland in cleverly crafted canoes called "tomols."

During the last Ice Age, when sea levels were lower, the northern islands formed one large island, still separate from continental North America. Archaeologists have turned up the charred bones of dwarf mammoths from the Pleistocene era — about 30,000 years ago — on two islands. The bones were found near what may have been a prehistoric "barbecue pit," but scientists have only been able to confirm the presence of humans on the islands 11,000 years ago. The climate was wetter then, and cypress and pine trees covered the islands. Grasses now cover most of the land, but on San Miguel, an eerie ghost of the forests remains. Long ago, sand particles blown in by the wind encased the trees, which decomposed, leaving behind sand skeletons. These strange forms make up the "caliche" forest.

Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, a Portuguese explorer working for Spain, sighted the islands during the 16th century. In 1542 he sailed into the Santa Barbara Channel, never to leave. Injuries received after falling on one of the islands eventually led to his death. His grave may be on one of the islands, but it has never been found. A monument in his honor stands on San Miguel.

As often happens when white men "discover" a new area rich with resources, the islands became a place to conquer and exploit. Native Americans had lived in harmony with the islands for thousands of years, but it took only a few hundred years for Europeans to practically obliterate otter, seal, and sea lion populations. After transplanting the Chumash to mainland missions in the early 1800s, the islands became the base for large ranching operations. Domestic animals, such as sheep, pigs, cows, and horses, munched natural ground cover to a weak stubble, causing accelerated degradation and erosion. Native plant species were increasingly threatened by exotic strains of iceplant,

which concentrate salt in the soil at levels native plants cannot tolerate.

Today the northern five islands are protected by a National Park designation, which encompasses the thick kelp forests beneath their surrounding waters. The Channel Islands National Park and National Marine Sanctuary was formed in 1980 in recognition of the need to protect the incredible life supported by the islands. Of the other three islands, only Santa Catalina is privately owned. San Clemente and San Nicolas are managed by the U.S. Navy.

Although San Miguel is part of the National Park, it, too, is partly owned by the military. Long a site for military activity, it's not considered safe to wander off of established trails on that rough and beautiful island. Live explosives are still uncovered by shifting sands on San Miguel, a dangerous reminder of man's destructive nature.

But the islands have astonishingly endured all the havoc modern man could wreak, and in the spring, when the islands turn gold with the blooming of the giant yellow coreopsis "sunflower

trees," it's hard to imagine a more prolific paradise.

WONDERFUL KELP

Around 1934, Charles Darwin wrote: "The number of living creatures of all orders, whose existence intimately depends on kelp, is wonderful. A great volume might be written, describing the inhabitants of one of these beds of seaweed." The Channel Islands bear testament to Darwin's writings.

These islands comprise a magnificent marine resource whose diving rivals any ocean in the world. Nutrient-laden cold-water upwellings off the California coast help create one of only a few environments that can support the giant macrocystis kelp. These kelp plants, in turn, harbor a rich variety of fish, invertebrate, and mammal life found

nowhere else. Sea lions, harbor seals, bat rays, angel sharks, and even gray whales make these islands their home.

During a typical Channel Islands' dive, you'll swim through towering kelp forests, spot brilliantly colored garibaldi, frolic with sea lions, and be dazzled by schools of mackerels. Bat rays and docile angel sharks scatter in the wakes of gentle divers. Their graceful swimming is angelic. When California gray whales start their southern migration, it's not uncommon to come face to face with one of these 50-ton giants underwater. Dives in these islands leave a lasting impression.

Channel Island visibility is best during the winter, and 150-foot clarity is common. During the summer, the warmer water brings decreased visibility, but the average is still around 60 feet.

The only downside to Channel Islands diving is the cold water. Water temperatures vary from the low 50s during the winter (when visibility is best) to the mid-60s during late summer; topside temperatures are fairly mild during most of the year. Full quarter-inch wet suits with hood and gloves are a must, and many California divers, particularly photographers, now use dry suits year-round. But the cumbersome equipment is a small price to pay for some of the best diving anywhere.

Many charter boats catering to divers and sightseers are available for Channel Island trips. They leave from as far south as San Pedro and as far north as Santa Barbara and take divers to most of the islands. Listings of many charter dive boats can be found in the California Dive Boat Calendar, available through any California dive center. The dive boats range from crammed people movers to luxurious, comfortable ones.

For non-dive trips, the National Park concessionaire, Island Packers, offers hiking and camping trips. For more information, write Island Packers Inc., 1867 Spinnaker Drive, Ventura, CA 93001, or call (805) 642-1393. Early reservations are recommended.

The Channel Islands National Park visitor center at Ventura offers a touch tank for a glimpse of underwater island inhabitants, along with films, special programs, photographs, maps, and interpretive displays on the Channel Islands. A bookstore and gift shop round out the visitor center, which is at the end of Spinnaker Drive at Ventura Harbor.

The Channel Islands offer divers and non-divers a bounty of underwater and topside attractions. But behind its modern facade lies an interesting history and fascinating geography. Even if you never have an opportunity to visit these enchanted islands, taking time to understand their natural and recreational benefits will give you a greater insight to America's seashores and marine environments around the globe.



Facts and figures

KEN BONDY

Location:

Just west of the Southern California coast.

Climate: The air temperature typically hovers around 70°F, being cooler at night and a little warmer during the day. Water temperatures range from 50°F to 68°F, depending on the season.

Largest city: Avalon, Santa Catalina

Currency:

U.S. dollars

Language: English

Entry requirements:

None for U.S. citizens

Time:

Pacific Time Zone

Electricity:

120 volts (same as the rest of the U.S.)

Water: Tap water

is safe to drink on all the islands

Tipping:

Customary, encouraged

Getting there: Most visi-

tors take one of the ferryboats leaving from Santa Barbara or the Port of Los Angeles. Regular helicopter and aircraft service is available to Santa Catalina from Southern California. Dive boats run regular charters to all the islands.

