

## Mysterious San Miguel a sea mammal haven

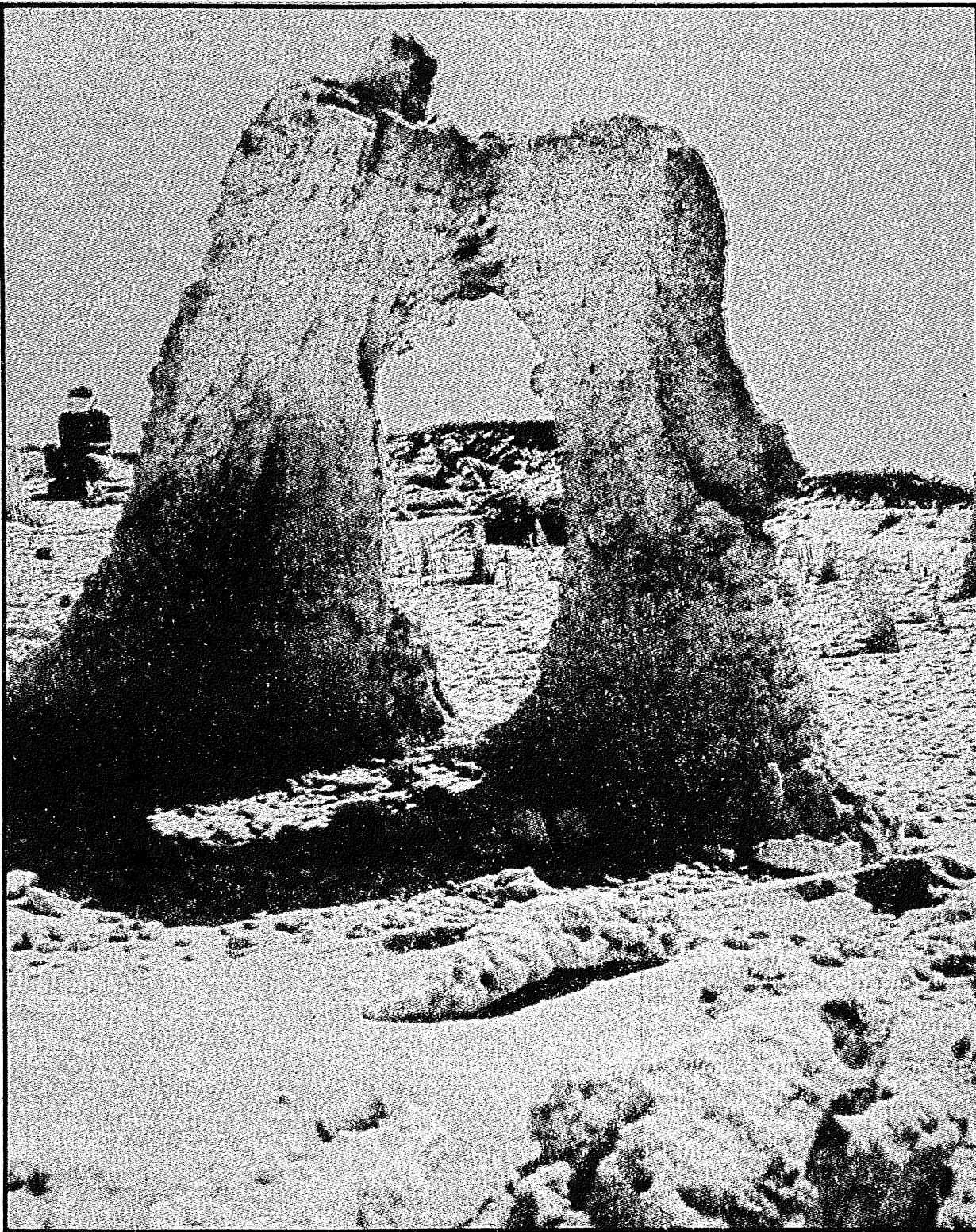


Photo by Peter Howarth

The caliche forest on San Miguel is a ghostly memorial to plants that once flourished.

### Lone Woman of San Nicolas

## Compelling saga of survival

In 1835, a drama began to unfold on San Nicolas Island that led to a best-selling children's book and Hollywood film more than 100 years later.

Receiving reports of widespread havoc wreaked by Aleuts on the island's inhabitants, the padres at Santa Barbara Mission sent a schooner to take the survivors back to mainland rancherías.

However, one woman was left by herself on the island.

Year after year, there were reports of human footprints on the beach at San Nicolas, and a number of expeditions went to search for the lone woman. George Nidever, a Santa Barbara sealing captain and eventual rancher on San Miguel Island, finally found the woman — 18 years after she had been abandoned.

Juana Maria, as she was called, lived in a hut of whale bone, which she had built for herself, and she lived on the flesh of seals and sea lions. Before they left the island, she showed her rescuers a dress she made from cormorant feathers.

The dress is today in the Vatican museum in Rome.

On the return trip, a storm came up, and Juana Maria signaled to her companions that she could take care of it. She knelt and chanted something the others could not understand.

And the skies cleared, they said. Juana Maria lived in Santa Barbara with the Nidevers, but she could not survive civilization and the exotic foods that went with it.

Three months after she had been rescued, she died from dysentery. Buried in the Santa Barbara Mission graveyard, she became known as the



News-Press photo by STEVE MALONE

A bronze plaque in the Santa Barbara Mission graveyard is a memorial to Juana Maria, the Lone Woman of San Nicolas.

Lone Woman of San Nicolas, and her story is the basis for the book and movie, "Island of Blue Dolphins."

### Once home to thousands of Indians

By Hillary Hauser  
News-Press Staff Writer

At Point Bennett on San Miguel Island, the elephant seals were whooping it up on the beach.

Some lay around at the base of the cliffs, tossing sand over themselves and their snoring neighbors, while others cavorted in playful fights in the surf. Elsewhere, a particularly blubbery trio waddled off toward neighboring sea lions.

The big males with elongated bulbous snouts emitted "bloops" that could be heard a mile away.

#### Contrast in size

The nearby herd of sea lions lazed in the noonday sun, their yellow-brown, streamlined bodies a contrast to the elephantine gray hides of the elephant seals.

San Miguel is the most mysterious of the Channel Islands — desolate, wind-blown, and inhabited by seals and sea lions, sea birds, a few National Park Service rangers and scientists and the memories of the colorful people who once lived here.

Shaped like a giant sting ray, the flat and sandy island is exposed to the winds that travel south along the California coast. These tempestuous blasts veer off at Point Conception 30 miles away, and hit the island full force.

#### Stiff winds

It was blowing almost 40 mph on the day Nick Whelan, public affairs director for the National Park Service, Ken Bullard, maintenance mechanic with the park service, and their pilot, Tom Driscoll, hiked from the Dry Lakebed landing toward Point Bennett.

The three planned to have a look at the seals and sea lions that covered the beaches.

Whelan, Bullard and Driscoll looked out across the sandy beach at Adams Cove to a turbulent sea of milky turquoise, which dropped away to a deep, whitecapped blue.

On the northern side of Point Bennett, Castle Rock protruded from the windwept sea. Thick kelp beds tangled along the San Miguel shoreline, stretching across the surface to create calmer spots amid the whitecaps.

#### Miniature caliche

Proceeding toward the tip of Point Bennett, the hikers made their way down the narrow sandy canyon leading to the beach. Along the way, Whelan pointed to a lone, miniature caliche protruding from a patch of clean, wind-swept sand.

The caliche, only three inches long, was a representative of the larger caliches that have formed a "ghost forest" near the middle of the island.

Caliches (pronounced kAL-EECH-ees) are petrified plaster castings of plant roots, and some of the caliches on San Miguel are thousands of years old and up to 15 feet in height. They are created when the decaying material of a plant reacts with calcium carbonate sand to form permanent castings.

As Whelan, Bullard and Driscoll moved toward the

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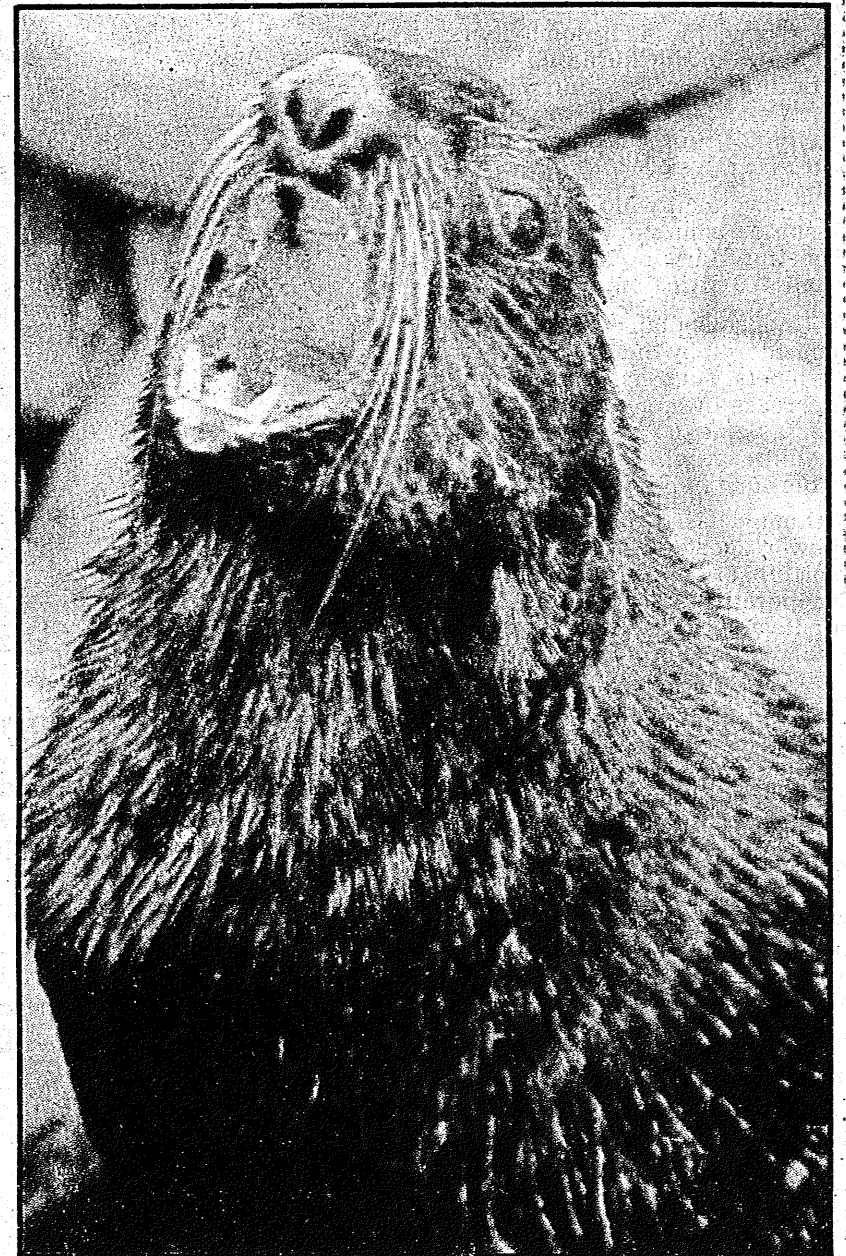


Photo by Peter Howarth

At Point Bennett on San Miguel, a fur seal registers a protest at human intrusion.

## Property acquired after park status granted to islands

In 1980, then-president Jimmy Carter signed a bill creating the Channel Islands National Park, ending the islands 42-year status as a national monument.

The legislation, authored by Rep. Robert Lagomarsino, R-Santa Barbara-Ventura, included provisions for acquiring private property within the park boundaries — including Santa Rosa Island, owned by the Vail and Vickers families, and the 6,264 acres owned by the Gherini family at the east end of Santa Cruz Island.

The Channel Islands National Monument had already included Anacapa and Santa Barbara islands. The islands were under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service. San Miguel Island, owned by the U.S. Navy, is also managed by the Park Service.

#### Jointly owned

The largest part of Santa Cruz Island, 54,381 acres, has been jointly owned and managed since 1978 by Dr. Carey Stanton and the Nature Conservancy, a national non-profit conservation organization.

Stanton is the son of Edwin Stanton, who bought the island property from the Caire family in 1937, and after moving onto the island in 1957, has run a 19th century cattle ranch on the island with his ranch manager,

Henry Duffield.

In 1978, Stanton gave the conservancy a limited interest in his property for \$2.6 million, and this interest will mature to ownership by 2008.

#### Protects ecosystem

Also created in 1980, by the authority of the Marine Protection Research and Sanctuaries Act of 1972, was the Channel Islands Marine Sanctuary. The marine sanctuary extends six nautical miles around the five islands of the park and protects the marine ecosystem of the islands.

The new Channel Islands National Park encompasses 250,000 acres — 125,000 acres of land, and an equal amount of surrounding waters. Park boundaries extend out to one mile around each of the islands.

With the passage of the 1980 legislation, William Ehorn, superintendent of the national monument, became superintendent of the new national park. He has since spearheaded the negotiations between the federal government and the private landowners for the sale of their island property.

#### Transfer completion

The purchase and transfer of Santa Rosa Island is expected

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# Sea mammals find safe, windy haven

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beach at Point Bennett, they passed a sandy knoll to the left of the canyon. One side of the knoll was littered with broken abalone shells — a Chumash Indian midden, or "kitchen," where the Indians had processed and eaten their seafood hundreds of years before.

## Low profile

Climbing the final cliff to the beach, Whelan cautioned the others to keep a low profile. If anyone stood up abruptly, he said, the animals might stampede.

Point Bennett is one of the most important seal and sea lion rookeries in the world. Thousands of these animals come ashore to breed at San Mi-

*If anyone stood up abruptly... the animals might stampede.*

guel and because of this, scientists look to the island to measure the comeback of the threatened species, counting heads during breeding seasons to estimate total populations.

There are six types of pinnipeds around the Channel Islands: The California sea lion, the northern elephant seal, the Steller sea lion, harbor seal, Guadalupe fur seal and the northern fur seal.

## Thousands slaughtered

In the late 1800s, some of these species were nearly annihilated by Russian, English, Aleutian and American hunters, who descended on the Channel Islands by the boatloads, to reap the furs and hides of ocean mammals.

When the noted mammalogist Charles Melville Scammon tried to piece together the population census for seals and sea lions in 1874, he said the pinnipeds along the entire California coast were in a "state of chaos and collapse."

With the cessation of concentrated hunting, however, many species began to recover. The animals were helped by a series of protective laws through the years, which culminated with the passage of the U.S. Marine Mammal Act in 1972.

## Population boom

Because of this hands-off law, many of the seal and sea lion populations have soared along the entire coast.

Peter Howorth, who takes care of sick seals and sea lions at his Marine Mammal Center in the Santa Barbara Harbor, said the pupping seasons for pinnipeds vary among species. At Point Bennett, the peak pupping season for California sea lions is in late June, and the peak pupping period for northern fur seals is in mid July.

Elephant seals pup from December to February, and harbor seals give birth to their young between March and April.

Of all the Channel Islands, San Miguel is especially indicative of what happens when biological relationships are tampered with.

## Much vegetation

In 1542, when Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo and his men set foot on San Miguel, they described the island as a "well-populated, amply-watered land with much vegetation."

But the island, owned by the U.S. government, was leased for many years by a series of enterprising sheep ranchers who found the land ideal for the grazing livestock. These included George Nidever, a sealing captain from Santa Barbara who bought the rights to San Miguel in 1850.

In 12 years, Nidever boosted his inventory of sheep to 6,000.

After the drought of 1863-1864, hungry sheep pulled up what little grass was left. Subsequent ranchers brought more sheep to San Miguel, and as late as 1940, the island was used for grazing by the Pacific Wool Co.

## Little protection

Without shrubbery to protect it, the island was exposed to the

forces of the wind and sea. Today, the effects of erosion can be seen almost everywhere, with the island's rivers of sand looking like white roads of concrete.

The drifting sands are slowly filling in San Miguel's only natural haven, Cuyler Harbor, so that safe anchorage is found only at its western side.

The swells were breaking inside Cuyler Harbor when Driscoll landed his airplane at the Lester Ranch landing. Now on their way back to the mainland, Driscoll, Bullard and Whelan had stopped at the Lester Ranch site to pick up Don Morris.

Morris, a full-time archaeologist with the park service, had been manning the ranger station on San Miguel for two weeks. He was sitting in a spot out of the wind, talking with fellow researchers, as Driscoll landed.

## Monument site

While Morris loaded his gear onto the plane, Whelan took a quick hike to the nearby Cabrillo Monument.

From the landing site, the walk to the monument is easy, down a gentle slope and through a miniature forest of deep green coreopsis trees. Along the way, Whelan stopped at a pile of brick rubble, where several rusted iron sinks had been thrown about.

The bricks, Whelan said, were once the fireplace of the ranch house occupied for 12 years by colorful island residents Herbert and Elizabeth Lester.

In 1930, Lester had moved onto the island to manage a sheep ranch for Robert Brooks of Santa Barbara, whom he'd met at the Walter Reed Army Hospital during World War I.

## Brought his bride

He brought with him his bride, Elizabeth Sherman Lester, the great-great granddaughter of Roger Sherman, signer of the Declaration of Independence.

The newlyweds made their home in the ranch house that had been built in 1900 overlooking Cuyler Harbor by a previous island inhabitant, John Russell. The house was constructed of timbers from the shipwreck J.W. Coleman, which had gone aground in 1893 in Simonton Cove.

The Lesters became known as the "King and Queen of San Miguel," and George Hammond, a Santa Barbara pilot, flew mail and supplies from the mainland to the island. Mrs. Lester taught their two girls in a miniature schoolhouse that had been given to the family by Santa Rosa rancher Ed Vail.

## Visitors spot

In 1937, the Cabrillo Civic Clubs of Santa Barbara erected a monument to Cabrillo, who is believed to have been buried on the island. Lester picked out the

*The seal and sea lion populations along the coast have begun to soar.*

spot on Dead Man's Point, overlooking Cuyler Harbor, where visitors can now hike to see the granite cross that bears Cabrillo's name.

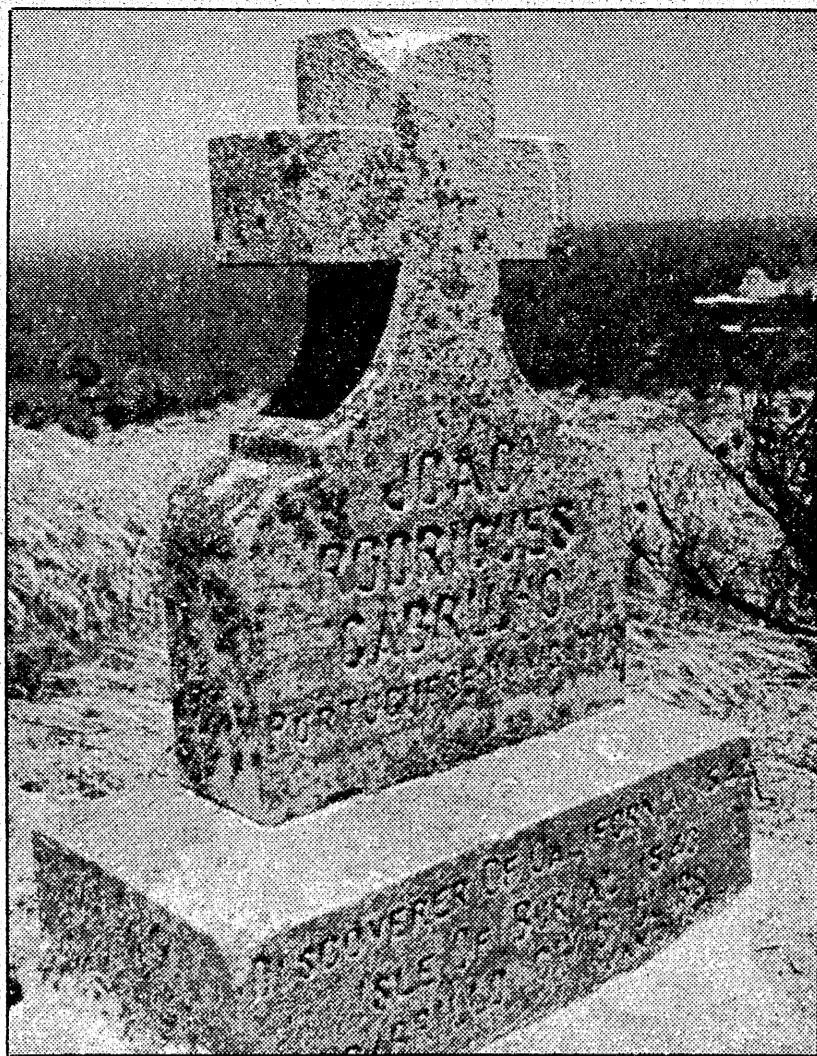
Standing at the monument, Whelan pointed to nearby Harris Point, where Herbert and Elizabeth were buried after their deaths. Lester died on the island in 1942, and his wife died in Santa Barbara in 1981.

Whelan expressed pleasure at seeing the vegetation around the Lester ranch site. When the National Park Service assumed stewardship of the island's resources in 1963, the foraging animals were removed.

## Plants life returns

The grasses and low-lying shrubs that have returned since helped to protect valuable archaeological sites on the island — since sands shifting in the winds had constantly uncovered Chumash Indian artifacts, middens and burial sites.

Later, Morris said that of the



News-Press photo by STEVE MALONE

## The Cabrillo monument on San Miguel Island overlooks Cuyler Harbor and the satellite rock of Prince Island.

three islands currently included in the National Park — Anacapa, Santa Barbara and San Miguel — San Miguel has the greatest number of archaeological sites.

The archeologist, who identified a 9,000-year-old, post-Pleistocene skeleton on Santa Rosa Island, said San Miguel has 60 Chumash Indian sites, whereas Santa Barbara Island has 20 sites, and Anacapa, 30.

## 'Thousands' of sites

Santa Cruz Island has "thousands" of Chumash Indian sites, Morris said.

On Santa Rosa Island, where major prehistoric finds have already been made by Museum of Natural History scientists, Morris expects to locate and describe previously unearthed Chumash sites when the island

is brought into the National Park system.

The estimate of 2,000 Chumash living on the islands at the time of Cabrillo's voyage in 1542 is "not unreasonable," Morris said.

Morris said he expects about 10,000 Chumash sites to be recorded when an archeological inventory is completed for the four northern Channel Islands.

Meanwhile, the archeologist has extended his scientific work to include modern shipwrecks, and he is mapping vessels that have sunk in the Channel Islands from the early 1800s to World War II. On this particular trip to San Miguel, he had made a positive identification of a wreck in Simonton Cove.

"There's a very long time span of man in the islands," Morris said.

# Island property acquired after park status granted

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to be completed by the end of 1986.

The selling of the east end of Santa Cruz has hit some snags and is behind schedule.

Ehorn said \$33.3 million in federal funds have been earmarked for both pieces of property, which at this time is "probably not enough."

In assuming his role as park steward, Ehorn said the emphasis of the park will be on preservation.

Listed in Public Law 96-199 as "nationally significant" are the brown pelican nesting areas, island tidepools, and the pinnipeds that breed and pup almost exclusively on the Channel Islands, "including the only breeding colony for northern fur seals south of Alaska."

Also preserved are the Eolian landforms and caliches, the presumed burial place of Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, and the archaeological evidence of substantial populations of Native Americans.