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The island panorama ranges from unspoiled stretches of meadows, canyons and beaches to surrounding waters filled with beauty and mystery...

Channel Islands today: What is there for us?

They rise out of the sea, often hidden by shrouds of fog.

Less than 30 miles from the Santa Barbara coastline where thousands are packed onto a sliver of land between the mountains and the sea, the green and unspoiled Channel Islands are reminders of a California long forgotten.

Those who cross the stretch of ocean between Santa Barbara and the islands can experience a natural beauty that ranges from the lighthouse on Anacapa to the moon-shaped beach of San Miguel's Cuyler Harbor.

Some say the islands are California's last frontier. The Galapagos of the West.

Inhabitants range from sea lions and elk to descendants of island pioneers.

The island panorama ranges from unspoiled stretches of meadows, canyons and beaches to surrounding waters filled with beauty, mystery and scenes of wrecks and destruction.

To know the islands is to delve into a history rich in adventurers, heroes and the Chumash Indians.

The first island adventurer was the discoverer of California, Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo. Another was the Chumash Indian woman, Juana Maria, who survived alone on San Nicolas Island for 18 years before she was brought back to Santa Barbara in the 1800s.

More recently, the story of the Channel Islands is told by people such as Pier Gherini and his sons, John and Pier Jr. Al and Russ Vail, who own large tracts of land on the islands, and the National Park Service rangers who live on the islands.

In a five-part series of articles, starting today, Staff Writer Hillary Hauser takes you to the Channel Islands. She brings you their history, their future, their unspoiled beauty.

You will read about islands that change with weather, tide and season, and about people who live and work on them.

The Channel Islands consist of eight rock and sand outposts between 10 and 30 miles off the California coast. The four northern islands are Anacapa, Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa and San Migu-

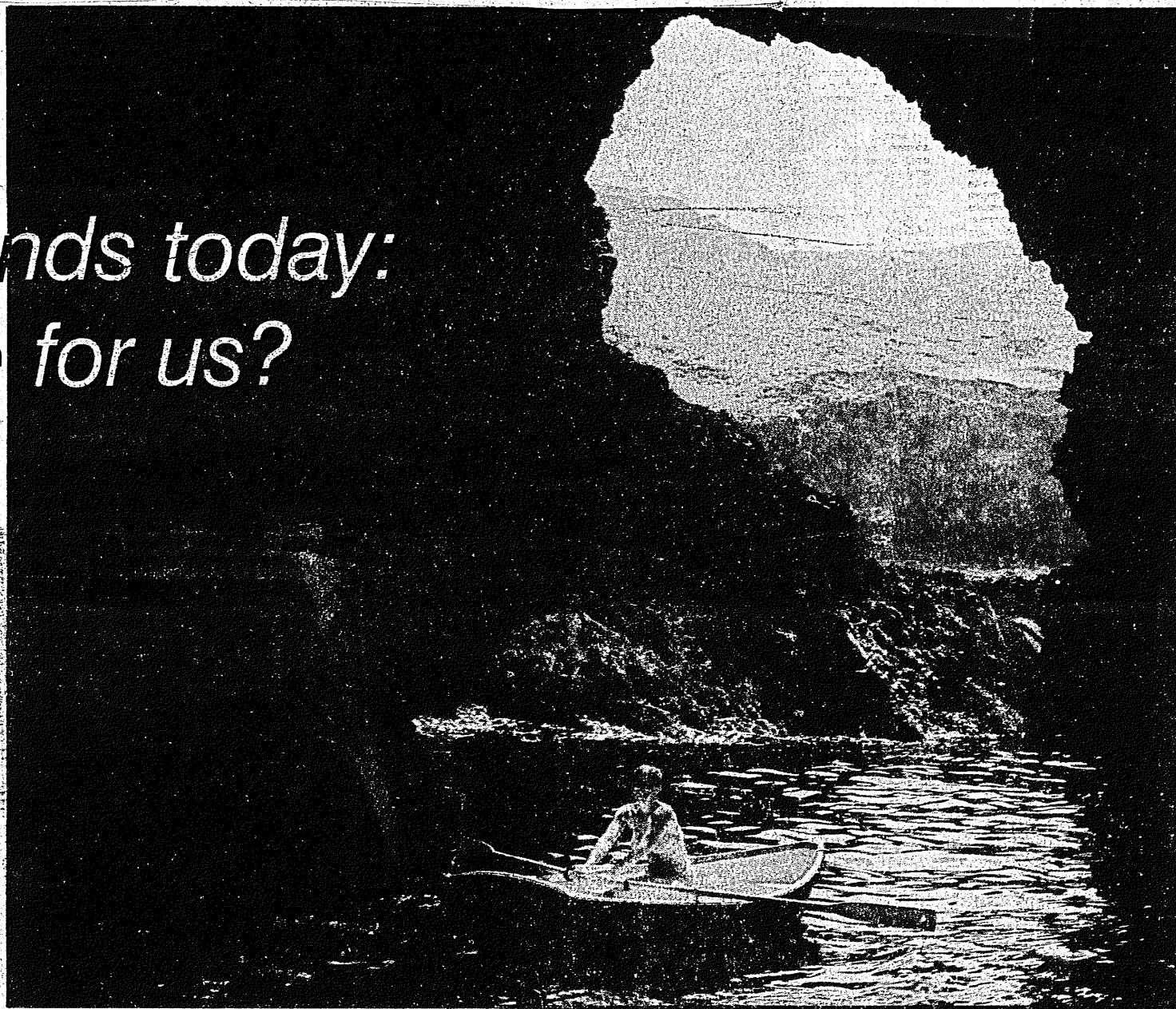


Photo courtesy of Peter Howarth

At Santa Cruz Island, a lone boater goes for a rowing outing near Arch Rock.

el. All but San Miguel can be seen from almost any beach in Santa Barbara.

Santa Barbara Island, even though it is geographically part of the southern group (Santa Catalina, San Clemente and San Nicolas), has long been included in the Channel Islands National Monument with Anacapa.

There are plans to open some of the islands to all of us.

The islands still privately owned are being bought by the federal government, which plans to spend millions to incorporate them into a national park.

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More on those treasured islands

Today: The islands' rich history. A-8. San Miguel: A haven for sea mammals and a story of courage. D-1.

This week: Monday: Recreation on the islands. Tuesday: Life on Santa Cruz with the Gherinis. Wednesday: A fragile ecology. Thursday: The future of the islands.

The Channel Islands: A world like no other

Some animals, plant species one-of-a-kind

By Hillary Hauser
News-Press Staff Writer

"Here we are," said Win Swint, as his 24-foot boat coasted toward the beach on Santa Rosa Island.

He scrambled for the bow. In minutes the anchor was over the side.

Seconds later, so was he.

A big swell was sweeping through Talcott Shoal, a shallow reef area just off Santa Rosa, and Swint wasn't going to miss an opportunity for some prime body surfing.

Commercial divers like Swint know each reef, shoal and cove of the Channel Islands, and for him, Talcott Shoal is like visiting his living room.

Located on the northwest side of Santa Rosa between Brockway and Sandy points, Talcott Shoal rises to within 16 feet of the surface in its shallowest spot. From the air on a clear day, this hazardous reef area looks tranquil — turquoise blue and rimmed with kelp.

"I worked in Florida for a while, collecting tropical fish," Swint said. "Coral reefs sound great, but they're boring compared to what we have out here. I could hardly wait to get back."

Wreck nearby

As enormous swells swept across Talcott Shoals, Swint found the biggest ones to ride. Somewhere nearby was the wreck of the Aggi, a Norwegian squarerigger that sank in such sea conditions in 1915.

Three miles away, across the San Miguel Passage, the low, flat cliffs of San Miguel Island sat on the horizon like a distant, sandy ghost.

It takes years of repeated trips to the Channel Islands to know the island landmarks like Swint does — to recognize Bechers Bay, Potato Harbor, Yellowbanks or Skunk Point.

It is believed that in early geologic time, the northern islands were connected to the mainland at Point Mugu, an extension of the Santa Monica mountain range created more than 63 million years ago, in the pre-Paleocene period.

Theory challenged

This "bridge" theory is challenged, however, by some scientists who say there is a lack of evidence for it.

Geologists also believe that the islands were one huge land mass, called "Santarosae," and that they were separated about 12,000 years ago by gradual faulting in the earth's crust and changes in sea level.

With the isolation of the islands, certain species of animals and plants began their evolution into species unlike their mainland counterparts.

Rare species

Among the animals found on the island but nowhere else on earth are the island fox, spotted skunk, deer mouse, night lizard and Santa Cruz scrub jay. Among the unique island plants (some of which have mainland counterparts) are the giant coreopsis ("tree sunflower"), succulent dudleya, and some species of ironwood and pine trees.

The body of water separating the northern islands from the mainland — the Santa Barbara Channel — begins at Point Conception, where the California coastline takes a sharp cut to the east for about 50 miles.

Mariners throughout time have learned to navigate through the channel with caution, since the area is known for sudden weather changes that can bring high seas and fog.

Diving spots

The razor-sharp jaws of submerged island reefs have

chewed the hulks of at least 100 unsuspecting ships that have sunk since the islands were discovered by Europeans. Ancient schooners, Forty-Niner sidewheelers, squareriggers and lumber ships are popular scuba diving spots for underwater explorers.

Navigators have called the northern Channel Islands "The Fearsome Foursome," and one archaeologist described the particularly stormy island of San Miguel as a "catcher's mitt" for ships.

The islands have a long history of sailing visits, beginning with Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, discoverer of California, who sailed up the coast during his epic voyage of 1542.

What Cabrillo was looking for at the time was a short cut to China — the mythical Strait of Anian. Supposedly, this was to provide a passage between the Pacific and the Atlantic.

First sighting

The ships Cabrillo sailed from Navidad, Mexico, to California were two frail open-decked caravels — San Salvador and La Vittoria. He sighted the first island — Catalina — on October 3, but stayed there only half a day. After poking into various coves along the mainland coast, he continued west to discover Anacapa, Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa, and finally San Miguel.

The four islands he called collectively Islas de San Lucas.

San Miguel seemed to be Cabrillo's favorite island (which he named La Posesion), and more than once he anchored his caravels in Cuyler Harbor.

Injured in fall

Cabrillo fell during his first excursion to the island, breaking either an arm or a leg (records are unclear as to which). With this injury, he managed to captain his boats farther north, and by November 1542, he had reached a spot near Monterey Bay.

Winter winds and storms drove the caravels back to San Miguel, and Cabrillo reportedly spent the winter in Cuyler Harbor. During this return visit, complications arose from his broken limb, blood poisoning set in, and the captain died on Jan. 3, 1543.

Where he was buried remains a mystery. Some believe he was buried on Prince Island, while others suspect he was removed to Santa Rosa or even buried at sea.

Monument erected

In 1937, a Santa Barbara club erected a monument to Cabrillo on San Miguel's Dead Man's Point, overlooking Cuyler Harbor.

This monument, a granite cross about 40 inches high on

top of a mound of rocks, is inscribed with the explorer's name in Portuguese:

*Joao Rodrigues Cabrilho
Portuguese Navigator
Discoverer of California 1542
Isle of Burial 1543*

Cabrillo Civic Clubs Jan. 3, 1937
Cabrillo's men renamed the island in honor of their captain — Isla de Juan Rodriguez — and returned to Mexico.

Subsequent voyages

The impact of subsequent European voyages to the Channel Islands was slight, producing little new except names.

In 1769, when Portola and Junipero Serra explored and settled the California coast, a supply ship anchored at what is now Prisoners Harbor on Santa Cruz Island. The priest aboard the ship, Juan Vizcaino, left a staff behind on the island.

The staff, topped with an iron cross, was returned to the Spaniards by the Chumash Indians living on the island. The impressed Spaniards renamed the island La Isla de Santa Cruz (The Island of the Holy Cross).

San Miguel received its final name in 1770, when the cartographer Miguel Costanso changed the name to honor himself.

Indian word

Anacapa got its name from the Chumash Indian word "Eneepah" (records also have it as "Eneepah" and "Anayapah" and a number of other ways). The word means "ever-changing" — a reference to the mirage phenomenon of the channel that seems to transform Anacapa's perpendicular cliffs into low flatlands, or, on occasion, erase the island entirely.

It is believed Santa Rosa received its final name from Juan Perez, who explored the area in 1774.

At the time of the arrival of Europeans to California, there were an estimated 2,000 Chumash Indians living on the Channel Islands, the majority of them on Santa Cruz.

Canoe builders

Bartolome Ferrel, Cabrillo's chief pilot, recorded in the ship's log that the Chumash lived well off the sea and were master canoe builders. These canoes, or "tomals," were up to 30 feet long and made of wooden planks — long before the first sawmills appeared in California.

Two replicas of the Chumash tomals are in Santa Barbara's Museum of Natural History. One of them, built by island expert Peter Howorth in 1976, was paddled to the islands by Chumash descendants.

Called "Canalenos" (People of the Channel), the Chumash who lived on the islands fished,



News-Press photo by STEVE MALONE

At Point Bennett on San Miguel, the seals and sea lions lounge around in the sun.

hunted sea otter and other sea mammals, and made buttons and beads from abalone shells. They adapted almost perfectly to their environment.

Move to mainland

However, between 1787 and 1816, most of the Chumash living on the islands were moved to the missions of the mainland.

The surviving remnants of the island inhabitants then had the ferocious Aleut fur hunters to contend with. They came from the north with their huge guns to kill sea otters, and they managed to kill many of the remaining Chumash as well.

When the islands were passed from Mexico to California in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848, some of them became private cattle and sheep ranches, others became property of the U.S. government.

Those who have lived on the islands, building residences, ranches — and in some cases, empires — have provided unique chapters of history.

Sheep stations

Justinian Caire, who bought Santa Cruz Island in 1869 to graze sheep, built a Mediterranean villa in the interior valley of the island, and at Scorpion Anchorage and Smugglers Cove at the east end, he built sheep stations with two-story adobes in French architectural style.

After Walter L. Vail and J.V. Vickers bought Santa Rosa Island in 1902, they were able to move into a two-story ranch house that had been built at Bechers Bay during the 1860s by previous owners, who had bought the island for \$1,000 to raise sheep.

Perhaps the most imaginative island inhabitant was Herbert Lester, who called himself the "King of San Miguel."

Ranch manager

Lester, a World War I veteran, moved onto the island in 1928 to manage a sheep ranch for Robert L. Brooks of Santa Barbara. He brought with him his bride, Elizabeth Sherman, the great-

great granddaughter of Roger Sherman, signer of the Declaration of Independence.

The two moved into a ranch house that had been built overlooking Cuyler Harbor in 1906 by a previous island lessee, John Russell. Since winds sometimes blow up to 100 miles per hour on San Miguel, Russell had built the house in the shape of a triangle, with the apex pointing into the winds like a bow of a ship.

For lumber, he used the wreckage of the lumber schooner J.W. Coleman, which had smashed into the rocks of Point Bennett.

House now rubble

Lester committed suicide on the island in 1942, and was buried near Harris Point, at the northwest tip of Cuyler Harbor. Elizabeth, who died in 1981 at her home in Santa Barbara, is buried next to him. The triangular ranch house, which can be seen by hikers visiting the Cabrillo Monument, is now a rubble of brick and rusted plumbing fixtures.

Today, the islands are in tran-

sition. Some are still privately owned and others are owned by the National Park Service. Recognizing their natural, cultural and historic value, the federal government is acquiring Santa Rosa and the east end of Santa Cruz to include in the Channel Islands National Park.

The Nature Conservancy, a national non-profit organization dedicated to preserving wilderness areas, has bought a conservation easement to the central and western parts of Santa Cruz, owned by Dr. Carey Stanton. The conservancy will own the property by 2008.

Undisturbed backyard

Even in transition, the Channel Islands remain a mostly undisturbed backyard to the California mainland.

For commercial fishermen like Win Swint, it's the peacefulness of the islands that appeals: "I don't think of them so much in terms of history, but for all that natural beauty and open space. I like to be out there in it."

Monday: How you can visit the Channel Islands.

Islands protected as national park

Continued from Page A-1

Santa Barbara and Anacapa are now included in the Channel Islands National Park, created by legislation in 1980. San Miguel is owned by the U.S. Navy, but is administered by the Park Service.

The goal of the federal legislation is to preserve the islands while allowing limited public access. If all goes according to plan, Santa Rosa Island and the east end of Santa Cruz will also be included in the national park. The Park Service's primary goal in this project, it maintains, is to preserve and protect the land and habitats.

The plan makes some people happy. However, others worry that the islands will be come another Yosemite, a national park spoiled by overcrowding.

The acquisition of the island property has been held up by lawsuits and delays and only time and the courts will tell when the complete park plan becomes a reality.

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