

**Navigating the Cultural Landscape:
Traditional Chumash Place Names in Channel Islands National Park**

Final Report for Western National Park Association Grant

Prepared by:

Matthew Vestuto
Board Member, Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival
Member, Barbareño/Ventureño Band of Mission Indians

Jennifer Perry, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Anthropology, California State University, Channel Islands

Kristin Hoppa, Ph.D.
Archeologist, Channel Islands National Park

December 2019

We are pleased to report the successful completion of our study on the traditional Chumash place names within Channel Islands National Park. The results of this project include the revision of place names associated with historic villages, the mapping of new place names, and on-site consultation with island descendants. We have submitted a map to Channel Islands National Park, which will be shared with the public in 2020, following formal consultation between NPS and tribal partners. This project has planted the seeds for a larger, ongoing Chumash place names project beyond the boundaries of Channel Islands National Park and we hope to inspire similar projects within other public lands and National Parks across the country. We are grateful to the support provided by the Western National Parks Association.

BACKGROUND

The ethnographic place names project aims to promote Chumash language revitalization and allow visitors to navigate and interpret the cultural landscapes of Channel Islands National Park. One challenge to communicating this story to park visitors is the sensitive nature of archeological sites – in order the best protect our cultural resources we have to keep their locations confidential. Research into traditional place names allows us to tell the human story as it relates to the island landscapes, seascapes, and natural resources without compromising archeological sites and other places of cultural significance.

For thousands of years Chumash families lived on the four northern islands of the Channel Islands archipelago. Compared to the extent of archaeological research into island lifeways, less attention has been given to ethnographic information, including language such as place names. Existing maps of Chumash place names are limited to major historic villages that were occupied into the 1800s (Kennett 2005). These names were largely mapped by Euro-American anthropologists using ethnographic notes compiled between 1881 and 1959, and tied to archaeological sites (Johnson 2001). Ethnographic work has been driven, for the most part, to archaeological-focused projects. Place names, whether connected to archaeological sites or not, are of interest in their own right because of how they reveal the story of human relationships with the environment. Our project expanded on place name documentation to include other types of locations, such as natural features, and focused on how this information is relevant to Chumash interests and those of park visitors today. By working directly with members of the

Chumash community, this project empowered descendants to narrate their own history in ways that serve their needs and interests, in particular by making them partners in decision-making about what can and should be documented and communicated in a public forum.

METHODS

As part of this project, Principal Investigator (P.I.) Matthew Vestuto comprehensively collected place names related to Channel Islands National Park and thoroughly researched the etymology and meanings. As a tribal scholar focusing on linguistics and language revitalization, and a member of the Barbareño/Ventureño Band of Mission Indians who traces his lineage to the village of swaxəl on limuw (Scorpion Anchorage on Santa Cruz Island), Mr. Vestuto was uniquely qualified to carry out this research related to his ancestral homeland. P.I.s Jennifer Perry and Kristin Hoppa, who have a respective 25 and 14 years of experience working on the Channel Islands, helped to determine which locations were logistically feasible to visit and weighed in on how meanings translated by Mr. Vestuto might reference different island locales. Chumash participants Annette Ayala, Raven Padilla, Raudel Banuelos, Alex Ramos, and Barbara Lopez engaged in consultation, including site visits intended to tie place names to specific locations.

Knowledge of place names and their placement on the landscape or seascape comes by cross-referencing the works of ethnologists, considering baptismal recordings of Spanish clergy, marriage patterns between villages on the islands and mainland, and the archaeological record, alongside the environment itself through site visits. The primary ethnographic record includes H.W. Henshaw's work with Juan Estevan Pico and J.P. Harrington's recordings of knowledge shared by Chumash consultant Fernando Librado (Johnson 2001). Santa Cruz Island, has the most ethnographic information, followed by Santa Rosa Island, which makes sense given that they are the largest of the northern islands, respectively; supported the highest population densities and permanent villages; and were occupied into the 1800s by the ancestors of Chumash consultants, notably Fernando Librado's parents and other relatives (Johnson 2001). Santa Cruz Island is the most accessible and visited of the northern Channel Islands today, and so it is fortuitous that it also has the most information on place names. In 2019, we conducted two trips to Santa Cruz Island, one trip to Anacapa Island, and one trip to Santa Rosa Island, during which

we visited different locations and discussed how they related to ethnographic place names. Anacapa Island provides a point of contrast to other two islands by being one of the smallest islands in the archipelago and one without permanent villages.



Figure 1. Participants at Bechers Bay on Santa Rosa Island.

RESULTS

Our focus was on cross-referencing relevant information sources to verify associations between known place names and locations as well as determine locations for ones that are mentioned in the ethnographic record but had yet to be identified and evaluated. Among the most significant contributions are the addition of place-names not associated with historic villages, but instead with natural features that enrich our understanding of cultural landscapes. These place names help us to understand how the Chumash related to and valued the environment in the past, and they provide important connections between the Chumash and their island homeland today.

Evaluating Known Place-Names and Locations

Among the known place-names and locations we visited were three historic villages, two on Santa Cruz Island and one on Santa Rosa Island. On eastern Santa Cruz Island there were two

historic villages, swaxəl and nanawani, to which Fernando Librado and two of the project members trace their ancestry. Because the archaeological records of these villages are in comparatively poor condition, there has been discussion in the archaeological literature regarding the locations of villages. The resulting conclusion was that swaxəl is associated with Scorpion Anchorage and nanawani with Smugglers Cove (Kennett et al. 2000), these locations being the mouths of the largest watersheds on eastern Santa Cruz Island. Of the three, the most insights have been yielded about swaxəl.

As evidenced in the Spanish mission records and interpreted by Johnson (2001), the historic village of swaxəl was one of the largest Chumash villages on the islands, where chiefs, boat-makers, dancers, and other people of status lived. The importance of this location derives in part from the abundance of chert on eastern Santa Cruz Island and the role of chert as a raw material for various tools including the drills used to make shell bead money (Arnold 2001; Kennett 2005). The place name swaxəl refers to the village and the watershed of Scorpion Canyon. Vestuto interprets swaxəl as referring to a wash, which is consistent with the amount of freshwater historically found in Scorpion Canyon and the potential for flooding at the mouth. A longer term more specifically refers to a trail of freshwater.

The word swaxəl is also incorporated into the names of other natural features and pathways, highlighting the ways in which the term was applied beyond the village to the landscapes and seascapes bracketed by the peaks of El Montañon and Anacapa Island. The place name snityewa swaxəl refers to the marine channel between Anacapa and Santa Cruz Islands and is translated as the 'sea of swaxəl', which could refer to the control of fishing grounds by communities on eastern Santa Cruz Island. The rocks just off the coast of swaxəl, known today at Scorpion Rocks, are called, ts^haquqla. Although there is not yet a translation for this place name, it can be confidently associated with this prominent feature. Today these rocks are important to bird populations and the surrounding waters are teeming with fish; and they are an excellent reference point for the location of the village of swaxəl when traveling by boat. On land there is the place name, pas^hyəmu swaxəl, which pertains to the trail that has been used by people over thousands of years to cross El Montañon. Although portions of this have been driven by vehicles, the top of the ridgeline has always had to be crossed by foot or horseback, making this trail a shared experience among islanders in the past and today. Taken as a whole, swaxəl not only refers to the

village but to the broader environment and resources that help explain the comparatively large population and positions of status found there.

Mapping of New Place Names

Many place names continue to be buried in ethnographic notes and have yet to be brought to light and then verified. Some of the place names identified and translated as part of this project are connected to obvious geographic locations. For example, on Santa Cruz Island is the cave now called Cueva Valdez. It is known by the Chumash as mup^h masəx patsətš, which translates to “cave with three mouths” (Figure 2). This is a literal translation, referring to the prominent three-mouthed cave there that is defined by ocean waters. As another example, the easternmost tip of Santa Cruz Island, known as San Pedro Point today, projects out towards Anacapa Island; it has two names that have two different but complementary meanings. One, paštšono lapli’iš, translates to nose or projection, which is consistent with the geographic feature. The other is tšuaqušquy luqtiqay, which translates as ‘it points to luq^htiqay’, meaning the peak of western Anacapa Island. Such references contain different layers of meaning, one of which may relate to navigation given that Anacapa has been utilized for that purpose during boat travel through time.

Without there having been an historic village on Anacapa Island, the extent of place-name work is the recognition that the name commonly used today is a derivative of what was used by the Chumash in the past. However, the ethnographic research conducted for this project has revealed multiple names that refer to geographic features and animals on Anacapa Island. Several types of animals are referred to, all of which have subsistence and supernatural significance; these include p^htsawap^h xelex, home of peregrine falcon; piyawap^h qoši huwan p^hhoti, homes of seals and cormorant; piyawap^h hew, which translates to “House of Pelican”. One of our crew (Hoppa) was out with a team of seabird biologists who counted more than >1200 pelicans at this location in one day (see Figure 3). Birds are of supernatural significance to the Chumash, their feathers and bones serving as the raw materials for ceremonial items.

Still other place names take more nuanced understanding. The Anacapa place name, haxpuk^hš, *mouthful of compressed water*, was a challenge. The ethnographic note, “suction cove = stingray beach; much tar there,” helped to place it. The cove is inaccessible from the bluffs and it was difficult to discern from the drawings associated with this place name, which of several coves it was referencing. However, upon entering the cove on a skiff we observed that the rock to the

west has a little arch through which surging water creates a bit of a suction effect; moreover, we observed asphaltum (tar) floating in the water (see Figure 4). Asphaltum naturally occurs in the Santa Barbara Channel through seeps; it was used by the Chumash as an adhesive and waterproofing material for tools, basketry, and tomols (plank canoes). This anecdote reflects the ability of place names to convey information of cultural significance and the importance on place-based research in teasing out the meaning of place names.



Figure 2. View from the outside (top) and inside (bottom) of *mup^h masax patsəṭš*, (Cueva Valdez.) The former showing the appearance of just one of the three mouths.



Figure 3. piyawap^h hew, or "House of Pelican," on eastern Anacapa Island.



Figure 4. View of haxpuk^hš, "suction cove" and floating tar.

On-site Consultation with Island Descendants. By 1810, Spanish conquerors had removed all Indigenous people from the islands. Since then, the lands have been held by a variety of owners. While the islands are remote, the Island Packers ferry service makes them somewhat accessible. Still, traveling to the islands for tribal people carries a freight significance and emotion. Though the experience is a privilege, a sense of loss becomes more palpable on the landscape. For many tribal participants, this was their first opportunity to visit to ancestral villages. For tribal elders Alex Ramos and Barbara Lopez, this project afforded them a first time visit to the islands. Lopez, who traces her lineage to q^hšiwq^hšiw on eastern Santa Rosa Island, had never set foot on

the island. Aged 71 years old, Lopez described this homecoming as a “bucket list” opportunity that allowed her to “walk in the footsteps of her ancestors.”

Annette Ayala has worked on the islands as a Cultural Resource Monitor and feels a strong connection whenever she returns. She reflected that, considering the notes and experiencing the very places discussed in the notes feels like she’s a detective and within a time capsule, rediscovering something left for us. She also felt enriched when archaeologists on our team explained how water levels through the centuries resulted in some of the archeological record being underwater today. The input of archaeologists and anthropologists surely contributes to our understanding of our past. Knowing the importance of the islands, Annette brought her daughter, Raven Padilla.

This project supported Raven’s first trip to the islands. She says it’s hard to feel a connection to her roots in Ventura. Extensive development has severely obscured our cultural landscape. She’d been told about the islands by her mother, however, her visit and experience went beyond anything she could have imagined. “It felt good to be a part of something very important for my tribe. It was an unforgettable experience.”

For researcher Matthew Vestuto, the visits to places on the islands were the culmination of years of looking at maps and ethnographic notes. Hearing insights from the archeologists is a privilege that adds valuable information for the Chumash community. The fellowship motivating tribal members was also an honor. Being there on the land, even for a short visit, has a significance that is difficult to convey. It involves learning with all the senses, and with silence.



Figure 5. Barbareño tribal elder Barbara Lopez hiking Lobo Canyon on Santa Rosa Island.

CONCLUSIONS

The research into traditional place names will be shared as part of a public lecture presented through the From Shore to Sea Lecture Series at Channel Islands National Park and presented at the Society for American Archaeology Annual Meeting in 2020. A long-term goal is to integrate data from this project into a mobile app currently under development, which will allow visitors to take self-guided interactive tours of the islands. There is already a great deal of content related to the natural resources within the park, but their cultural significance is not well represented, and this presents an ideal opportunity to make these connections.

REFERENCES

Arnold, Jeanne E. 2001. *The Origins of a Pacific Coast Chieftdom: The Chumash of the Channel Islands*. University of Utah Press. Salt Lake City, Utah.

Kennett, Douglas J. 2005. *The Island Chumash: Behavioral Ecology of a Maritime Society*. University of California Press, Berkeley.

Johnson, John R. 2001. Ethnohistoric Reflections on Cruzeño Chumash Society. In *The Origins of a Pacific Coast Chieftdom: The Chumash of the Channel Islands*, edited by J.E. Arnold, pp. 53–70. University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City.

Kennett, Douglas J., John R. Johnson, Torben C. Rick, Don P. and Juliet Christy. 2000. Historic Chumash Settlement on Eastern Santa Cruz Island, Southern California. *Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology* 22(2):212-222.

Northern Channel Islands



DRAFT

Not for public distribution

Pending tribal consultation by NPS



'anyapax (Anacapa Island)

Not for public distribution

[illegible]

limuw (Santa Cruz Island)