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Island Time

On the stories we tell about nature and history

There are few better places in California to think with nature than the blustery earthen prow of Fraser Point at the northwest tip of Santa Cruz Island. On a clear day, the point offers a magnificent 360-degree panorama. Behind you lie the island's arid windward slopes. To your right, sheer headlands overlook the Santa Barbara Channel and distant Santa Ynez Mountains. On your left is Santa Cruz Island's rugged western shore with its sea cliffs, tide pools, and guano-caked rocks. Directly in front of you across a six-mile strait, Santa Rosa Island's sand dunes shimmer in the afternoon sun. Far beyond, the hazy, double-humped apparition of San Miguel Island hovers over the horizon, perched on the edge of the wild Pacific.

Standing on Fraser Point, teeth to the gale and hardly a hint of humans in sight, it is tempting to indulge in the fantasy of time travel. Superficially, this place recalls

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Photograph by Ross Doering.

a bygone era in California when people were fewer and nature was still wild. The fact that Santa Cruz is an island, requiring an hour-and-a-half ferry ride to reach, adds to its sense of apartness, as if the channel crossing were a voyage to another age.

Yet this place is no relic. Santa Cruz Island is the product of a long and complicated history, clues of which are everywhere for those willing to look. Gazing south from Fraser Point, massive shell mounds mark the locations of ancient Chumash villages, now recognized as some of the richest archaeological sites in western North America; a mat of squat tan foliage, including a cornucopia of native and exotic plants, carpets the foothills; deeply incised arroyos recall decades of foraging by feral animals; and a maze of rutted dirt roads, long maintained by the US military, traverse steep mountainsides. Near the end of the visible shoreline, Christy Ranch's historic buildings once served as a remote outpost for the island's livestock operations and now provide simple facilities for visiting researchers.

How should one study, interpret, and manage an island known worldwide for both its natural and its cultural histories? This is one of the most important questions facing parks and reserves in the twenty-first century. Santa Cruz Island just happens to be an excellent example. It provides an ideal vantage from which to view the intersection of nature and culture in California, how our state's institutions interpret, represent, and mobilize history, and how their approaches to remembering the past and documenting change over time bear on the present.

Three institutions—the National Park Service, The Nature Conservancy, and the University of California's Natural Reserve System—serve as Santa Cruz Island's custodians. Along with a handful of other mainland organizations, they also serve as the de facto guardians of the island's history. Each has developed its own relationship with the past, and these relationships inform the ways that each studies, manages, and interprets the island. Each has a different origin, mission, and culture. Each embraces a particular kind of institutional memory, and each engages in some form of organized amnesia. The way these institutions remember and act on Santa Cruz Island's past will shape its future—and perhaps the futures of other such places in California and beyond.

First, consider the National Park Service, whose relationship with the past is best described as *selected memory*. Congress established the service in 1916 to “conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects” in national parks and monuments, and to “provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” In 1980 Congress created Channel Islands National Park, which includes Anacapa, Santa Rosa, San Miguel, and Santa Barbara Islands. By 2000, the park also had acquired the eastern quarter of Santa Cruz Island.

For more than three decades, the park service has interpreted the Channel Islands' history in much the same way that it has told the histories of other western national parks. Indeed, many readers who have never visited or even heard of the Channel Islands will immediately recognize the plot-line of the service's official history. It goes something like this:

The four northern Channel Islands comprise a seaward arm of the Santa Monica Mountains, at the southwestern edge of California's Transverse Ranges. During the

Pleistocene epoch, when sea level dropped to 120 meters below its current elevation, this archipelago formed a contiguous landmass. Close enough to the mainland to receive occasional terrestrial migrants, yet far enough away to isolate those newcomers from their source populations, the islands became a remarkable laboratory of evolution. Although not as rich in species as the mainland, they housed a grand menagerie of ice age flora and fauna, including the fanciful, oxymoronic pygmy mammoth. At least 145 species of plants and animals still occur here but nowhere else.

Evidence of human presence on the islands dates back at least 13,000 years. Over time, the Chumash people who lived here developed a sophisticated and cosmopolitan culture, complete with shell bead currency, deep-sea fishing gear, long-distance trade networks, and elaborate rituals. In 1542, Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo sailed along the Santa Cruz coastline, past Fraser Point, and estimated a population of around 2,000 human inhabitants in six villages. Disease and missionization decimated these communities and led to their abandonment by the early 1800s, less than three centuries after European contact. Ranching began on Santa Cruz Island in the 1830s with a Mexican land grant, and agriculture dominated the island for 150 years. Feral grazing and rooting animals denuded the vegetation, threatening native species and leaving a desolate landscape in many areas. Since the 1980s, restoration projects have begun to restore the island's ecosystems, a process that most observers believed would take decades but is already showing remarkable results.¹

If this story seems familiar that is because it is based on a formula.² Visit other western national parks and you will see the same tale, told again and again, with different details but an identical structure. As a genre, the park service's official history hits all of the disciplinary high points that national park visitors have come to expect: geography, geology, evolution, ecology, archaeology, and history. By combining the multiple temporal scales associated with these disciplines, national parks offer a God's eye view meant to convey a sense of wonder in the presence of ancient things and monumental processes. From a practical perspective, the park service cultivates this feeling of awe to instill a code of conduct within the parks and an ethic of support for its mission. From an ideological viewpoint, the official history also serves as a nationalist narrative designed to enroll visitors in a shared heritage that inevitably culminates with



Photograph by Flickr user Momo Go.

modern American society and benevolent bureaucratic management.³

Recently, at other sites, the park service has confronted challenges to its portrayals of the past, and this has led to public debates and new approaches.⁴ But these are exceptions. In a century of honing its official history, the park service has elevated this tale of the western national parks to the status of common sense. Today, it is the dominant narrative not only of ranger stations, trailhead signage, and official documents, but also of websites, guidebooks, and popular lore.

There is nothing nefarious about the park service's mission, nor anything technically wrong with the story it tells. Its facts are accurate, its chronology sound. Yet its version of the past barely resembles the kind of history that most historians regard as vital and interesting. Historians value questions as much as answers, insights as well as information. They endeavor to treat the past on its own terms, while drawing appropriate connections to contemporary issues. They seek to tell stories that enliven history, while



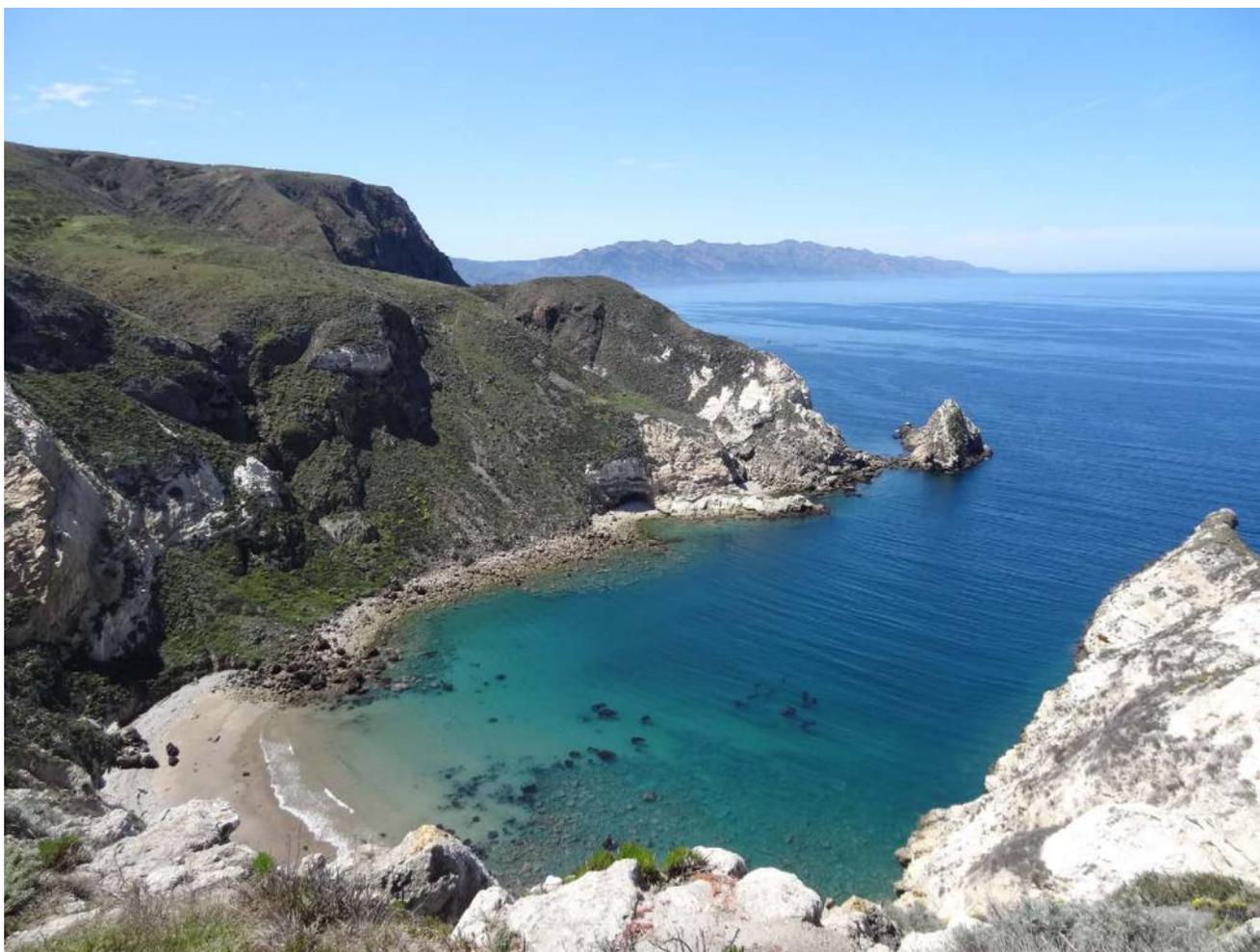
Photograph by Ken Lund.

puncturing the air of inevitability so common in textbook accounts. Perhaps most important, they treat all narratives of the past as provisional.

The official history of Santa Cruz Island sends an altogether different message. It is correct but not especially interesting because it is predictable rather than contingent. It is written in declarative instead of interrogative language that preempts, not prompts, further discussion. It artificially separates the past from the present, even though the consequences of that past are everywhere today. It then conflates the two by asserting that wise managers can turn back the clock, remaking lost landscapes from previous eras. The park service presents a stable and comfortable version of the past. Yet in doing so, it avoids almost all of the complex and important questions that link historical processes to current concerns.

Santa Cruz Island's second major administrative institution is The Nature Conservancy, whose connection to the past takes the form of *directed memory*. The conservancy, which owns the western three-quarters of the island, has its roots in the Ecological Society of America. Two years after the society's founding, in 1915, it established a preservation committee to promote the establishment of nature reserves for ecological field research. In 1946 the society's governing board disbanded the committee, arguing that activist organizations, not scientific societies, should take the lead in conservation work. Several members responded by forming a new group, the Ecologists' Union, which in 1950 they renamed The Nature Conservancy. This would become the world's largest nongovernmental conservation organization.⁵

In 1978 the conservancy acquired most of Santa Cruz Island from the Stanton family, which, like so many other



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wealthy Southern California clans, made its fortune in the oil industry. The family patriarch, Carey Stanton, made it clear that he did not want his property to fall into the hands of the National Park Service. After Stanton's death in 1987, the conservancy assumed full management of its portion of the island. This is where its story of the island's history begins.

At the time, Santa Cruz Island was, by all accounts, in miserable condition. The conservancy's restoration work began with the removal of more than 30,000 feral sheep in the 1980s and more than 5,000 feral hogs by 2006. Sometime in the 1990s, golden eagles from the mainland first appeared on the islands. They probably migrated there to feed on the islands' piglets, but they also found its native foxes easy prey. By the early 2000s, the island fox—an endemic and charismatic subspecies, which, despite its diminutive size, was the island's apex terrestrial predator—

had nearly gone extinct. The conservancy joined with several other organizations to mount a response that included rounding up the foxes, protecting them in enclosures, and initiating a captive breeding program, while eradicating the remaining pigs and revegetating the denuded areas where the foxes were most vulnerable to areal predation by golden eagles. The program also involved removing all of the golden eagles and replacing them with bald eagles. Bald eagles disappeared from the islands by the mid-twentieth century, due to a combination of hunting, harassment, and reproductive failure associated with DDT toxicity. Many biologists believed that bald eagles were once common on the islands, were sufficiently territorial to fend off golden eagles, and preyed on fish rather than foxes.⁶

In its promotional materials, the conservancy describes these events as a gripping tale of loss and recovery through

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expert management. A short online film, entitled *Santa Cruz Island: Restoring the Balance*, sets the stage. An airborne camera pans across the island to solemn music while the narrator describes it as “a world apart . . . Every plant and animal is an integral part of a unique, self-sustaining ecosystem. But this is a fragile place, where the slightest human touch can be profound.”⁷ The conservancy’s website echoes its film, recounting the story, and concluding with a declaration of victory: “Once on the brink of ecological collapse, Santa Cruz Island now offers visitors a glimpse of what Southern California used to be like hundreds of years ago . . . After three decades of tireless work, Santa Cruz Island has emerged as a leading example for successful island restoration and innovative conservation.”⁸

The conservancy deserves credit for its accomplishments. Yet its account of Santa Cruz Island’s history is filled with contradictions. The claim that Santa Cruz is “a world apart” forgets the extent to which people have shaped its flora and fauna. The idea that every organism is “an integral part” of the island’s “self-sustaining ecosystem” ignores the outsized role of introduced species, particularly nonnative plants, dozens of which are still common there. It also fails to mention the occasional natural colonizations that are typical of a large island so close to a continent. It discounts the several millennia during which humans, not foxes or eagles, dominated the island’s food web. And it overlooks the conservancy’s own history of intensive management, which is unlikely to end soon. Calling Santa Cruz “fragile” may seem reasonable, considering the grave changes that occurred there during the ranching era. But the conservancy’s own description of the island’s recovery suggests that even after decades of abuse, this remains a remarkably resilient place. Given these observations, the claim that Santa Cruz Island offers “a glimpse of what Southern California used to be like hundreds of years ago” is untenable. A more honest assessment would arrive at nearly the opposite conclusion: the past 250 years have been the most transformative and consequential in the island’s long history.

The Nature Conservancy’s account of the past qualifies as directed memory because it is history with a purpose. Unlike the National Park Service—which sees historical interpretation as central to its work, and whose form of selected memory serves bureaucratic needs but also the broader goals of promoting an inclusive and educated citizenry—the conservancy has much narrower objectives and no real allegiance to the past. Its goals are restoring and preserving nature—a project that often involves ignoring or attempting to purge the past—and securing funds to continue its efforts. Ecosystems are inherently historical entities, which makes erasing history impossible on the ground. So where restoration reaches its limits, a rhetorical project begins.

The third institution responsible for Santa Cruz Island’s management is the University of California’s Natural Reserve System, where history has usually taken the form of *neglected memory*. The UC Natural Reserve System dates to the mid-1960s, when the UC system created a single administrative unit to coordinate its existing reserves, and produced a plan for the development of a larger reserve network that would include representative samples of California’s biophysical diversity. The natural reserve system’s founders envisioned it as serving several objectives. It would provide secure sites for long-term research, facilities for teaching, and spaces for studying environmental problems. The reserves would also act as control sites for measuring ecological change in surrounding areas. Today, the system encompasses thirty-nine sites with access to around 750,000 acres, making it the world’s largest and most diverse university-run reserve system.⁹

In 1966, a year after the system’s founding, the university established Santa Cruz Island Reserve. The state does not own any land on the island, so the reserve operates under agreements with the National Park Service and The Nature Conservancy. The reserve’s director, Lyndal Laughrin, a fox biologist by training, is himself something of living historical figure, having worked on the island since 1964.

The system's founders knew that a reserve's value depended on effective management and adequate facilities, but they also stressed the importance of supporting documentation.¹⁰ This included basic natural history observations, scientific data collected on-site, archives pertaining to the history of the area before it joined the system, administrative records describing the reserve's management, and libraries of reference materials. These founders conceived of a reserve network whose value would grow each year as knowledge about each site increased and became more accessible. After the system's establishment, however, this vision was mostly forgotten. Today, the reserves hold only a small fraction of the supporting materials necessary for a rich understanding of their histories. Indeed, many scientists conducting research at UC reserves have no knowledge about the histories of their study sites, or how the legacies of those histories shape contemporary ecological processes.

There are many reasons for this predicament. Because most scientists see the history of their profession as a march toward more knowledge and better ideas, they tend to place little value on the past. During the mid-twentieth century, the biological and environmental sciences in particular turned away from historical accounts toward mechanistic explanations for patterns in nature. In the period of rapid expansion after the reserve system's founding, its leaders focused more on site acquisitions than on instituting their vision of the reserves as repositories of knowledge. At most sites, urgent tasks—such as construction, maintenance, and fund-raising—took precedence. The need to produce timely results from funded research discouraged many scientists from undertaking long-term projects or assisting with baseline monitoring. Even efforts to compile lists of publications based on data gathered at the reserves faltered. The result of all this is that history, once the source of so much interest in the reserve system, has assumed the same role it so often does in the sciences. It moved from the vital foreground into the neglected background.

The system's leaders now recognize their past lack of historical mindedness, and along with partners from several UC campuses they are now trying to catch up. But building an information infrastructure isn't easy. Most reserves operate on shoestring budgets without resources for such work. A few reserves have done admirable jobs maintaining their records, but most have not. Some records have disappeared; others are disorganized, dispersed, or degraded. Basic



Photograph by Flickr user Momo Go.

information about past land use is missing, and only a few sites have extensive collections of historical data and documents. Their capacity to capture such materials remains limited. And the reserve directors are only beginning to develop partnerships with campus archives, libraries, museums, and laboratories whose missions include preserving such materials.

Three factors are generating increased interest in the reserves' histories. The system's first generation of directors is now in or approaching retirement; if not properly planned, their departures could represent an irreplaceable loss of memory. In 2015 the reserve system will turn 50, an anniversary that will include many celebrations but may also generate questions about the system's legacy. Finally, increased interest in environmental change has caused many scientists to search for more historical information on California ecosystems. High-quality, well-documented data going back more than a few decades, these investigators have found, is as rare as it is essential.

The Santa Cruz Island Reserve is probably in a better position relative to its supporting documentation than most other UC reserves. This is due in large part to the work of the Santa Cruz Island Foundation, an independent non-profit group founded by Carey Stanton that collects materials related to the island. But the reserve itself is only now beginning to assemble its own archive, from long-neglected records in its office, with the assistance of a lone volunteer.

The National Park Service, The Nature Conservancy, and the UC Natural Reserve System embrace different forms of memory that lead to different relationships with the past on



Photograph by Ross Doering.

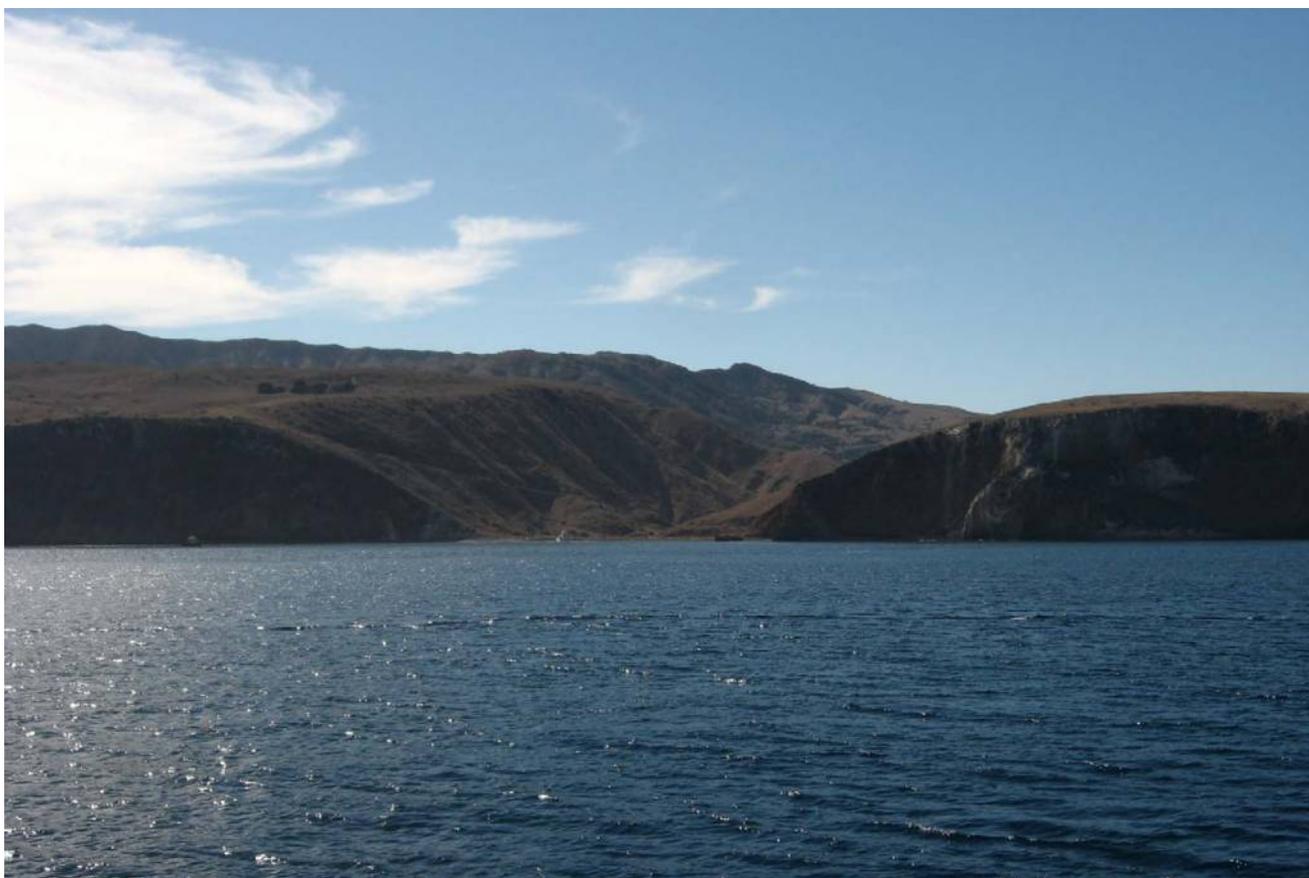
Santa Cruz Island. But why does this matter so much for thinking with nature in California? And if all of these accounts fall short, then what should replace them?

The way these three institutions relate to the past matters because the Santa Cruz Island case is not unique, and because it affects the future in at least three crucial ways. First, it influences the kinds of historical documentation these institutions choose to preserve, which in turn shapes our understanding of environmental change. Preserving such materials requires effort, which may seem like a tall order given the constraints these institutions face. But some nearby parks and reserves provide models of what can be done, often without spending a lot of money. Stanford University's Jasper Ridge Biological Preserve, for example, has built a rich trove of historical documentation using mostly volunteer labor. This includes a complete database of all research conducted on the site beginning in the 1920s. With each additional archive and dataset, Jasper Ridge's value increases. The loss of documents associated with the UC

Natural Reserve System is one example of how, even in an increasingly digital world, important clues about the past can be lost without proper care.

Second, the ways these institutions relate to the past shapes not only what they value, but also what their patrons and the broader public value about places like Santa Cruz Island. The Nature Conservancy's rejection of most of the island's human past sends a clear message: what is important here is nature not culture. The conservancy is entitled to manage the lands it owns according to its mission and values. (It is, after all, The *Nature* Conservancy.) The problem is that Santa Cruz Island is a product of both nature and culture. To truly know this place would be to value both human history and ecological processes, and to understand that both have contributed to making it what it is today.

Third, the ways these institutions relate to the past informs their management decisions. At the time of this writing, The National Park Service was promoting a new



Photograph by Ken Lund.

Channel Islands management plan that, if approved, will increase the proportion of the park designated as wilderness from zero to 53 percent. This will include almost all of the service's land there, with the exception of San Miguel Island, which the park service manages but is still owned by the US Navy.¹¹

The Wilderness Act of 1964 defines wildernesses as places where "earth and its community of life are untrammeled by humans, where humans are visitors and do not remain." Such areas should retain their "primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation," according to the act, and appear "to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of humans' work substantially unnoticeable." Wilderness designation can be an effective management tool, and the park service has made this a centerpiece of its nature preservation efforts. Yet it is difficult to see how the legal definition of wilderness could apply to Santa Cruz Island. To make it fit, one must accept a number of assumptions about

human history and the relationship between the past and the present.¹² One must believe that several millennia of human habitation do not constitute a permanent presence, and that human activities on the island have not fundamentally altered the character of its wild areas. One must trust that damaged environments will repair themselves, returning to "primeval" nature with little or no human assistance, given the practical impediments wilderness designation imposes on restoration efforts. One must also consent to the park service's wisdom in determining which historical features, such as roads and buildings, warrant preservation. Experience from elsewhere suggests that the park service will set a high bar for what it deems worthy. Much of the island's built environment, including any features not a part of the service's official history, will eventually disappear.¹³

Now consider an alternative possibility. Imagine a world in which institutions like the National Park Service and The Nature Conservancy stop presenting their versions of history as settled and circumscribed stories for passive

consumption and, instead, start posing interesting questions that require us to reflect on the relationships between the past and the present. The result would be a less-manicured history, but it would be more alive and meaningful. It could also have important implications for policy and management. There are many good candidates for such questions; I will conclude with just a few.

How did the island's native people alter its ecosystems prior to European contact, and what are the consequences of those changes for contemporary ecology and management? Did the island fox begin as a domesticated Chumash animal, and if so what does this mean for our attitudes and values toward native and exotic species?¹⁴ Did bald eagles and island foxes really live in harmony for all those years? How can histories of human impact on the islands' marine ecosystems, which scholars once thought were trivial but now believe were extensive or even transformative, reshape our understanding of environmental history? What does it mean to establish a baseline target for ecological restoration on an island characterized by constant change? How can wilderness and historic preservation be reconciled to promote a richer appreciation of both nature and culture? And how can we develop a monitoring strategy for the island that will enable us to capture diverse data so that we can better analyze current and future environmental changes?

This is by no means an exhaustive list, but I hope these are good questions to ponder—and to spark a conversation—if you ever find yourself, as I did recently, with time to think on a clear day at Fraser Point. **B**

Notes

- ¹ This paragraph is a summation of material contained on the National Park Service's Channel Islands website: www.nps.gov/chis.
- ² Alfred Runte, *National Parks: The American Experience* (Taylor Trade Publishing, 2010); John E. Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton University Press, 1994).
- ³ Popular Memory Group, "Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method," *The Collective Memory Reader*, Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered

Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Daniel Levy, eds., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 254–260.

- ⁴ Ari Kelman, *A Misplaced Masacre: Struggling Over the Memory of Sand Creek* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).
- ⁵ Abby J. Kinchy, "On the Borders of Post-War Ecology: Struggles over the Ecological Society of America's Preservation Committee, 1917–1946," *Science as Culture* 15:1 (March 2006), 23–44.
- ⁶ Timothy J. Coonan, Catherin A. Schwemm, and David K. Garcelon, *Decline and Recovery of the Island Fox: A Case Study for Population Recovery* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).
- ⁷ The Conservancy's short film is available on YouTube and other websites.
- ⁸ See The Nature Conservancy's Santa Cruz Island web page.
- ⁹ Peggy Fiedler, Susan Gee Rumsey, and Kathleen Wong, eds., *The Environmental Legacy of the UC Natural Reserve System* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).
- ¹⁰ Lawrence D. Ford and Kenneth S. Norris, "The University of California Natural Reserve System: Progress and Prospects," *BioScience* 38:7(July/August 1988), 463–470; Peter S. Alagona, "A Sanctuary for Science: The Hastings Natural History Reservation and the Origins of the University of California's Natural Reserve System." *Journal of the History of Biology* 45 (2012), 651–680.
- ¹¹ National Park Service, *Channel Islands National Park Draft Management Plan/Wilderness Study/Environmental Impact Statement*, Channel Islands National Park, November 2013.
- ¹² Matthew A. Lockhart, "The Trouble with Wilderness' Education in the National Park Service: The Case of the Lost Cattle Mounts of Congaree," *The Public Historian* 28:2 (Spring 2006), 11–30. William Cronon, "The Riddle of the Apostle Islands: How Do You Manage a Wilderness Full of Human Stories?" *Orion* (May/June 2003), 36–42; National Wilderness Steering Committee, "Guidance 'White Paper' Number 1: Cultural Resources and Wilderness," 30 November 2002.
- ¹³ Laura Watt, *The Paradox of Preservation: Wilderness and Working Landscapes at Point Reyes National Seashore*, unpublished manuscript.
- ¹⁴ Torben C. Rick, Jon M. Erlandson, René L. Vellanoweth, Todd J. Braje, Paul W. Collins, Daniel A. Guthrie, and Thomas W. Stafford, Jr., "Origins and Antiquity of the Island Fox (*Urocyon littoralis*) on California's Channel Islands," *Quaternary Research* 71 (2009), –98.