



# ALOOLKOY

News from the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary



NATIONAL MARINE  
SANCTUARIES  
CHANNEL ISLANDS



## RECREATION IN THE SANCTUARY

Winter 2002  
Volume 15  
Number 2

# Experiencing the Channel Islands

By Tom Dore

People's reasons for going to Channel Islands National Park are as different as the sand grains in the dunes at Cuyler Beach. The Park Service understands this and provides opportunities for all people to make their unique connection with the place.

It may look like people come to camp, or kayak, or look at birds, but what they could actually be doing is chasing an old experience that felt really good. People remember where or when they were truly alone in nature for the first time, or heard silence for the first time outdoors, when they caught their first fish, or were close to a wild animal.

The smells, sounds, and feelings that are linked to each of our special places are so important to us, and have such a positive effect on us, that we search for ways to re-create them. Many of our most exciting experiences in nature were so because we didn't know what was around the corner. We had never been in that exact situation before. That's adventure.

This park—Anacapa, Santa Rosa, Santa Cruz, San Miguel, and Santa Barbara islands—is a perfect place to re-create. Here people can find the elements they look for in primitive and wild experience far from hints of the human-made landscape: specifically, the time machine, nature, and silence.

## The Time Machine

Just a little ways before you get to Inspiration Point, there is a high point on the trail. It's actually the high point on all of East Anacapa Island. You may slow there and think you are gasping at the view, but what may actually be happening is that you feel Chumash footprints under your feet. Almost 10,000 years of people walking right where you are, scraping the meat out of abalone shells, gathering it up in a kelp net, and climbing back down the steep, volcanic cliff to a plank canoe.

You can take your shoes off, step back in time, and feel the crushed shells between your toes as they did. Nothing has changed here in all that time, and you can easily see why they chose this panoramic spot to clean their food.

There are other places just like this one on the islands that



© Tom Dore



© Tom Dore

Above: Juan Rodrigues Cabrillo monument on San Miguel Island.

Below: Taking it easy on Santa Cruz Island.

have disappeared into the landscape, preserved forever—never to be disturbed or built on. National parks protect all of the parks' resources and use a tiny portion to show visitors what's so special about the place...so those visitors can make their own connection back in time.

## Nature

Islands do interesting things to animals and plants. As you slide into your sleeping bag and rest your head on your folded jacket, you summarize your day and put it into perspective.

You saw an island fox that you thought was a cat because they're so much smaller than mainland foxes—but they still are the biggest native animal on these islands. Even so, they're dying off because non-native pigs are breeding here and luring golden eagles, which eat the foxes, too.

You saw a scrub jay that was twice as big and deeper blue than any scrub jay you've ever seen. A blue whale that was not blue at all, but at least twice as big as the humpback you were so impressed with. The giant kelp grows two feet a day. Let's see, you'd be 29,240 feet tall if you grew that fast.

You barely saw a squad of Xantus's Murrelets flying just off the water. The Island Packer boat goes 25 knots, so they must have been going at least 30. They spend their whole lives at sea, except for breeding, and their entire species trusts only a couple of tiny islands here to have their babies.

You walked through a forest of ironwood trees. The park naturalist said they're here because this is the only place left that remotely resembles the swampy climate that existed thousands of years ago in their historic groves all over the West.

Now, why were those sea lions blowing bubbles under your kayak? That is so weird. You've never seen this many stars less than 200 miles from your house and you're only 20 miles away. There's something inspirational about staring straight up into a starry sky. Your pupils and senses are so dilated that understanding comes easy.

Humans and their pets aren't the only animals on earth. There is wildness very close to us if we can just let go of our human things and become an animal with them. Then it feels good to be out there.



© Jeff Foote

Harbor Seal.

## Silence

Silence is so alien to us that we find ourselves stopping while we walk on some of the islands and saying, "Do you hear that?" "What?" "There's no noise." Sounds are such a part of our mainland life that when they are absent, we're shocked. The quiet reinforces that we are somewhere far away and we are getting what we came for.

But there is no silence on Anacapa Island. It's a great place, but not quiet. With the thousands of western gulls whistling most of the year and the seals and sea lions barking constantly, you wouldn't be able to hear the fog signal every 14 seconds if it weren't so loud. Usually at night, even during the gull-nesting season (if it's not too windy) it gets much quieter. That is, until the barn owls go to work. Then there's no sleep for you or the birds.

Santa Barbara Island's about the same but without the lighthouse. The

two big islands, Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa, have isolated beaches and big, deep canyons and valleys that get soundless. The beaches on the south side of Santa Rosa are identical to what Malibu probably looked like 100 years ago: coastal bluffs and mountains, no roads or cars or buildings. The soundscape pulses with surf and silence, surf and silence. It's a strict rhythm you can live your life by. You can arrive by kayak or foot and camp there and not see another person for weeks.

The campground at San Miguel is probably the quietest place in coastal Southern California... not at the west end where 25,000 elephant seals are jockeying for a mate, but right in the middle of the island near the monument honoring Cabrillo's resting place. Coming up the canyon trail and over the dune from mint-colored Cuyler Harbor, make your way through the shoulder-high yellow coreopsis forest. About then you'll notice the thunder of the surf zone has vanished. On the rest of the way to the campground, the quiet is broken only by your heartbeat and an occasional raven noting your presence.

## Camping and Hiking How-Tos

For detailed camping and hiking information, call Channel Islands National Park, (805) 658-5711 or visit [www.nps.gov/chis/](http://www.nps.gov/chis/)

Reservations for National Park Service campgrounds on the Channel Islands are available through Biospherics Inc. at (800) 365-CAMP (2267) or <http://reservations.nps.gov/>. Free permits for backcountry beach camping on Santa Rosa Island are available on a seasonal basis.

Hikers should check with park rangers before hiking on the islands due to the possibility of seasonal closures and island-specific restrictions. Stay on trails, carry plenty of water, and never hike alone.



© Tom Dore

Take some time and think about why you go to natural places. What experiences do you strive to re-create? You can probably create a similar experience at Channel Islands National Park and find your unique way to connect with nature. Pack your pack and go to Channel Islands, Ventura, or Santa Barbara harbors. There's a boat leaving every day for one of the Channel Islands.

*Tom Dore is a park ranger for the Channel Islands National Park.*



© Tom Dore

Exploring tidepools at Frenchy's Cove, West Anacapa Island.