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AN AIR INSPECTION OF THE CHANNEL ISLANDS NATIONAL
MONUMENT AND OTHER ISLANDS OF THIS GROUP

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AN AIR INSPECTION OF THE CHANNEL ISLANDS NATIONAL
MONUMENT AND OTHER ISLANDS OF THIS GROUP

by

Lowell Summer, Biologist

May 7, 1948.

Purpose of the Report

On April 20 an air inspection of Channel Islands National Monument was made with the Regional Director and Superintendent Scoeyen, Coordinating Superintendent for the Channel Islands National Monument. Through the courtesy of the Coast Guard, which furnished a PBV amphibian and the crew for this purpose, all the other islands of the Channel Islands' group also were inspected at close range.

This report is primarily for the purpose of bringing Service information up-to-date on these islands, rather than to contribute new biological information. The last biological reports by Service personnel were the excellent reports by Wildlife Ranger Clarence Fry transmitted July 15, 1941, together with an additional report dated January 5, 1942. A fairly comprehensive report of June 28, 1939 on "An Investigation of Santa Barbara, Anacapa and San Miguel Islands" was made by the present writer.

Summary and Recommendations

This unique and originally beautiful group of islands has been almost unbelievably vandalized for about 100 years by overgrazing. Soil erosion is probably more extensive and spectacular than in almost any area of the U. S. mainland with the possible exception of a very few completely abandoned agricultural areas of the Southeast and Southwest. It appears to be much worse than on the Navajo reservation in Arizona. ✓

These islands are a unique national heritage that will be increasingly appreciated by future generations if they can be preserved now from complete destruction. Their scientific value and potential visitor interest are very great even under present conditions of abuse.

Our two national monument islands, Santa Barbara and Anacapa, have not been grazed for about 15 years and appeared to be well on the way toward ultimate recovery. In this they contrasted markedly with the other islands where the prevailing ruinous abuse of the vegetation and soil has been aggravated by two consecutive years of drought. ✓

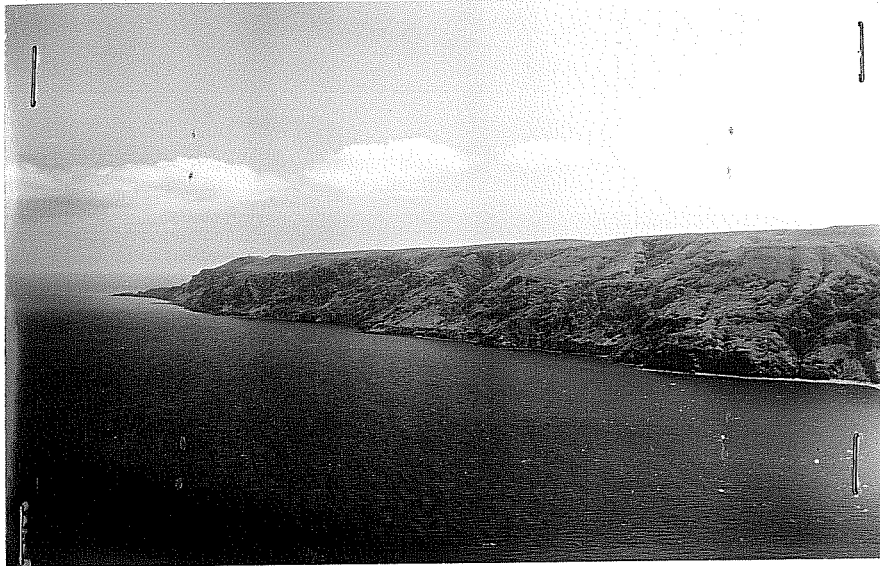


Fig. 2. Southeast tip of San Clemente Island which is controlled by the Navy. Although now largely bare on top because of many years of overgrazing the canyons still contain groves of trees. Water is sparse.

to the Channel Islands National Monument with provision that the Navy continue with full military control if the Navy wishes, but above all with immediate cessation of the sheep grazing. Failing the accomplishment of such transfer it is recommended that the Navy be requested, as has been done earlier, to put a stop to this ruinous and uneconomical sheep grazing so as to preserve a unique national area which has a great value to the nation even beyond its possible military importance.

In the case of San Nicolas and San Clemente Islands the Navy should be urged to cease grazing operations for the same reasons as for San Miguel. The deep interest recently shown by the Navy Department in the preservation of unique natural values in South Pacific Islands and the program which it has undertaken to assure this preservation is well-known. In view of these considerations it is urged that this is a favorable time to draw to the attention of the Navy the equally imperative need for similar conservation on San Nicolas, San Clemente, and if a transfer is not possible, on San Miguel.

Existing primitive landing and overnight installations at Santa Barbara Island have been greatly improved by the Navy indicating a certain degree of use of the area. These improvements are beneficial, but it is recommended that the Navy Department be requested not to shoot or otherwise disturb any of the wildlife and



Fig. 1.

Superintendent Scoyen in the spacious observation blister of the Coast Guard PBX amphibian enroute to Channel Islands National Monument. Photograph by Major Tomlinson.

Of the eight islands of the Channel Islands' group five are in Government hands, two being under this Service and three under the Navy. Those controlled by the Navy are San Nicolas, San Clemente and San Miguel. Despite this Federal ownership, which ought to be more enlightened than commercial private ownership, these last three appear to be in a worse condition than any of the others. This condition seems to be due primarily to the fact that for a few hundred dollars rental the Navy continues to permit overgrazing by sheep on these lands. For a few hundred dollars a year a unique and irreplaceable national resource is being destroyed.

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San Miguel Island is believed by many to be the burial place of the explorer Cabrillo. It is historically important also on other grounds as shown in the 1939 report previously mentioned. The archeological, paleontological, botanical and zoological values are extremely important even under present conditions of soil erosion. A representative of the Soil Conservation Service, who studied the area during the 1939 inspection, believes that if grazing were eliminated, eventual recovery of the island would take place. Moreover this recovery could be greatly assisted by a few relatively simple soil conservation techniques. Apparently the Navy has no extensive military installations on this island comparable to those on the other two islands under its control. In view of this fact it is recommended that the National Park Service seek a nominal transfer of San Miguel from Navy ownership

not to set fire to the grass cover of the island which is recovering nicely from former overgrazing.

Similarly in the case of Anacapa Island existing Lighthouse Service facilities appear to have been augmented, indicating regular use of the easternmost island. Here also the Navy should be requested to refrain from molesting the wildlife of the island and should not set fire to the vegetation.

San Clemente Island

San Clemente Island, which is controlled by the Navy and probably is in active use for rocket studies, lies 60 miles from Cabrillo National Monument from which it is visible on a clear day. The island is 18 miles long and an average of 2-1/2 miles wide. In 1917 sheep grazing was described as still rather good with large flocks of these animals habitually present. In 1948 the more or less level top of the island was practically denuded, but trees still occurred in groves in the canyons. Soil erosion was severe. A native fox and a species of mouse occur on this island, but nowhere else in the world. Sheep grazing appears to be going on in spite of the reduced vegetation. It costs more to remove domestic stock from these remote islands than to let them die of thirst and starvation. If the grazing fee is comparable to that on San Miguel Island the Navy probably receives \$700 or \$800 a year in return for this opportunity to destroy the vegetation and soil.

Santa Catalina Island

This island is privately owned and is a famous fishing ground resort with a resident population of several hundred people. The island is rugged and mountainous with fair sized trees in the canyons. Two kinds of mice, a ground squirrel and a fox species are found here, but on no other island nor on the mainland. Wild pigs run loose and appear to be quite destructive to the vegetation. An excursion boat from San Pedro and Los Angeles makes this island easily accessible to tourists. It lies only about 20 miles from the mainland and can be reached by air on more or less regular commercial flight schedule.

Santa Barbara Island

Santa Barbara Island is 38 miles from the mainland. One of the principal reasons for making the inspection trip was Superintendent Scoyen's desire to ascertain whether the old fishermen's



Fig. 3. Santa Catalina Island as seen from the west side in the vicinity of Catalina Harbor.



Fig. 4. Santa Barbara Island. This is the principal "harbor" at Santa Barbara Island. Originally landing here even from a skiff was difficult and almost hazardous. As shown here a hoist and a stairway have been constructed by the Navy. The water tank also is new. The old fishing shacks have been rehabilitated. The square building some distance beyond the main group is new.

sheds formerly used by visiting Park Service personnel for shelter were still present. As shown in Fig. 4 and 5 these sheds apparently have been moved so that they are side by side, and have been repaired considerably. The water tank is a new and welcome structure, as also is the series of stairs and the landing platform used to hoist equipment from boats to the mainland.

In the old days a rather faint tractor trail extended from the vicinity of these sheds to the opposite side of the island where the lighthouse beacon^{was} located. The tractor was kept in an old shed and was used for hauling fuel. Through Navy activity the faint trail has become a minor road system. As shown in Fig. 6 what appears to be an observation tower now is located at the site of the old Lighthouse Service beacon.

All this activity is beneficial to this Service, provided it is kept within the bounds required by protection of the Monument's primary values. This means that the Navy should be requested most urgently, ^{not} to allow its personnel to shoot sea lions, disturb the nesting birds, or set fire to the healthy mat of vegetation which blankets the island. There should be absolute prohibition of cats, and the same regulation should apply to dogs as applies in the parks. Preferably no dogs should be allowed on the island under any circumstances.

In view of the great interest shown by the Navy Department recently in protecting the unique wildlife on the islands of the South Pacific, it appears that this is a favorable time to secure Navy cooperation in the protection of values at the Channel Islands National Monument that are almost equally unique.

Fig. 7 shows Gull Island, which has been recommended for inclusion in the Channel Islands National Monument by proclamation. Its original exclusion was unintentional. This small island fragment has a scientific value out of all proportion to its size for the reason that no cats, rabbits or sheep have ever occupied it so far as can be determined. This means that if any of the once abundant murrelets and auklets survive on the Channel Islands they probably do so on this rocky islet. These birds have been practically exterminated from the main island of Santa Barbara by wild house cats, and probably also by the sheep that at one time destroyed most of their nesting cover. It is believed that a landing on Gull Island from a skiff could be made at some time in the future to check the important scientific possibility of their occurrence there.

San Nicolas Island

San Nicolas Island, 18 miles long and about 3 miles wide, lies 53 miles from the nearest mainland. Even in 1917 the island was described as very sandy with sparse vegetation of brush and cactus. However, prior to grazing, which even in 1917 had been



Fig. 5, Santa Barbara Island. In addition to new installations and rehabilitation of the old, one or more well-defined roads now are present. In the old days the Lighthouse Service kept a tractor in a shed here for hauling fuel to the Island's beacons.



Fig. 6, Santa Barbara Island. This was the location on the southwest side of the Island of the old Lighthouse Service beacon. The present structure appears to be new and the platform indicates that it may be an observation tower. Navy personnel must be requested not to shoot at the sea lions which congregate at the foot of the cliff below this tower.



Fig. 7. This is Gull Island--the latest National Park Service acquisition. It lies a few hundred feet off Santa Barbara Island and was omitted from the original Monument proclamation by mistake. Its biological importance may be unusually great.

going on for a long time, the region probably was well-covered with low-growing vegetation. Sheep still are numerous according to Coast Guard personnel. During drought years they have died in great numbers, but enough survive to make sure that the race shall not perish. It can be imagined to what extent the vegetation is ravaged before the animals actually die. Erosion appears to be worse on this island than on any of the others except San Miguel, and is worse than anything I have seen on the mainland anywhere. There are several alkaline springs which insure the survival of a few of the sheep at all times.

A tremendous congregation of sea lions was observed on the southern boundary of the island in 1948. This was in contrast to the general scarcity of these animals on the other islands. This gave the impression that the total Channel Islands' population of sea lions may have temporarily moved to San Nicolas. This could be explained as a result of persecution by fishermen, who were able to exert sufficient political pressure last year to force the State Division of Fish and Game to issue the fishermen permits to slaughter sea lions for their hides. In previous years the Division of Fish and Game has successfully opposed granting permits to the fishermen, and has insisted on carrying out any necessary control measures with its own personnel.



Fig. 8. East end of San Nicolas Island which is under Navy control. Sheep are present and erosion is terrible.



Fig. 9. ^{Two} A very large group of sea lions and many scattered individuals seen on the beach on the south side of San Nicolas Island.

San Miguel Island

The melancholy state of affairs at San Miguel Island was fully described in the 1939 report. At that time the Navy received \$600 a year for allowing the Island to be ravaged. Thirty-six thousand sheep are said to have been grazed here at one time. In 1939 eleven hundred head were present, and the Navy was about to increase the number. During the present drought 100 head would be too many.

San Miguel Island is 25 miles from the mainland. In 1917 the grass was still long and abundant, but today it hardly exists at all. Nevertheless the archeological values remaining are still high. At the ranch house there is, or was in 1939, an unusually interesting collection of native artifacts. This island also is the locality where the fossil elephant remains were found. As previously mentioned, Cabrillo, for whom Cuyler Harbor was a favorite anchorage, is supposed to lie buried here. In 1939 there still remained one or more walls of the adobe house constructed by the famous old-time explorer, Captain George Nidever. The wild foxes of this island are unlike those of any of the other islands, or the mainland. There are also races of fox sparrows, white-footed mice and other lower vertebrates that are found only here; the same applies to several species of plants. The islet at the mouth of Cuyler Harbor, that is known as Prince Island, was described in the 1939 report. It is the site of any extremely interesting and scientifically important breeding colony of sea birds. Access is easy by means of a small boat.

This island apparently is used very little by the Navy judging from the lack of installations. It is recommended that if possible, nominal jurisdiction be transferred to the National Park Service so that grazing can be stopped, restoration promoted and the unique educational and interpretive potentialities adequately realized. If the Navy refuses to make this transfer, the least that should be done is to abolish the present grazing once and for all. The interest shown by the Navy in preserving the islands of the South Pacific should be applied to the equally urgent conservation requirements of San Miguel Island. To do less is to vandalize a unique national resource. Conditions here are so bad that by contrast severely eroded areas on the mainland seem relatively good. Probably only the Dust Bowl of the Middlewest, during its worst days, is in a more miserable condition.



Fig. 10. Cuyler Harbor, San Miguel Island, where Cabrillo is supposed to have been buried. This was once a fine harbor, but has filled with sand in the last 40 years as a result of erosion caused by overgrazing. The pier where the sheep are loaded is visible at left center. Photo by Major Tomlinson.



Fig. 11. Cabrillo described San Miguel Island as green and verdant, but 50 years of overgrazing have stripped away the vegetation and turned it to a pale sand color.



Fig. No. 12, San Miguel Island. Although unknown thousands of sheep have died on this island in the last 50 years from thirst and starvation, a few still remain to strip away the remnants of grass. The original brush lands vanished years ago. The sheet and gully erosion shown here is typical.



Fig. No. 13. The ranch buildings on San Miguel Island are surrounded by a faded rectangle of sparse greenery that is streaked with bare sand and erosion gullies. Most of the island a few miles from the ranch house is bare as a sand dune. Apparently the fence around the ranch house keeps out some of the sheep and reserves this area as San Miguel's "best" pasture land.



Fig. 14. On Santa Rosa Island water is plentiful and vegetation once was plentiful too, until the sheep destroyed most of it. This is one of the larger and better islands of the group, with great scientific and recreational potentialities which are being destroyed gradually by the private owners.

Santa Rosa Island

Santa Rosa Island is 28 miles from the mainland. It is 15 miles long and 10 miles wide at the widest place, and is visible from the vicinity of Santa Barbara. Very little appears to be known about the area because the private owners have been inhospitable to visiting scientists. Vegetation once was plentiful, but sheep have stripped away most of it and erosion is quite severe. The recreational and scientific potentialities of this island are among the highest of any in the group although at the present rate they will be destroyed in a few more decades.

Santa Cruz Island

Santa Cruz Island is the largest and most beautiful of the group although its beauty has faded sadly under years of heavy grazing. Many of the pine forests no longer exist and from the Coast Guard plane we saw their remnants as blackened prostrate trunks. Most of the Island was almost bare of grass because of the drought and the years of abuse. Several newspapers this year described drought conditions at Santa Cruz Island which forced the sheep owners there to ship their stock to the mainland. One can well imagine that this costly procedure was not undertaken until the drought had reached severe proportions and the beaten vegetation was nearly ready to expire. We frightened a few horses and remaining sheep as we flew by at a low level. In the canyons there is plentiful water and many fine groves of old trees. Undoubtedly, however, as in similar situations on the mainland, the sheep have prevented reproduction of the ancient oaks and deciduous forest trees. Thus as one by one the old trees die there will be no younger generation to replace them. In a few decades then, these canyon forests will vanish from Santa Cruz. There are at least two small landing fields on the Island apparently used by private planes.

This island is without any question whatever of outstanding national importance scenically, scientifically, and recreationally. Private ownership has conferred the privilege of destroying what really belongs, not to one man or one family, but to the nation as a whole.

Anacapa Island

Anacapa Island appears to be recovering nicely from the damage of previous years. Drought conditions in 1943 greatly reduced the floral displays that have made the area famous for years. However, we flew so low that many bright blossoms could be seen. We also saw that the pelicans were nesting apparently undisturbed. From the standpoint of science the Island already has justified its inclusion in the National Park Service system. Young pelicans, banded in 1939 and 1940, have been recovered from many distant localities during the succeeding years and have furnished material for more than one scientific article. No recommendations are offered for this island other than that more members of the National Park Service should visit it during late April and early May when the wildflower display is most beautiful and the air swarms with nesting birds.



Fig. 15. Santa Cruz Island was one of the most beautiful, as well as being the largest of the Channel Islands' group. Monterey pines were plentiful along with oaks and lush grass lands. However, large numbers of sheep and hogs have stripped this island almost as extensively as the other islands.



Fig. 16. From the Coast Guard plane we could see extensive bare slopes on Santa Cruz Islands on which the blackened trunks of hundreds of pine trees lay prostrate as in a small logging operation. Whether the trees died as a result of fire could not be ascertained. Sheep and horses were observed at close range.



Fig. 17, Santa Cruz Island. The larger canyons are well-watered and contain fine groves of trees. Even during the 1948 drought such places were beautifully green and attractive. This view shows one of the ranches where the sheep are raised that plague the land.



Fig. 18. Part of the elongated curving chain of islands that is known collectively as Anacapa Island. These are separated by small gaps. The easternmost island, shown in Fig. 20, is out of sight to the left.



Fig. 19. This forms a partial panorama with the section of Anacapa Island shown in Fig. 18. The westernmost island of the group, which is also the tallest and most picturesque, is on the extreme right.



Fig. 20. Close-up of the Lighthouse Service installations that appear to have been augmented by the Navy. This is on the easternmost island of the Anacapa group. Location of military and Lighthouse Service facilities at this end is fortunate in that it insures that the main portion of the island will remain comparatively free from disturbance. Whether the flat, light-colored area at the upper right is a water catchment basin or a landing strip for small liaison planes was not learned.