

Wimat Island And Contemporary Chumash Indians

John M. Anderson, 1999

This web site was designed to supplement the web pages sponsored by the Channel Islands National Park, offering additional information about the Chumash islanders. The web pages of the federal parks are curiously absent of historical and cultural information about the native peoples of the islands and their territorial claims .¹

Are Contemporary Environmental and University Research Politics Incompatible With a Future Homeland for the Chumash Indians?

This island is located off the coast from Santa Barbara, California. *Wimat* is the island's Chumash name, which has been changed to *Santa Rosa* by the Americans. Title to this island is being negotiated between the federal government and a cattle ranch which has been using *Wimat* as a grazing land. The current negotiations focus on the year 2011 as a transition year for the island, after which the cattle, elk, and deer introduced by the ranch owners will be removed and the island return to its aboriginal state. This webpage presents information on *Wimat* island's past use by American private and governmental interests groups. It asks the reader to consider whether the future of the island after the year 2011 should include Chumash Indian residency.

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- 1 When this webpage was composed in 1999 the absence, of information in government agency public statements about Chumash history islands, was described as curious. After two more decades of working with state and federal agency policies and procedures it is abundantly clear that the neglect of Chumash data was and is systemic. (John Anderson, September 2000).

Wimat History

The Chumash Indians lived on Wimat for more than ten thousand years before being driven from their homes by the Spanish and Mexican colonial governments, who exiled the last of the islanders to nearby mainland missions such as Ventura, Santa Barbara, Purisima, and Santa Ynez. See [1812 Earthquake](#) for the story of the evacuation of most of the last Chumash from Wimat under threat of a tidal wave caused by a major quake under the sea. See [Museum](#) for an explanation of the dispersal of the islanders into mainland missions. "Eventually the Chumash subgroups combined through intermarriage," this webpage reports, "but island Chumash lineages have persisted and may be traced in many family trees of modern descendants of the original people to inhabit the Channel region."

The federal government took over *Wimat* island, along with the rest of California, when it annexed the region in the 1850's. The federal government refused to recognize the Chumash land claims at this time, permitting non-Indian ranchers to keep title and run cattle and sheep on the islands. This policy resulted in severe erosion on Wimat, and drastic reduction of native plant life which was grazed heavily by the introduction of the herds. Meanwhile on the mainland, the Chumash had been reduced to a tiny 99 acre reservation after the federal government allowed government agents to seize the Chumash Santa Barbara and [Tejon](#) reservation lands.

Wimat Becomes A National Park and Marine Sanctuary

The ownership of these Mexican land titles was never successfully challenged by the Chumash into modern times, until 1986 when *Wimat* island was purchased from the last of the cattle companies for thirty million dollars of federal funds.

The stated purpose of the title transfer was to protect the island from further degradation, by adding it to the Channel Island National [Park](#) which already held title to large parts of the other Chumash islands. Unfortunately, it was leased back to the cattle company instead of returning to the Chumash. This leasing agreement is expiring, however, providing the federal government with another opportunity to consider the merits of returning the island to the Chumash. But there are many obstacles in the way, especially over environmental issues. The Chumash maintain good relations with environmental groups but some environmental advocates would still like to see the island remain a national park without permanent native American residents.

Lawsuit By National Parks and Conservation Association

In 1995 the environmental group called the National Parks and Conservation Association (NPCA) filed a notice of intent to sue the National Park Service over continued degradation of the *Wimat* island ecology. The Environmental Defense Center filed on NPCA's behalf, charging that the national park agency had repeatedly violated environmental laws in its management of *Wimat*, the second largest of the five islands administered by the federal government. Of primary concern were the 5,000 cattle and about 3,000 deer and elk (for hunting operations) which foraged on the island. For information on the lawsuit, see [NPCA1](#) and [NPCA2](#)

University of California Research on *Wimat*

A large number of scholars from the various campuses of the University of California are funded each year to conduct research on *Wimat* and the other Chumash islands. Federal, state, and private funds are granted in fields as diverse as anthropology, marine science, and botany. The Marine Science Institute, located at the Santa Barbara campus, handles a significant number of grants for research on the Chumash islands. At this time, I am unaware of any Chumash participation in these grants, nor of any independent grants (or matching funds) being awarded to any individual or Chumash band.

"The University of California and the National Park Service have done an excellent job of facilitating scholarly research on the Chumash islands but have done a miserable job of advocating for the Chumash Indians who are the aboriginal peoples of the islands. My impression from studying various grants which focus on *Wimat* island is that the University and Park Service have a long history of avoiding the subject of aboriginal rights. This is, of course, self-serving and needs to be rectified in the years ahead."

[J. Anderson: September 1998]

Related Chumash Legal Battles For Islands

John Gherini's article called "Santa Cruz Island: Conflict in the Courts" provides background to the long-standing legal battles over ownership of the Chumash islands. It discusses the 1986 Chumash claim filed in the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, and its denial.²

² The Fourth California Islands Symposium, 1994 abstracts. Note that the Gherini family owned a 6,300 acre ranch on nearby Santa Cruz ranch, which has been transferred to the National Park system.

Oil Industry Interests On Wimat

The Chumash (Santa Barbara) Channel oil fields were among the largest on the continent. Many American oil companies drilled these fields, with the profits going to investors and the taxes going to the state and federal governments (not the Chumash). John Hundley wrote "The Oil Story: Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa Islands" which documents the oil industry activities on *Wimat* island. Exploration wells were drilled on the Vail & Vickers *Wimat* property.³ Oil exploration effectively ended on the island after the 1986 acquisition by the Channel Islands National Park.⁴

Wimat Island Sites

The Chumash Indians maintained a large population on Wimat island, prior to the appearance of European ships and the subsequent introduction of diseases. See [Wimat Sites](#) for further information.

This web page presents the views of the author, and does not necessarily represent the views of the Chumash Indians, either individually or as a group

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³ Hundley co-authored this paper with K.B. Hall, S.F. Fine, and M. Daily; Santa Cruz Island Foundation.

⁴ None of the profits from oil extraction in the Chumash Channel, called the Santa Barbara Channel by the state government, went to any Chumash group or individual.