

# California's Commercial Spaceport Rises on Native Land

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The State of California and the aerospace industry have joined forces to create the California Commercial Spaceport (CCS) near Santa Barbara. The spaceport is being built on one hundred coastal acres leased from Vandenberg Air Force Base – on land once the homeland of the ancient Chumash Indian nation.

Vandenberg Air Force Base covers a vast area of coast containing numerous Chumash religious shrines and the remains of the ancient Chumash towns of Xoqto and Saspili. The spaceport is being constructed at Point Conception, which is a Chumash site known as Humqaq (meaning “The Raven Comes”). The Chumash believe that it was at Humqaq that the souls of the dead left the Earth to begin their journey to heaven.

For more than thirty years, military rocket launches and space shuttle missions have rained toxic chemicals and sonic booms over the coastal lands and waters of ancient Chumashia. More distant landmarks, including the sacred Chumash peak Iwihinmu (Pine Mountain) and the Tejon Indian Reservation, where many Chumash once lived, have also been affected by sonic booms from the space shuttle.

Rattlesnake Shelter, an important Chumash religious [sacred?] site near the spaceport that has been studied by many scholars, was not mentioned in the spaceport's first environmental impact report. Seen from a distance, the quartz banding in the rock face reflects the sun with a mysterious light. Rock art at the site, consisting of fine lines cut into areas of red ochre, includes ancient white-on-red images depicting a European ship and anchor.

Prior to the arrival of Europeans (and the cultural genocide of the California Catholic mission system) the Chumash were once of the largest native groups in the western US. Today, 200 descendants of the Tsmala Chumash inhabit the 99-acre Santa Ynez Reservation, the only federally recognized Chumash reservation in the US. The majority of the 3,000 descendants of the Chumash live outside of the reservation and lack both land and federal recognition.

## *A Sixty Trillion Dollar Race to the Moon*

The recent discovery of ice on the moon has accelerated the race to build commercial spaceports. The presence of water means the moon's mineral wealth can be extracted at a much lower cost than previously predicted. Water on the moon also can be converted into low-cost rocket fuel, enabling aerospace corporations to use the moon as a staging ground for commercial exploration of Mars.

Last March, a report by a group of leading US space scientists estimated the minimum value of the ice on the moon at sixty trillion dollars. NASA predicts that water extracted from a football-field-sized plot of lunar rock could sustain six astronauts for ten years.

The Christian Science Monitor followed up by estimating the amount of water on the moon to be enough to "enable a modest amount of colonization for centuries." Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA), chair of the House Subcommittee on Space and Aeronautics, reacted to the news by declaring: "American pioneers didn't bring lumber and food west in their covered wagons; they brought axes and plows and built a life off the land. Now we know that the same will be possible as we move into the solar system, starting with the moon."

Japan is set to launch a mission to probe the moon's surface in 1999, with Russia, China, Europe, and two private US companies set to follow in 2000. Several nations and six US states – New Mexico, Nevada, Florida, Virginia, Alaska and California – are competing to build a new generation of private, for-profit spaceports.

Suddenly, promises of immense profits for industry and increased revenues for governments have stimulated a space race between the US, Russia, China and Australis. The Chumash sacred site – believed to be the spot where souls depart this world for the afterlife – is now slated to become the space industry's commercial ladder to the stars.

## *Dismissing Native Claims*

The well-financed coalition between the aerospace industry, local and state politicians, and big business has pushed ahead with spaceport construction without consulting the Chumash or including them on their planning boards.

Due to lack of media attention, the public has little understanding of the seriousness of increasingly contentious relationships between the aerospace industry and Native Americans. Also under-examined are the actions of economic and political powers allied against the Chumash over the spaceport issue. Events are moving so rapidly that the public may only learn about these power struggles after the fact.

To address native claims, California Commercial Spaceport contracted with Dr. L. Wilcoxon and Dr. B. Haley to research Chumash ethnohistory and the cultural validity of religious shrines in the area near the spaceport. Their article, published in the December, 1998 issue of *Current Anthropology*, also attacked the validity of Chumash religious beliefs about Point Conception and suggested that Chumash traditionalist – i. e. the majority of the state's Chumash – should be left out of formal state negotiation to identify and preserve Chumash religious and archaeological sites.

Haley and Wilcoxon wrote that “Chumash Traditionalist lack the kinds of biological and cultural linkages with the region’s aboriginal past that they claim – few are descendants of the aboriginal inhabitants they consider their ancestors.” The authors argued that the only legitimate Chumash Indians were the 200 “nontraditionalists” who are “descendants of the Catholic Indian communities in San Luis Obispo, Santa Ynez, Santa Barbara, Ventura and Tejon.” The rationale for this favoritism is that a large number of the ancestors of these people appear in the California mission records. How sweet it would be for the aerospace industry to deal only with this small band and ignore nearly 3,000 other Californians who identify themselves as Chumash.

Wilcoxon and Haley’s article seemed less an academically objective discussion than a carefully laid-out argument for an industry challenge of the legal rights of the Chumash majority to participate in site-monitoring. Publications of these charges caused understandable conflict among the many Chumash groups concerned with cultural preservation.

Wilcoxon and Haley acknowledged that “A portion of our research was performed under a contract with California Commercial Spaceports, Inc.,” but they did not reveal the dollar-amount of their grant.

## *The Pipeline Precedent*

The Wilcoxon/Haley article recalls a similar event from the 1980’s. One of California’s biggest environmental battles of the decade involved a plan to build a massive Chevron liquefied natural gas (LNG) pipeline through western Chumash lands. One of the most serious impediments to the development of Chevron’s project was the presence of Chumash monitors at development sites.

In a 1989 article in the National Association for the Practice of Anthropology’s NAPA Bulletin, Chevron’s principle anthropologist, Mary O’Connor argued that all contemporary Chumash groups lacked cultural validity. (O’Connor also acknowledged the trouble and expense Chevron encountered working with Chumash monitors at the construction sites.)

By dismissing all evidence of descent other than Catholic mission records, O’Connor denied the Chumash self-determination of their tribal membership and shifted authority to incomplete and culturally-biased records of hostile Spanish and Mexican colonizers.

The result of these charges was confusion in the public mind over the proper role of the Chumash in monitoring future sites. Weren’t any Chumash rights protected under California laws governing monitoring activities? Why was a representative for the oil industry challenging Chumash cultural identity so aggressively?

There is a certain amount of racism implicit in the legal argument that ethnicity must be dependent on European and Catholic rules of verification. One of the most important powers any cultural group possesses is its ability to define its own membership. If outsiders usurp this function, the group’s self-identity is fundamentally compromised.

European imperialism was not gentle with the conquered peoples of the Americas. All too often Spanish, Mexican and US armies were allied with proselytizing Christian churches. As a consequence, few native people volunteered to reveal the full truth about their religion to hostile priests. The most sacred truths were carefully hidden from the conquerors.

What this means for students of native California religion is that one cannot rely solely upon ethnographic materials when trying to understand the ancient theologies of the region. As a result of

the ongoing repression of religious freedom among defeated populations, ethnographic data captured only a fractured view of the full richness of native thought.

## *Environmental Impacts*

The Western coast of Chumashia is ideal for a commercial spaceport, spaceport promotional literature advises, because it is ideally positioned to inject space vehicles into a broad range of popular orbits. Best of all, no overflights will take place over population areas.

The promotional literature ignores the negative impacts that rocket launches will have on coastal flora and fauna. Instead, investors are assured that they will benefit from reduced environmental permit requirements engineered by pro-industry legislators.

But what effect will the awesome sound of rocket liftoffs have on migrating whales, on the critical ocean flyway that links birds from California and Mexico to summer feeding grounds in the northern US and Canada, and on ocean mammals that rest and breed on nearby beaches and downrange islands?

Chumash traditionalists are concerned about the environmental cost of the spaceport in a region that is vital to the survival of many species, including the whales and seals that frequent the coast. Spaceport operations will increase the impact of sonic booms that can disturb both land and ocean-dwelling creatures.

The Guadalupe fur seal may prove a critical issue during future hearings on the spaceport. This rare species has been reappearing on the islands near the spaceport and is protected under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act.

If the commercial spaceport is fully developed, the Santa Ynez Valley and the Santa Barbara coast could face growth similar to that which turned the San Fernando Valley into a “little Los Angeles.”

Finally, there is the risk to people. The US Air Force is justly proud of a safety record that, over the last 50 years, has seen no civilian population centers hit by wayward rockets. An internal military document obtained by *Florida Today* revealed serious concern among USAF officials that shifting safety responsibilities to commercial interests could pose “potentially catastrophic consequences: for the public. In the heat of a profit-oriented atmosphere, the document suggested a commercial operator might be tempted to try and recover control of an out-of-control rocket, even when such a delay could run the risk of civilian casualties.

## *A Fast-Track to the Stars*

The situation seems daunting for the Chumash and their supporters – environmentalist and no-growth advocates – who are trying to preserve the Chumash coast from further development. Many of the world’s largest and most wealthy corporations... have allied themselves with local, state and federal politicians as well as with top officials at Vandenberg AFB.

A number of aerospace giants such as Lockheed Martin and Boeing (and newly emerging companies such as Kistler Aerospace and Pioneer Rocketplane) saw potential for immense profits if

they could obtain a position of leadership in the California industry. In 1993, the California legislature enacted a law to exempt the commercial space industry from state sales taxes. Supporters argued that the special tax favors would bolster California's competitiveness in aerospace; critics described them as corporate welfare.

Space Systems International (SSI), the company building the spaceport, is owned by ITT Federated Services, a \$9 billion (1996 figures) multinational concern with vast influence in US state and federal governments. ITT's contracts include expansion of oil fields in Oman, Joint-ventures with powerful Saudi Arabian firms, development of radar facilities for the 340<sup>th</sup> Space Command and commercial support for Vandenberg's Ballistic Missile Defense Program (the reincarnation of President Reagan's "Star Wars" program).

One of SSI's major goals has been to align government and private industry to promote a pro-space business climate in California. SSI's website boasts that this effort includes a "public/private partnership [with]... over 20 aerospace and support companies; the US Air Force; and the State of California."

In 1996, California Rep. Tom Bordonaro (R- Paso Robles) authored Assembly Bill 1240, which exempts commercial space launches from "mobile source" air quality regulations. "Development of the commercial space industry depends to a great extent on the existence of low-cost access to space," Bordonaro explained. Without such an exemption, it is unlikely that the spaceport could have operated in a region already impacted by a growing population and emissions from offshore oil platforms. In a press release, Bordonaro acknowledged writing the bill at the request of the Western Commercial Space Center.

In 1997, Bordonaro joined State Sen. Jack O'Connell to author California Assembly Bill 1475, which placed the California Spaceport Authority under the California Space Technology Alliance to "promote changes in federal, state and local statutes and regulations." AB 1475 not only established a mechanism for channeling public funds into the development of space-related commerce, it also ensured the spaceport a unique place in the history of corporate welfare when it declared SSI the only California business exempt from state sales tax.

Governor Pete Wilson signed AB 1475 into law in October 1997. Since then, a new bill, AB 1765, has been introduced to remove sales taxes for all commercial space activities in the state.

## *The Last, Best Hope*

The California Department of Transportation (Cal Trans) may prove to be the next battle ground for political justice in this struggle. Existing laws have created a Spaceport Office within CalTrans charged with the responsibility to work cooperatively with the Western Commercial Space Center "to support rapid development" of California's space programs.

CalTrans is so entrenched in a pro-growth tradition that it likely will remain beyond the ability of the Chumash or their allies to influence. If CalTrans remains in the back pocket of military and civilian developers the next best option for opponents will probably be to approach the California Coastal Commission (CCC). In 1997, Assembly Speaker Cruz Bustamante appointed four new members to the commission. The appointments removed several pro-growth members and gave the CCC an 8-4 environmental majority. Fortunately, the CCC still has a lot to say about the environmental impact of spaceport operations on the fragile California coast.

Perhaps environmental and no-growth interest groups can still persuade the public to carefully examine the wisdom of the spaceport project, but if government and industry are going to build a spaceport, then at least the price of developing the facility should not include cultural genocide. Billions of dollars are at stake, and clearly the Chumash deserve the public's support in this classic battle between corporate America and a relatively impoverished native population.

On June 25, 1968, David Brower wrote a forward to a book called *Almost Ancestors: The First Californians* by Theodora Kroeber and Robert Heizer. He spoke of the extermination of many of the First Californians and pondered the tragedy of someone's being the last person on Earth to speak an ancient native language. "Perhaps we can wonder a moment what it might be like, for example, to be the last man on Earth who could speak French." Brower wrote: "Man has been forgiven often for knowing not what he does. For the kind of error that wiped out this kind of uniqueness, there cannot be much more forgiveness. There isn't enough of it left, any more, to let die or to kill or to poison or to pave over. Too many species are down to the last that speak their language, and organic wholeness will be lessened when they go, on whatever part of this planet they inhabit. What lessens them, diminishes us..."

Web: [http://www.earthisland.org/ejournal/fall98/fe\\_fall98spaceport.html](http://www.earthisland.org/ejournal/fall98/fe_fall98spaceport.html)

Related writings by the author

*California's Commercial Spaceport: At Point Conception<sup>1</sup>*

John M. Anderson;  
Clarifications, and updates :1998

"The purpose of this webpage is to provide background information on an article which I recently published in *Earth Island Journal* (fall 1998). This article features a discussion of ethical questions concerning the California Spaceport being built on the Vandenberg Air Force Base west of Santa Barbara California. *Earth Island Journal* provides international environmental news to a wide readership and includes information on related native American issues.

My primary goal in writing this article was to inform my readers about the growing social and economic impacts of commercial spaceports that are being developed in many states. I used the California Spaceport as one example, to question whether the local Indians were adequately incorporated into planning and the "rewards" (see Haley/Wilcoxon) resulting from such potentially massive economic development projects.

The language of this article is intended for a non-academic readership interested in environmental and native American issues. I especially wanted to avoid the sometimes arcane and often legalistic language of the anthropological and archaeological debates now being fought over Point Conception and Chumash Traditionalism.

Recent Questions from the public:

Is the Commercial Spaceport Located on native land? The use of the phrase 'native land' in the subtitle of this article was not meant in a legal context, but in the broader ethical context of the article which addresses the (long-standing) failure of local, state, and federal governments in California to help the landless Chumash and other native peoples to obtain homelands where they can preserve their culture.

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1 This commentary (page/earthisland) appeared as an Expage listing. It is no longer functioning.

Under contemporary American laws, the spaceport is being built on land that is legally under title by the Vandenberg Air Force Base as described in the opening paragraphs of my article. I am not challenging the Spaceport's legal right to use this land, therefore, but commenting on its moral obligations to ensure that operation of the facility do not negatively impact nearby Chumash sacred sites, especially Point Conception which is so important to many contemporary Chumash people.

Is the Commercial Spaceport Located Right At Point Conception? No, it is not. The commercial spaceport is located in the next drainage north. At issue is the potential negative impact on nearby Chumash sites including those in the greater Point Conception area, which many Traditional contemporary Chumash consider a sacred place. Also at issue are long-term expansion of the Spaceport facilities, possibly into the greater Point Conception area.

Adequate Consultation? In the passages of my article called "dismissing Native Claims" the text states that the California Spaceport coalition pushed ahead with the spaceport construction "without consulting the Chumash or including them on the planning board" New information, which received only after the article was published, indicates that this sentence should have read "without adequately consulting" the Chumash. I want to set the record straight. I was wrong: the Spaceport company did consult with the Santa Ynez Reservation, but I and a number of my non-reservation Chumash contacts were previously unaware of this fact. (November 10, 1998).

### *California's Commercial Spaceport: Update<sup>1</sup>*

John M. Anderson;  
1998

Who Is a Legitimate Chumash? One of the overriding issues in media coverage of the Chumash is the legitimacy and authenticity of various factions such as the reservation, non-reservation, Catholic, Traditionalists, etc.

Legitimacy means to be sanctioned by laws, conforming to or abiding by the law. Clearly, therefore, the Santa Ynez Reservation residents are legitimate Chumash. It is the non-reservation Chumash who are the majority, but they remain without federal recognition and without their own homelands. Many of these people consider themselves Traditionalists, as do a number of the Chumash families on the reservation. Not surprising, then, when Haley and Wilcoxon's article was published in the *Journal of Current Anthropology* (winter, 1997) questioning the influence of modern academics on Chumash Traditionalism, it caused considerable consternation.

Chevron Oil Pipeline Mary O'Connor was the principal investigator for the Chevron oil pipeline, not a gas pipeline as stated in the article. For information on the liquified natural gas issue and the occupation of Point Conception in 1978, see Michael Khus's web commentary called "The Chumash Struggle to Save Humqaaq".

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1 This web commentary (earethisland2) appeared in Expage.com. It is no longer functional.