

WE ARE OCEAN PEOPLE: INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP IN MARINE CONSERVATION
CINDY BOYKO & 'AULANI WILHELM, GUEST EDITORS

The Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary: *An interview with Violet Sage Walker*



Chumash—For more than 40 years, California’s coastal Indigenous People, community members, and elected leaders have advocated for the establishment of a new national marine sanctuary. In 2015, Northern Chumash Tribal Council chair, Chief Fred Collins, officially nominated Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary through the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s public nominations process. After his recent passing, his daughter, Violet Sage Walker, who had been working on the project with him from the beginning, is carrying on his legacy. I recently sat down to talk to her about the history of the Chumash, their deep connection to the ocean, and her personal journey of discovery. —Margaret Cooney

What does the Ocean mean to the Chumash?

The Chumash people are a beautiful, inspiring culture that most people have never heard of. We have lived along the same stretch of California coastline for the last 15,000 to 20,000 years. One of the oldest archaeological sites in North America is on our Channel Islands, where the “Arlington Springs Woman” was found, and dated to be around 13,000 years old, making her one of the oldest dated human remains in North America. And there are more than a

thousand recorded archaeological sites both onshore and offshore that tell our stories.

The Chumash are first and foremost a maritime people. Before colonization, you would have seen a thousand tomols [plank-built boats] along the

▲ Friends and family carry the tomol during Northern Chumash Tribal Council Chair Fred Collins’ memorial in November 2021. ROBERT SCHWEMMER



▲ Dolphins off the Channel Islands. VIOLET SAGE WALKER

coastline, because most people lived and traded by the ocean. It was a thriving, advanced, complex society built around art, trade, crafts, and community.

But our way of life was mostly taken from us by the Spanish California mission system in the 1700s, then again by the newly designated state of California in the mid 1800s and onward.

It wasn't until the social movements of the late '60s and '70s that inspired religious freedom, that we were able to start talking about taking back our lands and ceremonies, and regaining control of our own stories.

For example, in 1976 the Brotherhood of the Tomol came together to build the first traditional canoe, the Helek (Hawk), in over 150 years, which helped us to rediscover the old seafaring ways and reclaim our heritage as stewards over these waters. My Tribe's nomination for the designation of the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary seven years ago was an additional opportunity to reclaim our identity as an ocean-going people and caretakers of our place.

What does traditional Chumash culture look like?

Before colonization our people were thriving, because the ocean and land were so plentiful. The offshore area has a prime, deepwater upwelling that provided everything that the Chumash, as well as our brothers Grizzly, Hawk, Eagle, and Swordfish, and our sister Condor, needed to thrive. We co-existed and lived in harmony with all the animals. We were not predator and prey with them, they were like our brothers and sisters and relatives.

Amid such bounty we had the time to build culture and artistry. We had the most advanced fishing culture. Some sites revealed more than 40 different types of fish species in our diets and skilled wood, bone, stone, and basketry crafts. Our craftspeople, such as the Brotherhood of the Tomol, were the best of the day, and our artists developed jewelry and basket-weaving that would rival jewelry-making and basketry anywhere.

Our medicine, healing, and spiritual community was similarly advanced. We had the time to share, experiment, and grow. There has always been a huge educational and apprenticeship aspect to advanced societies, and the Chumash were no exception.

But because of the plentiful California coastal bounty, and the advanced peoples living there, the area became attractive to invaders.

How did colonization shape Chumash culture?

Russian fur traders were the first to come in, and they almost completely wiped the Southern sea otter from existence. The Southern sea otters were what helped keep the kelp forests healthy and fishing good, which is what provided the Chumash with all of our plentiful resources.

When the sea otter population was almost wiped out, other food security declined too. The larger



mammals, bison, deer, elk, bear, and wolves were next. With them went our hunting and gathering society. We changed to survive. Many of our people went to work in the missions and ranches that came next. Our people used their skills to fabricate horse and ranch equipment like saddles, bridles, ropes, and leather goods, and we trained horses. The Chumash were the original California Vaquero, a specialized, highly-skilled style of ranch horsemanship that is a blending of Spanish-style riding and the training of war horses and cattle horses. Vaqueros worked

in ranches and for the missions, traveling, trading, farming, and raising livestock.

What changes have you seen in the Central California coastline in the absence of traditional Chumash culture and stewardship?

I used to drink water and eat fish out of the creek. Then our local waterways became too polluted. My dad told stories about how when he was a kid, he would walk across the creek on the backs of the steelhead. Now the coho salmon don't run, and the steelhead barely runs. Extinctions are happening in the span of

◀ Violet Sage Walker is both a fifth-generation horsewoman and a beekeeper/entrepreneur. **LEFT** Violet with her horse Salah at Varian Arabians. **BELOW** A selection of products from her company, Native Herbs & Honey.



VIOLET SAGE WALKER



ELENA RAMOS-PERFELI



EVIE TUBBS SWEENEY



just one or two generations. That is so rapid that most people do not see the devastating effects of losing a species until most of them are gone.

One example is the California condor. We need condors, they keep our environment clean. Animal carcasses can carry and spread disease, and by consuming these carcasses, condors—who are resistant to disease and infection—help prevent disease outbreaks. Plants and insects also benefit from the release of nutrients that results from this process.

The Western way of thinking is that this clean-up function is less important, but the Chumash have always known otherwise. Condor and Eagle are central in our creation stories. Eagle represents male energy of hunting, warfare, and power, while Condor embodies female energy of connection to the earth, soil, water, and plants, and of regeneration. Condor is the ultimate caretaker of the earth.

► Chumash tribal members performing traditional songs and dances at Fred Collins' memorial. [ROBERT SCHWEMMER](#)
▼ Friends and family participate in the traditional ceremony at Fred Collins' memorial. [ROBERT SCHWEMMER](#)



But their population nearly went extinct in my lifetime. Due to a slew of human-related factors—lead poisoning, habitat destruction, pollution, and hunting—by 1982, only 22 condors were left in the wild and only 2 were left in captivity. In 1987 scientists captured the last remaining wild condor, and put the fate of the species into a captive breeding program.

Twenty-five years later, this massive effort by scientists, Tribes, conservationists, governments, and local communities has brought the California condor back from the brink of extinction. Due to the successful captive breeding and reintroduction program, the world’s population of California condors now numbers around 500 individuals, with two-thirds of those birds back out in the wild.

How are these endangered species connected to Chumash culture?

Chumash culture is not complete and whole without these species; our spirits are connected. Our culture was based on mimicking the animals we lived with. They were our teachers, and we learned how to survive and thrive from them. We learned hunting from Eagle and Falcon, fishing from Pelican and Swordfish, and took our strength, healing, and medicine powers from Grizzly.

We have a spiritual practice of praying to these animals and giving them thanks for their guidance. One of my Elders, Pilulaw Khus, told me of a time during the 1969 Unocal oil spill in Santa Barbara where she went down to the beach to take care of the animals’ spirits; she prayed for their spiritual well-being while the rescuers were cleaning oil off

▼ Violet with her father, Fred Collins, and Elder Mary Trejo picking sage in Santa Barbara. VIOLET SAGE WALKER



them. She became a leader in the environmental movements like Earth Day, Point Sal occupation, Ward Valley, and many others that arose from that tragedy.

What is your connection with your Elders?

When I was twelve, the Elder I mentioned above, Pilulaw (Chumash word for the western red sunset) Khus (grizzly bear), sought out my dad. She needed help protecting the coastline and went to my dad, because he was self-taught in law, computers, and tech. She wanted someone who had experience to negotiate on her behalf. My dad brought me along for the ride.

Pilulaw taught us who we were. She showed us that there have always been Chumash people on the frontlines of conservation. We also met with Chief Mark Vigil, who taught us about Chumash cultural resources. We were guided by Elder Mary Trejo, my grandmother Consuelo Soto, and her sister.

Mary was born in 1917 and was around when John P. Harrington came in and did the wax cylinder recording of the last speaker of the Chumash languages, Rosario Cooper in Lopez Canyon. My grandmother and Mary witnessed this and told first-hand accounts of the event to my father and me. Their first-hand accounts helped lead to the rebuilding of our language, which was based on those wax recordings.

Once I got my driver’s license I basically became Pilulaw’s chauffeur, taking her to ceremonies and meetings. She would ask me to take her to Whales Cave and sing the Whale Song, or teach me how the Chumash would gather plants, food, and medicine. She taught me how to engage and lead others.

Your father, Chief Fred Collins, recently passed into spirit. Can you talk about his vision for the future of the Chumash and what he called “thrivability”?

My dad would always say to people, “We can do better.” I don’t know where that came from, but it’s something I think about every day. Am I doing enough? Can we all do something better?

My dad was a big thinker and had huge dreams. He was really committed to our culture and wanted to see more opportunities for our people. He invented a self-contained organic vertical farming system that





▲ Violet and other advocates of the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary hiking at Whales Cave, Avila Beach, California. ERIN EASTWOOD

could be used for disaster zones or city farms. He hiked at Montana De Oro every day, and that partly inspired his vision for establishing the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary. He said before his passing that the Sanctuary would be the greatest accomplishment of his life, pointing out that “Grandmother Ocean has been providing life to the Chumash Peoples for over ten thousand years, now is the time for all communities to work together and assist her in rebuilding her Vibrant Thrivability for all future generations.”

He always said that it is not enough for us to merely survive, but that if we are good stewards of our lands and waters, we can all thrive.

How has a connection to the ocean and nature influenced you throughout your life?

I grew up at the beach, so my compass is set by where the ocean is, but I was born into a place that no longer had grizzly bears; that was seeing the last of the California condors and peregrine falcons; and

that still had a struggling population of critically endangered southern sea otters. I grew up with a conservation lens, thanks both to my parents, and because I lived where all the various endangered species were, I felt a connection to them even before I knew I was Chumash.

At the heart of the matter is that the Chumash have lived on our land for millennia, but we have not always had the rights, or sovereignty, or access to that land or our cultural waters. We are by definition the local experts and guardians of this area, but we have been sidelined.

For example, I have been diving since I was twelve and have seen first-hand the destruction caused by ocean acidification in Chumash heritage waters. Abalone has been a part of Chumash culture for millennia, and ocean acidification interferes with the abalones’ ability to form hard shells as they grow, leaving the abalones more susceptible to disease and to predation.





▲ Violet began scuba diving at age 12 and became a dive master at 18; she continues to dive today, most recently in Palau. VIOLET SAGE WALKER (LOWER RIGHT: DAN HUBBELL)

The changes happening in the ocean due to a rapidly warming planet are literally eating away at our land, water, and culture. The Chumash must be allowed to protect that.

What do you see as the next steps in your journey?

At the northern edge of the proposed Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary sits Morro Rock. It is a sacred place for us, one of our high spiritual locations. Indigenous Peoples from all over the world would come and pray with us there. We were its hosts and guardians.

In 1944, the Army Corps of Engineers came to Morro Bay and blew up the rock to make the San Luis and Morro Bay breakwater. Mary, Consuelo, and Pilulaw made my dad promise to protect what was left of Lisamu' (Morro Rock). He advocated for stronger protections, including a ban on all hiking of what was

left of the rock and a ban on any disruption of the peregrine falcons or migratory birds that nest there.

About five years ago, the Corps decided to rebuild the breakwater in Port San Luis, Avila, and talked to my dad about what to do with the rocks from Lisamu'. He asked them to return Morro Rock—and *just* Morro Rock—to the original site, which they originally scoffed at. Then, a few days before my father's memorial, I got a call from the Army Corps asking if I was still interested in the breakwater rocks. I immediately said yes, and we came to a compromise—the Corps will be returning the breakwater rocks from Port San Luis back to Morro Bay and making a seamount on the western side of the rock.

Our culture has been chipped away at for centuries, until there was almost nothing left. Reuniting the rock would be a way of healing the community. It's



symbolic of what happened to our culture. We were literally blown up, and we've been working to reunite piece-by-piece. It's been a struggle to get to where we are, but we are still standing and still beautiful people, just like Lisamu'.

Since that call, I've been feeling the energy of Condor, of connection to the earth, and to its regeneration. If all goes well, this Summer we will all come together for a ceremony to celebrate what I proposed to the Army Corps we call "Operation Reunite the Rock."

So many pieces are now in motion: the rebuilding of Morro Rock and the designation of the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary are at the forefront, but we're also working with the state of California on the decommissioning of Diablo Canyon and restoration of the PG&E nuclear power plant property, as well as the removal of vehicles from the Oceano Dunes. All of these moving pieces will work towards the preservation and regeneration of our Tribe's spiritual and cultural heritage.

It is of the utmost importance that we share our stories and the traditions passed down to us from our



▲ The interviewer, Margaret Cooney, and Violet. VIOLET SAGE WALKER

Elders, so that everyone can know that we are still vibrant, beautiful people today, whose knowledge of place is indispensable.

In our hearts, my people hold deep reverence for Grandmother Ocean, Mother Earth, and all living things. As a witness, and now leader, to these welcome changes, I am hopeful for the continued restoration and the sharing of our traditional way of life.





Citation for this article

Cooney, Margaret, and Violet Sage Walker. 2022. The Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary: An interview with Violet Sage Walker. *Parks Stewardship Forum* 38(2): 317–324.

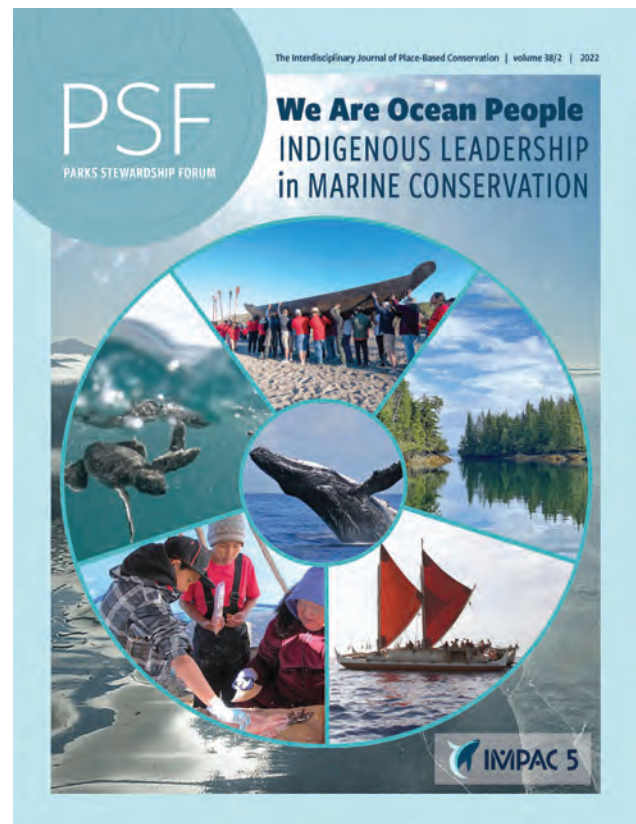
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The journal continues *The George Wright Forum*, published 1981–2018 by the George Wright Society.

PSF is designed by Laurie Frasier • lauriefrasier.com



On the cover of this issue

CIRCLE DESIGN, clockwise from top:

- Northern Chumash ceremony | [ROBERT SCHWEMMER](#)
- Haida Gwaii | [CINDY BOYKO](#)
- The Polynesian Voyaging Society's voyaging canoe Hōkūle'a | [NOAA](#)
- Elder teaching youths, northern Alaska | [US FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE](#)
- Baby Honu (sea turtles), Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument | [NOAA](#)
- Center: Humpback whale, Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument | [NOAA](#)

Background: Pacific Rim National Park Reserve | [PARKS CANADA](#)