

Clean Energy, Cherished Waters and a Sacred California Rock Caught in the Middle

The proposed Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary could create a new model for Native collaborative management of public lands. But the sanctuary faces headwinds with a last-minute boundary change to accommodate a wind farm.



Morro Rock in Morro Bay, Calif. The proposed Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary, a yearslong effort spearheaded by the Northern Chumash tribe, would protect 7,573-square-miles of water and coastline in Central California. Credit...Nic Coury for The New York Times

By [Lauren Sloss](#), Published Oct. 24, 2023 Updated Oct. 25, 2023

My paddle slips gently through calm ocean water as the kayak glides toward the mouth of Morro Bay Harbor. I approach a sandbar covered in resting cormorants, as sea otters float in nearby kelp, inky-eyed pups nestled on their mothers' chests. On this windless morning, the marine layer paints the world in a gentle watercolor wash. In front of me, Morro Rock rises dramatically from the landscape.

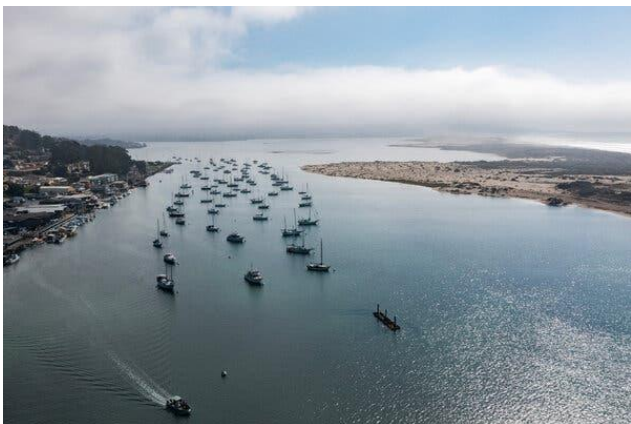
I'm on a paddle around the fish-hook-shaped Morro Bay, where sailboats bob between a working fishing port and an 800-acre wetland, near the small seaside city with the same name on California's Central Coast. But I'm mostly here to learn more about the proposed [Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary](#), a yearslong effort spearheaded by

the [Northern Chumash](#), a tribe that has inhabited this coastline for thousands of years.

The 7,573-square-mile sanctuary would include 156 miles of coastline between the towns of Cambria and Gaviota and link the [Greater Farallones](#) and [Monterey Bay](#) National Marine Sanctuaries to the north and the [Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary](#) to the south, creating a chain of conservation of more than 20,000 square miles. The new designation would limit offshore oil drilling, acoustic underwater testing and other activities in the area, while providing funding for research and protection to numerous Chumash sacred sites, both on and offshore.



Kayaking in Morro Bay. The Central Coast, a destination for surfing, kayaking, fishing, diving, sailing and whale watching, is where the waters of Northern and Southern California converge. Credit...Nic Coury for The New York Times



Around 15 million visitors come to the area annually, according to the tourism boards of San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties. Credit...Nic Coury for The New York Times

It would also be the first tribally led effort of its kind in the United States, with the potential to create a new model for Native American collaborative management on public lands and waters, and the possibility of a different kind of tourism, one that is centered on and enhanced by Native history, culture and knowledge.

This proposal comes after extensive community outreach and environmental reviews, as well as coordination with the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#), which oversees sanctuary management and operations, including hiring staff, enforcing regulations and controlling the budget, among other responsibilities. Now, after years of work, the sanctuary is nearing [the final stages of the designation process](#).

But NOAA has thrown a late wrench in the plans. In an effort to allow for the development of an [offshore wind energy project](#), NOAA is now suggesting shifting the sanctuary's borders to remove a section of the coastline that includes Morro Bay and Morro Rock — or Lisamu', a site sacred to the Chumash that was always meant by the tribe to be the hub of the sanctuary.

As I turned my kayak back toward shore, I feel the power of this place, of the towering, volcanic Morro Rock and the water teeming with life all around it. What does the future hold for the sanctuary, and Morro Bay's place within it?

A hot spot of biodiversity

The 350-plus-mile Central Coast is already a beloved destination, with its golden, hilly landscape giving way to a rugged coastline dotted with beach towns. There is quaint Cambria and tony Santa Barbara, with the low-key, throwback charm of Morro Bay in between.

And then there is the ocean: A destination for surfing, kayaking, fishing, diving, sailing and whale watching, the Central Coast is where the waters of Northern and Southern California converge. Point Conception, near Gaviota, is a striking headland recognized as a hot spot for biodiversity. (The Chumash believe the point,

which they call the Western Gate, is where souls pass on to the spirit world after death.)

“It’s one of the richest marine ecosystems in the world,” said Zachary Plopper, the senior environmental director of the [Surfrider Foundation](#), a nonprofit focused on ocean and beach protection. “It’s a critical migratory corridor for gray whales.”

The area also draws around 15 million humans annually, according to the San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara tourism boards. In the last decade, NOAA has placed more of an emphasis on recreation possibilities and developing a “blue economy” around its marine sanctuaries.



The Central Coast is “one of the richest marine ecosystems in the world,” said Zachary Plopper, senior environmental director of the nonprofit Surfrider Foundation. Credit...Nic Coury for The New York Times



Designating the area as a marine sanctuary would limit offshore oil drilling and other activities in the area, while providing funding for research and protection to numerous Chumash sacred sites, both

on and offshore. Credit...Nic Coury for The New York Times

“If you think about a national park or national forest, there are opportunities for how this sanctuary can help encourage and facilitate sustainable tourism,” said Paul Michel, regional policy coordinator for NOAA.

Indeed, a [2014 study](#) prepared for the Sierra Club covering the possible economic impacts of this proposed sanctuary suggested \$23 million and 600 new jobs could be generated.

“National marine sanctuaries [are places of special ecological, archaeological or historical importance](#),” said Joel Johnson, chief executive of the [National Marine Sanctuary Foundation](#). “The protections that are afforded to these areas are diverse, and are really driven by an intersection between the interests of the local community as well as the federal government.”

The Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary’s proposal was submitted to NOAA in 2015, though the area has been on conservationists’ radar since the passage of the [National Marine Sanctuaries Act](#) in 1972, which has since led to the creation of 15 [national marine sanctuaries](#) and two national marine monuments.

“Morro Bay is at the center of our commerce and our community,” said Violet Sage Walker, a Northern Chumash Tribal Council chairwoman, and spokeswoman for the sanctuary.

“This is always where we envisioned having places for outreach and education, and potentially an aquarium,” she said. “And this is exactly where they want to lay cable for offshore wind.”



The proposed wind farm is unprecedented in its size and scope, and its environmental impact unknown, making for an increasingly common conflict between clean energy and conservation. Credit...Nic Coury for The New York Times



The Northern Chumash has inhabited this coastline for thousands of years, and Morro Rock, or Lisamu', is a site sacred to the tribe. Credit...Nic Coury for The New York Times

The area for the wind farm, [leased from the federal Bureau of Ocean Energy Management](#) last December, covers 376 square miles 20 to 40 miles offshore from Morro Bay. Floating turbines — of which there may be up to 200 — would be anchored to the sea floor, in water more than 3,000 feet deep, [with the potential to power millions of homes](#). As the wind proposal is unprecedented in its size and scope, its environmental impact is unknown, making for an increasingly [common conflict](#) between [clean energy](#) and [conservation](#).

“If we do not wean ourselves off fossil fuels, the impacts will be catastrophic,” said Benjamin

Ruttenberg, a professor who specializes in conservation and management of marine systems at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo.

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“There are ways for us to do this responsibly and find ways to minimize or mitigate the environmental impacts. We need a ‘D, all of the above’ approach,” he said, one that should include both offshore wind and conservation.

Development and marine sanctuaries are not necessarily incompatible; like national forests and recreation areas, sanctuaries are meant to be multipurpose. (There are no plans to limit fishing, commercial or recreational, for example.) [Two submarine fiber optic cables](#) were installed in the [Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary](#) in Washington in the late 1990s, but according to Mr. Michel, the current scope of this California wind project will likely be too extensive for it to exist within the original sanctuary footprint — B.O.E.M. anticipates that underwater cables and substations needed by the project would pass through the waters off Morro Bay. (Regardless of the sanctuary’s final boundaries, the agency will conduct its own environmental review before the project goes forward.)

“The hope was that the two goals would be compatible, but that might be too much industrial development to coexist within a national marine sanctuary,” Mr. Michel said.

[NOAA’s preferred boundary](#) now excludes the coast from Morro Bay to Cambria. For Ms. Walker, a giant industrial undertaking is not a sufficient explanation to cut out a place that, for the Northern Chumash, has always been at the heart of the plan because of its cultural, economic and ecological significance.

“Wind energy needs to be compatible with conservation,” she said, noting that a scaled-back version of the project could potentially exist alongside the sanctuary, but that the exclusion of Morro Bay “brings up a lot of concern.”

“Are they serious about collaborative management?” she said. Are they really going to listen to us?”

All the same ocean

Last month, on a warm gray afternoon out by Morro Rock, the sound of a traditional Chumash welcome song was punctuated by the crash of waves against a nearby breakwater. This was Rally at the Rock, a call to action from the Northern Chumash tribe and other supporters to raise awareness of the importance of Morro Bay to the sanctuary, and to spur supporters to [submit public comments to NOAA](#) before the Oct. 25 deadline. Representatives from the local government came, along with members of the Sierra Club and Greenpeace.

One participant, Solomon Kaho’ohalahala, brought his experience from Hawaii as a co-founder of the [Maui Nui Makai Network](#), a conservation group on four Hawaiian islands. It is the first community-based marine conservation group in Maui, and works to preserve and restore ocean ecosystems by incorporating Native knowledge and values. Despite recently losing his Lahaina home in the devastating Maui fires, Mr. Kaho’ohalahala felt that it was essential to lend support to the Chumash.



Solomon Kaho’ohalahala, second from left, of

Hawaii, speaks to attendees at the Rally at the Rock, an event held by the Northern Chumash tribe and other supporters to raise awareness of the importance of Morro Bay to the sanctuary. Credit...Karla Gachet



Northern Chumash Tribal Council Chairwoman Violet Sage Walker, third from left, speaks at the Rally at the Rock. Credit...Mario Tama/Getty Images

“We all live in the same ocean. Those resources are fluid; to think that we can draw a line through it and protect just one part is not true,” he said.

In recent years, the [Biden administration has committed](#) to advancing co-stewardship of public lands with Native tribes. A [2022 report](#) from the Interior Department highlighted hundreds of examples of co-stewardship and co-management, while the leaders of the agency and the National Park Service are Native Americans. Deb Haaland, the interior secretary, is a member of the Pueblo of Laguna tribe, and Charles Sams III, the N.P.S. director, is a member of the Cayuse and Walla Walla tribes.

Ideally for the Northern Chumash, the tribe would be major decision makers regarding the sanctuary, acting as environmental and cultural stewards to highlight their traditional ecological knowledge.

At a recent session hosted by NOAA, Mr. Michel shared [possibilities for collaborative management](#), including a 15-seat advisory council with one or more Indigenous members and an Indigenous Cultures Advisory Panel, all working in concert with NOAA.

But there is a difference between being consulted and given actual decision-making power. This discrepancy is particularly heightened when you consider that these federally owned lands were created [by the displacement of Indigenous people to begin with](#), not to mention the inherent concern that progress may be rolled back under a [less sympathetic executive branch](#).

In California and elsewhere, tribes are not single-minded, of course; not all Indigenous people, or even all Chumash people, support the sanctuary proposal. Members of the Salinan tribe, who have lived similar parts of the Central Coast — including Morro Bay — as the Northern Chumash, have [raised objections](#) to the sanctuary; the name, in particular, is a sore spot. This has also been cited by NOAA as a reason to exclude area from the proposal.

Robert Piatti, a council member for the [Salinan Tribe of Monterey and San Luis Obispo Counties](#), thinks that the importance of the sanctuary outweighs these objections.

“Our tribal council has not come to a consensus, but personally, I am in favor of the sanctuary being established and running the entire length,” he said. “I’ve realized that it’s needed, even if I’d like to see something a little different.”



NOAA’s preferred boundary for the sanctuary now excludes the coast from Morro Bay to Cambria. For Ms. Walker, the wind-farm proposal is not a sufficient explanation to cut out a place that, for the Northern Chumash, has always been at the heart of the plan because of its cultural, economic and ecological

significance. Credit...Nic Coury for The New York Times



Violet Sage Walker in Pismo Beach, Calif., Ideally for the Northern Chumash, the tribe would be major decision makers regarding the sanctuary, acting as environmental and cultural stewards to highlight their traditional ecological knowledge. Credit...Nic Coury for The New York Times

Under the rainbow bridge

On another trip to the Central Coast, I spent a week sailing in the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary, just miles from the proposed sanctuary, and was struck by how quickly I snapped into the rhythms of sea life. My skin instantly took on a familiar layer of salt. We lived by the weather, highly attuned to the wind and waves, snorkeling among towers of kelp, the water gleaming with fish of all shapes and sizes. For me, time spent in concert with nature has always been a balm. In Morro Bay, I saw how it could also be a call to action.

Travel, while often fraught in discussions of climate change, can be, at its best, a way to stoke love for our planet. This marine sanctuary offers the potential for the knowledge of the Chumash people to lead to an even deeper love and connection to those who visit. Picture a whale-watching trip or a kayak tour that included Chumash ecological know-how and myths, or a visitors’ center that detailed sacred sites and origin stories.

“We believe that we all came from the Channel Islands, and that we crossed a rainbow bridge that Hutash, the Earth Mother, created to the

mainland,” said Ms. Walker. “Hutash told the people not to look down, because we’d fall, but of course, they did. And to save them from drowning, she turned them into ‘alolk’oy, or dolphins.”

For now, Ms. Walker and her team will do all they can to encourage people to write in support of the inclusion of Morro Bay until the comment period ends. Then, NOAA will finalize the sanctuary proposal — including the name, management plan and boundaries — before

sending it to Congress for review and official designation.

The rainbow bridge is not my story; these dolphins are not my ancestors. But stories like this connect us, even if we don’t lay claim to them. I thought of my own voyage sailing through these turquoise waters, dolphins dancing along our bow. It makes me feel an even deeper connection to this area, particularly in a moment like this when the future remains unknown.

Here’s something I do know: I’ll never see a dolphin in this ocean the same way again.

A correction was made on Oct. 25, 2023: An earlier version of this article referred imprecisely to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s oversight of the proposed Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary. While the agency aims to have an approach of collaborative management with Indigenous communities, it does not plan to co-manage the site with them. The error was repeated in the web summary.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. [Learn more](#)

A version of this article appears in print on Nov. 4, 2023, Section C, Page 10 of the New York edition with the headline: When a Marine Sanctuary’s Rival Is a Wind Farm. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today’s Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)