



San Nicolas Island



Alone on a windswept island-the thunder of enormous elephant seals and the crashing of surf filling the air. Imagine white sand beaches without footprints and tidepools brimming with life. Imagine you were on such an island, alone, for eighteen years.

Island of Isolation

Located 65 miles off the southern California coast, San Nicolas is one of eight Channel Islands. The island contains over 20 square miles of gently rolling terrain accented with steep sea cliffs. These steep cliffs are perfect nesting habitat for seabirds such as cormorants and western gulls. Atop the island the tiny island fox reigns as the largest land mammal. The isolated beaches provide resting places for three species of pinnipeds (seals and sea lions)- northern

elephant seals, harbor seals, and California sea lions. Dense undersea kelp forests surround the island providing food and shelter for many species of fish, invertebrates, and, once again, for sea otters. Pristine tidepools ring the island's rocky shores where crabs, abalone, sea urchins, and sea snails have adapted to their ever-changing homes. San Nicolas Island is typical of the islands in the Channel Islands archipelago-but it is also unique.



A Military Presence

Since 1933 San Nicolas Island has been under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Navy. Approximately 400 people work and staff the island. San Nicolas is part of the Pacific Missile Test Center's Sea Test Range. Navy personnel work on projects such as missile tracking and weapon system testing. A 10,000-foot runway accommodates supersonic target aircrafts and planes from the mainland during operations. Facilities for island personnel include a bowling alley, cafeteria, and hobby shop. Because of the military operations, visitation by the general public is prohibited. The natural resources of San Nicolas Island are

managed by a joint agreement between the Department of the Navy, the Department of the Interior, and California's Department of Fish and Game. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is currently working on a sea otter recovery program on the island. Once abundant around all the Channel Islands, sea otters were hunted to the brink of extinction for their valuable pelts. Biologists working on the sea otter project relocate animals from the Monterey Bay population in hope that a colony of otters will be established once again in southern California.

The Lone Woman

The Nicoleno were the group of Tongva peoples who lived on San Nicolas island for thousands of years, (Note: the Tongva have been sometimes referred to as Gabrielino. However, Gabrielino more specifically refers to Tongva peoples living near the San Gabriel Mission.) These people maintained a thriving culture, trading with the Chumash on the northern Channel islands and with the Nicoleno people on the mainland. In the mid and late 1700s, Russian and Aleut sea otter hunters began frequenting the waters around San Nicolas, and the island people began to feel the brunt of intrusion by the outside world. Nicoleno men were killed and women were kidnapped. The Spanish padres who were building the California missions decided to remove the Nicoleno from San Nicolas Island for their safety.

The story of the lone woman begins as the San Nicolas islanders were evacuated. According to legend, the Mexican schooner "Peor es Nada" sailed to San Nicolas to bring the islanders to the mainland. As the ship was loading passengers, a woman realized that her child was not on board. She swam back to the island and as she did a storm came up and prevented the ship from recovering her. When the woman located her child, the child had died. The schooner sailed to the mainland and promptly sank. The woman was alone on San Nicolas Island.

Eighteen years later, Captain George Nidever was on a sea otter hunting trip and found the woman. She was a gracious hostess to the men of Nidever's party and cooked food for them. They returned to the city of Santa Barbara, and the woman lived with Captain Nidever's family for seven weeks before she died. She is buried at the Santa Barbara Mission, where she was baptized "Juana Maria." Many versions of this story have been told, but the most famous is "*Island of the Blue Dolphins*" by Scott O'Dell.

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