

A CONDOR'S VIEW OF ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE SIERRA SAN PEDRO MÁRTIR REGION

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In June 1579 a small sailing vessel made its way cautiously along the California coast. Francis Drake, destined to become one of the world's legendary sea captains, was looking for a place to careen his leaky vessel — the *Golden Hind*. He had come halfway around the world, and was to complete his voyage by sailing across the Pacific and to England, but he desperately needed a place to careen his ship and make repairs.

As he approached the shore of this land never before seen by European eyes (assuming it was northern California), Drake's crew was surprised to see several canoes venturing out from shore. Descriptions of this event are sketchy, but it seems clear that a man in one canoe made a statement, perhaps delivered a blessing, and then threw a black-feathered bundle onto the deck of Drake's ship (Kelleher 1997:324). From its description, the feathers were probably from the California condor. Drake's reaction to this event is not recorded except that it's likely the Englishmen felt they were being worshiped as gods. In fact, they may have been perceived as ghosts, coming from the land of the dead. The first gift from native Californians to people from another world was probably the feathers of a California condor, and a sign of mourning ritual.

The condor has been reintroduced to Baja California in a binational effort to restore its numbers. The center of this relocation is the Sierra San Pedro Mártir, the highest mountains on the peninsula. From this setting, the birds have begun to venture out over a vast landscape. This paper summarizes archaeological observations made over the last decade while evaluating condor habitat and a proposed biosphere reserve in the montane region of the northern peninsula — a condor's view of the human history, as it were.

THE CALIFORNIA CONDOR

Who amongst us has not dreamed of soaring effortlessly over the landscape, seeing everything in the daily lives of lowly earthbound pedestrians? With scarcely a wing flap, condors transcend the deserts to the seacoast, cresting the highest peaks and spanning the most foreboding terrain. Such is the perspective of the California condor and perhaps the key to its special place in many native cultures across the Californias.

The California condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*) is North America's largest bird. With a wingspan of nearly 3 m and a weight of 9-10 kg, it commands the skies. The genus, *Gymnogyps*, means "naked vulture," referring to the bird's bare head and neck. The name "condor" is derived from the Quechua *cuntur*, a name for the Andean Condor of South America (Snyder and Rea 1998:32). Adult California condors have a yellow-orange head, black plumage set with brown on the back, and a white triangle patch under each wing (Figure 1). A whitish wing bar is also found on the upper surface of the wing. As juveniles, they have black heads and a light neck ring.

Figure 1: The California condor (Gymnogyps californianus) is the largest bird in North America. It held a special place in the cultures of native peoples in Alta and Baja California. Photo courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.



Figure 2: The realm of the condor in the Sierra San Pedro Martir, Baja California. Condors range over the eastern escarpment of the peninsula's highest peaks and gaze down on the imprint of human history.



Condors are carrion eaters. They lack the strong talons and beaks of hawks and eagles, and depend on finding carcasses for food. They have never been known to attack a living animal. They will commonly gorge themselves when feeding on a carcass and may go days without eating. Their keen eyesight helps them locate food. They sometimes travel up to 225 km per day in search of a meal. They are also keen observers of other scavengers like turkey vultures, golden eagles, and common ravens.

In Pleistocene times, California condors were found across much of North America. In a fossil context, the remains of condors are absent after about 11,000 years ago. This corresponds to the decline in large Pleistocene fauna on which they presumably fed. In historic times, the birds ranged from British Columbia to Baja California Sur, but by 1940, they were seen only in southern California. By 1977, approximately 45 birds were known to exist in the wild, and by 1985 only nine birds remained. On April 19, 1987 the last free-flying California condor was captured from the wild and placed in captivity. At that time, only 27 of the species remained alive, all in zoos. Successful captive breeding programs have increased the number so that reintroductions to three different sites in southern California and the Grand Canyon have been started. The world's population has been increased to approximately 240 birds (Foster 2003).

CONDOR REINTRODUCTION TO BAJA CALIFORNIA

In October 2002, six pioneer condors raised at the Los Angeles Zoo were flown to Baja California to begin the process of reintroduction. There are presently eight condors living in a "condominium" located in the Sierra San Pedro Mártir National Park and gradually being habituated to wild living in the forests and canyons of Baja California (Figure 2). This marks the first time since 1930 that condors have been seen on the peninsula. The birds are tracked by a GPS device as they soar around over the landscape at speeds up to 110 kph. Food is provided for them as they develop their foraging skills. All the while, they look down on human history.

CONDOR STUDIES AND ARCHAEOLOGY

I have been working as part of the habitat evaluation team in the Sierra San Pedro Mártir and adjacent canyons areas. This has been very interesting, as it is part of a conservation effort to establish a Biosphere Reserve in the mountains and adjacent palm canyons. From a cultural standpoint, there are many reasons this area calls for archaeological attention.

First, it is the homeland of one of the few surviving indigenous peoples of the peninsula, the Kiliwa. Recent studies of Kiliwa peoples at Arroyo de León, on the northern flanks of the Sierra, have documented a total of 43 people, only 10 of whom speak the native language (Estrada and Estrada 1991:8, 9). Kiliwa native traditions are rapidly disappearing and there is steady encroachment on their *ejido* territory. Logging and water development interests pose a serious threat. As everywhere else on the planet, changes are occurring making it ever more difficult to retain ancient traditions.

Kiliwa peoples have occupied villages on the flanks of the Sierra for many generations. These Yuman speakers traditionally lived in small family groups and prospered by hunting, gathering, and fishing across a wide and diverse terrain. They had an intimate knowledge of resources within their homeland and traveled frequently to take advantage of seasonal opportunities.

Game was abundant in Kiliwa territory. Jackrabbits, quail, and deer were hunted. In the highest areas, mountain sheep were also sought. Fish and shellfish were exploited in great quantities on the shores of the Gulf near present day San Felipe. Staple plant foods were mesquite and pinyon pine nuts. Acorns also formed a significant dietary supplement to agave and yucca.

Meigs (1939:20) estimates the aboriginal Kiliwa population at 1,300. This would make them one of the least numerous and most dispersed cultural groups of the peninsula. Sparse knowledge of Kiliwa life has accumulated since 1930, but recent ethnographic work

associated with Biosphere Reserve studies has revealed the survival of Kiliwa language and traditions among scattered families in the region (Estrada and Estrada 1991; Zárate 1987).

Early explorers of the Sierra described a series of Kiliwa rancherías on the western slopes and eastern canyons (Arrillaga 1969; Linck 1996; Longinos 1961). These sites had adequate year-round water supplies and allowed exploitation of desert and highland resources. From them Kiliwa families launched food gathering quests to the mountains and Gulf coast.

If condors could speak to us they might relate details of ancient life seen by their ancestors in the peninsular mountains. Initial archaeological surveys at the higher elevations of the Sierra San Pedro Mártir have previously reported seven small aboriginal sites around the margins of La Grulla meadow (Foster 1991a, 1991b, 1992). The archaeological remains are small rock shelters or open camps with metate slicks and scatters of lithics and pottery tucked in and around the granite boulder landscape. The largest site has an impressive rock shelter and surface artifacts with a single cupule. One faint pictograph was also documented.

The other meadows have yet to receive archaeological attention. Brief examinations of La Encantada meadow did not result in any sites being located, but they are probably present. Vallecitos meadow did produce one small milling site and several isolated metates and projectile points.

This Sierra San Pedro Mártir is of added archaeological interest because of the accounts left us by early explorers. José Longinos Martínez, a naturalist who explored the region in 1792, gives the fullest account of native people. He reported three large rancherías in the high mountain valleys. These were occupied for two to three months each year when hunting forays and acorn and pine nut expeditions were carried out. His expedition describes being led to a “great water” high in

the Sierra. The water and a high peak nearby were feared by the Kiliwa because of their immense power. Without proper precautions, both could kill instantly. As he reported,

at about two in the afternoon [we] arrived at the “great water.” When we sighted it the new Christians and gentle friends of the escort, along with others who had joined them, began to drop behind and take up positions on the highest spots, from which they could watch us when we reached the lake, thinking they would see us fall dead. Notwithstanding my conviction that this was one of their superstitious beliefs, I did not let the soldiers of my escort to taste the water until I had analyzed it. . . [Longinos 1961:40].

La Grulla contains ample evidence of a former “great water.” Two centuries of grazing have resulted in landform disturbance that now prevents a surface impoundment (Minnich et. al. 1997), but the signs are unmistakable. Looming Picacho del Diablo is very likely the peak with reported killing power, as the name implies. Whether the power of this sacred landscape made people wary of living here is a factor for future archaeological studies to consider.

The Baja condors are soaring above the eastern escarpment and canyonland slopes of the sierra, the same area occupied by Kiliwa people for centuries. As we gaze down on this uniquely eroded terrain, we note that it contains hundreds of palm oases, small rock shelters, and protected canyons. It also contains an obsidian source and a tremendous potential for archaeological research.

One of places most frequently noted by early explorers is Agua Caliente, west-southwest of San Felipe, one of the canyons that allowed descent from the sierra. Here the hot and cold pools provided comfort for Arrillaga and Linck as they had to Kiliwa people for centuries. An impressive rock spire contains a vast number of petroglyphs in the Agua Caliente canyon narrows. Near the top are *tabla* designs, a measure perhaps of the fierce independence of the Kiliwa in their resistance to mission conversion (Figure 3). Also noted is an apparent sun dagger petroglyph, an ancient reminder of measuring time (Figure 4). In

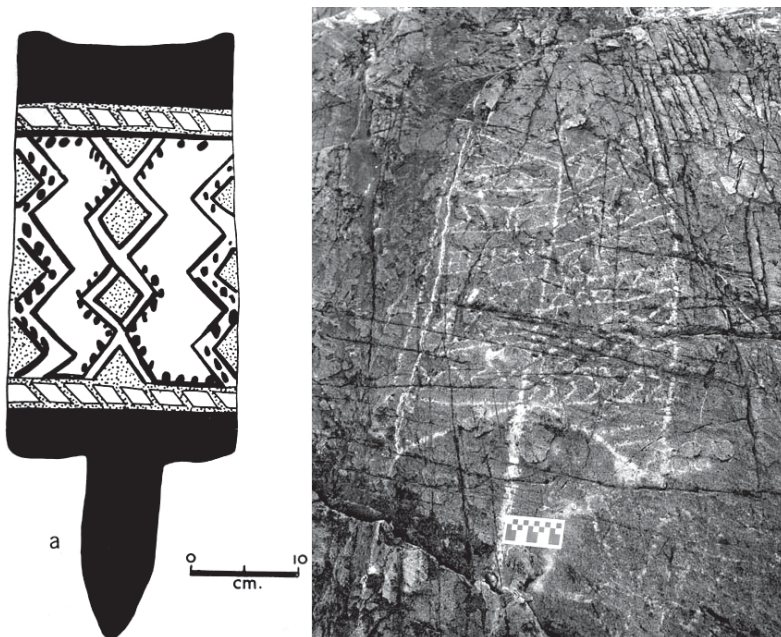


Figure 3: “Tabla” petroglyphs from Agua Caliente canyon. These are representations of the venerated wooden objects from the northern peninsula.

climbing to view the rock art, one wonders if condors haven't looked down on these inscriptions for eons.

Biosphere Reserve studies in the Sierra San Pedro Mártir have documented a unique natural and cultural landscape (Minnich et al. 1997; Sosa 1991). This montane region forms the southernmost extent of the California biogeographical province. To the south, there are no more Jeffrey pine forests on the peninsula. Likewise, there is a distinct cultural boundary. The Yuman language family and pottery-making traditions, for example, extend no further. The California condor reintroduction is part of the Biosphere Reserve strategy for protecting essential resource lands. As a symbol of wilderness heritage, perhaps its rebirth will signal a new understanding of the native cultures that have known and revered it for centuries. The Kiliwa people have shared this landscape with condors for many generations. They are the southernmost peninsular peoples to survive missionization and have managed to maintain their language and traditions to the present time (Hinton and Owen 1957). These traditions, along with information from archaeological studies, can reveal the dynamics of an ancient and successful way of life in the shadow of the sierra.

Both condors and native traditions can survive if the Sierra San Pedro Mártir landscape can remain mostly intact. Let's hope people of today's world can see the wisdom in allowing that to happen.

The condor reintroduction is an extraordinary collaboration among the Instituto Nacional de Ecología, the Comisión Nacional de Áreas Naturales Protegidas, the Centro de Investigación Científica y de Educación Superior de Ensenada (CICESE), the Zoological Society of San Diego, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the World Center for Birds of Prey in Boise, Idaho. The Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) partnered with California State Parks and U.C. Davis in the Sierra San Pedro Mártir Biosphere Reserve study. Partial funding was provided by the National Science Foundation. Special thanks are due to Julia Bendímez Patterson for her support and assistance. Ernesto Franco of CICESE also provided considerable support for the research. Robert Orlins, Steve James, Bob Plummer, Miles Knudsen, Mike Foster and Jim Barry helped in the fieldwork.

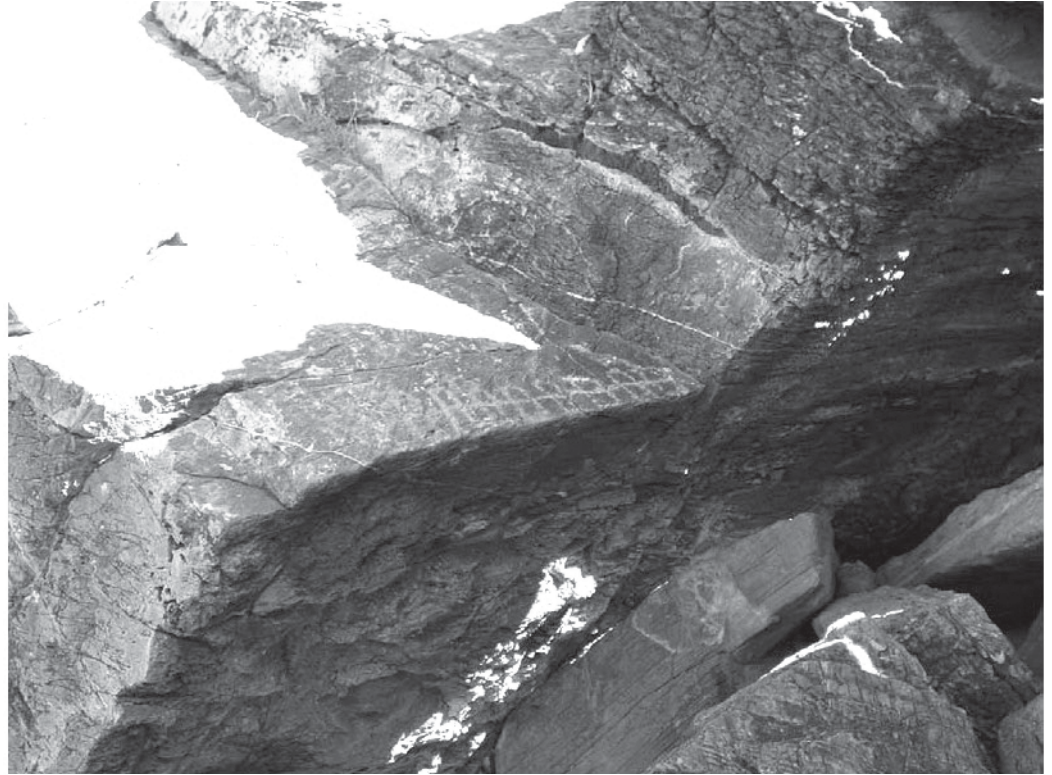


Figure 4: A sun dagger petroglyph in Agua Caliente canyon. Many petroglyphs occur in the eastern escarpment of the Sierra San Pedro Mártir.

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