THE ECOLOGY OF SAN LUIS OBISPO:

A Children’s Book

By

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Proposal</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annotated Bibliography</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outline</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text – with citations</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text – book layout</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I plan to write a paper on the ecological history of present day San Luis Obispo, California. The aim of this composition is to tell the story of the landscape, the plant, animal, and human inhabitants, the role of climate, and the ways in which these have interacted through time. I will trace the formation of landforms, the oscillations in climate, and coevolution of plant and animal species over millions of years. By pairing a limited geographic area of study with a long term time scale and both organic and inorganic subjects of study I hope to present a unique perspective of this much loved, awe-inspiring place.
This compilation of plant species and communities of California classifies vegetation types, identifies environmental factors which determine species distribution, examines factors and dynamics of disturbance, the role of human activity, and introduced and invasive plants, and discusses important soil types.

This book argues the urgency of an improved integration of environmental history and world history. As I aim to do in my paper, this work gives a holistic account of the historical human-environmental story that has played out in various places in the world.

This book examines evidence of regionally specific coastline transformation including that of the Pacific Coast of the United States. There is also discussion of categories of coastal change such as cliffed and emerging coastlines which are found on the California Central Coast.

This source argues that in every historical period and in every inhabited land humans have altered their environment while adapting to it. It gives a concise account of this interrelationship from prehistory to present day.

This book explores the Earth’s climate history and the political and ethical implications of climate change for human societies. A long global history is covered, beginning with the origin of the Earth and projecting into the possible timing of the next ice age. It touches on a variety of the complex interactions between climate, the physical environment, and forms of life.

Lewis, C. (1952). *Earth song: a prologue to history*. University of California Press. This book celebrates the physical evolution of California’s landscape. In it, the land is both the main actor as well as the stage for a continuous procession of life. It describes scenes from millions of years before the arrival of man up until it’s date of publication.


Penna, A. N. (2010). *The human footprint: A global environmental history*. Wiley-Blackwell Publishers. This work describes the physical evolution of Earth (beginning with the original formation), the evolution of humankind, and development of subsistence strategies, the impacts of population, and industry, as well as climate change.

I. Introduction

- The county of San Luis Obispo is one of the most loved places in the world. Its residents have been called some of the happiest people on earth. What could it be about this place that is so enchanting? It could be the idyllic Mediterranean climate, with copious days of sunshine, perfect for grape growing and outdoor activities such as biking, boating, fishing, golf, hiking, kayaking to name just a few. It could be the picturesque landscape with sandy beaches, rolling hills, mountains, streams, lakes. Trees and wildlife abound in forested open spaces and throughout the cities. Or perhaps the rich cultural heritage of the historical Spanish Mission San Luis Obispo de Tolosa, the communal charm of the Farmers Market, or the intellectual optimism of the State University are what make the 250,000 residents smile each day. Located halfway between San Francisco and Los Angeles, San Luis Obispo County is the heart of California's Central Coast. However, this paper is not about the present-day cities or residents thereof. It is an ecological history; the story of life and land over time. This author neither intends to give a full historic account of the peopling of this portion of the California coast, nor downplay anthropogenic impacts on the environment. The focus is on evolution of the ecosystem — the interaction of organic and inorganic elements which produce unique sets, scenes, and actors in an ongoing play. The land; the mountains, streams, plants and animals have existed and changed for quite some time before people came. They deserve to be described their own right. However, one cannot deny the environmental impact of humans. The aim of this composition is to tell the story as the land itself would. By pairing a limited geographic area of study with a long term time scale and both organic and inorganic subjects of study I hope to present a unique perspective of this much loved, awe-inspiring place.

II. Mountain building (c. 20 mya)

- These mountains are the bones of San Luis Obispo County. They give us visual contact with nature, "a sense of place" and a daily reminder that we still live close to the land.
• The Nine Sisters represent a unique arrangement of hills; formed from the plugs of long-extinct volcanoes which have been inactive since before human speciation.

• The chain of nine took shape 20-25 million years ago. The volcanoes were formed by collisions of tectonic plates. The tremendous force caused solid rocks to melt and form gigantic, lava spewing cones even grander than the mountains of today.

• The present peaks are the hardened lava that filled the deep parts of vents for those volcanoes.

III. The Super Ancient Environment (c. 40 kya)

• Climate: At the time of the last Ice Age a large part of the continent was sealed in glacial ice, there is no ice here. The climate is wetter and cooler than now, but the landscape may seem quite familiar.

• Landscape: There are two deep valleys on either side of the chain of peaks. Two creeks flow to a Morro Bay in the North, and one creek flows to San Luis Bay in the South. There is a chain of hills backing the flatlands of this creek. In the south lie a lake and wetlands.

• Vegetation & Animal life: A great number of plants flourish in the mountains and lowlands. Various habitats are found in micro climates due to varied topography: stands of pine, moss draped oak forest to grassy and wild flowers. Also there lived complex communities of insects, birds, reptiles and mammals, but no humans yet.

• Very large animals called mega fauna roamed the valley: Mammoths, mastodons, long horned bison, saber toothed tigers and giant ground sloths lived along with deer and cheetahs and horses.

IV. The first Americans (c. 13 kya)

• Arrival from the north

• Came upon the fruitful valley sheltered by winds and some decided to stay for a while
• Subsistence lifestyle (technology): Hunted large game using group strategy and projectile points. Also utilized a wide spectrum of other animals and plants. Learned the land very well, and began manipulation by fire to improve access to animals and forage.

• Impact on landscape, vegetation, animals- The game animals have not coevolved with humans and populations are depleted. Other predators, big cats, struggle to compete.

• Climate: gradually warming and drying

V. The Chumash (c. 2 kya)

• The valley was heavily occupied by the Chumash Indians. The Chumash used the Mountains as well. The Mountains are sacred to the Chumash, and Bishop Peak occupies an area which is considered significant.

• Subsistence lifestyle (technology): Acorns are the primary food source, processed by mortars and leeched. Also gathered wide variety of other plants and hunted deer and rabbits. Semi-nomadic, seasonal camps. Varying group size. Well established trade with Chumash from the coast and other groups. Continued to use fire to clear brush especially around oak trees, encourage new growth, and hunt.

• Impact on landscape, vegetation, animals: short grasses flourished, ground between trees clear

• Climate: similar to 20th century AD.

VI. Explorers from Afar or the Arrival of Cabrillo (1542)

• Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo was a navigator from Portugal who charted the land north of the Spanish colonies in Mexico. Some say he is the Alta California counterpart to Cortez’s Baja. His ship entered San Luis Bay and named it Todos Santos, or all saints bay.

VII. Missionization (1772)
San Luis Obispo de Tolosa was one of the first Father Junipero Serra founded of 21 California missions.

Subsistence lifestyle (technology) Fathers brought horses, sheep and cattle to graze and adopted Mexican crops corn, beans and squash to cultivate. The mission became famous for jerga, a woolen fabric woven by the Chumash and traded between the other missions. The Chumash also continued to hunt and gather wild foods.

Impact on landscape, vegetation, animals: The Chumash population decreased due to the introduction of European diseases. Focus on cultivation and herding eased pressure on game, competing predators. Missionaries discouraged use of fire. Chumash have since lost knowledge of their ancestral fire technology. Underbrush thickened in forested areas. Grasses grew long and thick.

VIII. Land Grants and Ranches

Subsistence lifestyle (technology): livestock farming as well as cultivating wheat and other crops.

Impact on landscape, vegetation, animals: – some ranchers are considered the first environmentalists

IX. Contemporary San Luis Obispo

The chain of hills provides both habitat and a wildlife corridor that is vital for the continued viability of plant and animal diversity in the area.

Subsistence lifestyle (technology): The human population of 40,000 has well developed transportation, industrial, intellectual, and agricultural technology.

Impact on landscape, vegetation, animals: Compared to other areas in California with comparable living standards, residents in San Luis Obispo enjoy a profound closeness to nature.
CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

San Luis Obispo is one of the most loved places in the world by its residents and visitors. Located halfway between San Francisco and Los Angeles, San Luis Obispo is the heart of California's Central Coast. However, this paper is not about the present-day cities or residents. It is an ecological history; the story of life and land over time.

Historians tend to treat nature as the setting for history, rather than a participant. Ecology is a history written knowing that we shape our environment and it shapes us (Worster, 1998).

This is a story of the ecology of San Luis Obispo.

CHAPTER 2 – MOUNTAIN BUILDING

The famous peaks of San Luis Obispo play a major role in the daily lives of the people who live here. The mountains draw our eyes up to the natural ruggedness as well as back in time to a setting long ago.

The mountain chain known as the Nine Sisters stretches from Morro Bay to San Luis Obispo. The peaks were formed by volcanoes 20 to 25 million years ago. The volcanoes are the result of the collision of movement of the Earth’s crust which also pushed up the sea floor to become what is now California. The tremendous force created by this collision caused solid rocks underground to melt and flow out as lava. The gigantic volcanic cones were many times bigger than the mountains we see now. The present peaks are the plugs of hardened lava that filled the deep parts of vents for those volcanoes. Millions of years of rain and wind have eroded them into the familiar landforms we see today (Chipping, 1987).

The peaks have a long story to tell us, a story that is unique in California.

CHAPTER 3 – PREHUMAN ENVIRONMENT

Now we visit a time very long ago, yet not so ancient as the mountains; a time around the last Ice Age, about 40 thousand years ago. Although a large part of the continent was covered in glacial ice, there is no ice here. The climate is wetter and cooler than now, but the landscape may seem quite familiar.
There are two deep valleys that lie on either side of the chain of peaks. Two creeks flow to a
great bay in the North, and one creek flows to a bay in the South. There is a chain of hills
backing the flatlands of the main valley. In the south lie a lake and wetlands (Hall, 2007).

A great number of plants flourish in the mountains and lowlands. Unique habitats are found in
micro climates ranging from stands of pine, through moss draped oak forest to grassy slopes
where flowers bloom. And there lived complex communities of insects, birds, reptiles and
mammals (Hall, 2007), but no humans yet.

It was a very special time, for very large animals called mega fauna roamed the lush valley.
Mammoths, mastodons, long horned bison, saber toothed tigers and giant ground sloths lived
along with deer and horses (Krech, 1999).

Between the pine and oak woodlands were grasslands that were home to deer. If you have ever
wondered why deer can run so fast is it because they used to be chased by cheetahs! Yes,
cheetahs roamed the foothills, grasslands and forests here too.

CHAPTER 4 – THE FIRST AMERICANS

So where are the giant beasts now? Scientists are not really sure about what happened to the
megafauna. Fossils tell us they nearly all went extinct around 11 thousand years ago. No more
horses or camels or ground sloths, no more great tusked mammoths or saber-toothed tigers. It
probably isn’t a coincidence that this is when the first hunters and gatherers came to America.
They arrived from the North and came upon the fruitful valley sheltered by winds. Some
decided to stay for a while. They survived by gathering wild food like roots, nuts, and fruits, as
well as hunting large and small game (Krech, 1999).

The large, slow moving mammoths, mastodons, and giant ground sloths were their favorite
game. These animals had never encountered a predator like humans before. The hunters had
spear and clubs and worked together with effective strategies to bring down their kills. They
very likely out-competed saber-toothed tigers and cheetahs for the supply of meat (Krech,
1999).

Climate change is another factor that probably contributed to the megafauna extinctions. As
the Ice Age was coming to an end, the environment started changing rapidly (Krech, 1999).
Grasslands were drying out and expanding and different kinds of plants and animals became
better suited to the changes. Some of the streams which used to flow all year started drying up,
too.
CHAPTER 5 – THE FIRE-BEARERS

Add to all these changes the amazing force that humans controlled: fire. They did not only use fire for light, warmth, and to cook their food, but also to improve their access to animals and plants. One must know that in many cases, fire does not totally destroy ecosystems, but in some ways, improves it. The people would set fire to grasslands to make the soil more fertile and produce tender young shoots that grazing animals like deer find delicious. They would burn the woodlands as well to open the remove underbrush between oak and pine trees which made it easier to walk and hunt there. Large trees would survive the blaze, especially if it was done regularly, but underbrush and vermin would be cleared away. Just weeks after a burn, berry bushes would appear from the ashes to ripen in the summer. The ancient hunters would also use fire to hunt. After locating a group of deer they would strategically light fires to herd them into an area where they could be cornered. Fire was also useful to flush rabbits out of bushes and into nets (Krech, 1999).

Native Americans, living so close to the land, knew how to shape the environment for their benefit. They probably did not predict or mean to cause the extinction of certain animals, but were just maximizing their resources at the time. Besides, it was most likely a combination of causes of that finished off the North American megafauna (Krech, 1999).

With the disappearance of the mega fauna Native Americans began to make a living from an environment that closely resembled our own. Much later, their descendants would lead to the Chumash.

CHAPTER 5 – THE CHUMASH

The Chumash Indians have occupied the area from San Luis Obispo to Santa Barbara for at least two thousand years. They lived quite comfortably on the coast as well as mountains and valleys. Bishop’s Peak was considered sacred to the Chumash (Dart, 1978). Then as now, it was a very good life. The winters were wet and mild and the summers warm and dry. There was plenty of water in the streams and the large population lived richly on the land. A major part of their diet was acorns that the women ground up with stone. They also gathered fruits, seeds, grains, roots, and hunted birds, rabbits, and deer. (Davenport & Johnson, 1993; Dart-Newton & Erlandson, 2006; Gibson, 2004). And of course, they groomed the land with fire (Krech, 1999).

All Chumash sites were near water or wetlands, (Morrison & Hayden, 1917). They used the tule plant, a kind of water reed, for many things. Tule was used to make clothes and very impressive baskets that they are famous for. The Chumash lived in dome shaped houses of reeds and willow poles. A number of houses together would make a village with anywhere from
100 – 1,000 people. In each village there was a chief but he or she was not totally in charge – they just helped settle disputes and saw that no one went hungry.

The people celebrated life and their environment. They held dances and ceremonies to honor the Earth, the sun, and particular plants and animals like foxes, bears, and swordfish. The Chumash believed humans were responsible for keeping the world in balance. One of their creation stories tells how Hutash, the Earth Goddess, gathered the seeds of a magic plant and from them made the first Chumash. Then Hutash’s husband, Sky Snake, threw down lightning bolts which gave the people fire (Davenport & Johnson, 1993; Dart-Newton & Erlandson, 2006; Gibson, 2004).

CHAPTER 6 – MISSION SAN LUIS OBISPO

Spanish explorers first arrived on the central coast by ship about 470 years ago, in 1542 (Angel, 1966; Dart, 1978). The captain, Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, and his crew were amazed at the luscious grassland, majestic oak forests, and of course the many Chumash. The native people rushed out to meet the explorers with gifts (Morrison & Hayden, 1917; Dart, 1978). They were used to people coming to trade from other villages but surely had never seen anything like the grand vessel and fair-skinned Spaniards in funny clothes (Gamble, 2008). Cabrillo and his men did not stay long and soon continued sailing and mapping the coast of California (Angel, 1966).

The next time foreigners came to the Chumash lands was 230 years later in 1772. Missionaries from Spain led by Father Junipero Sera came to teach the native people Christianity. The Mission San Luis Obispo de Tolosa was one of the first of 21 California missions (Angel, 1966; Dart, 1978). The Chumash were reluctant to change their lifestyle, but the missionaries convinced them their way was better. The fathers brought horses, sheep, and cattle to graze on the wide open hills. They also brought crops grown by the native peoples of Mexico: corn, squash and beans, as well as wheat and fruit trees from Europe (Angel, 1966; Dart, 1978; Gamble, 2008). Many Chumash helped build the mission and new housing. They learned how to communicate with each other and cultivate the land. The Chumash still hunted and gathered wild foods and there was plenty to eat (Dart, 1978; Gamble, 2008). They traded extra food and things they made with other missions. San Luis Obispo was famous for jerga, a cloth made from sheep’s wool (Gamble, 2008). This mission was one of the wealthiest in all of California (Morrison & Hayden, 1917; Sonnebornast, 2007).

The worst part of the Spaniards coming was that they accidently brought diseases with them (Dart-Newton & Erlandson, 2006). The Chumash had never been exposed to these before and
had no immunities. This took a grave toll and the native population shrank pretty fast. Also, the people’s relationship with the land changed. The Chumash put most of their labor into farming and didn’t burn the brush anymore. The forests became harder to walk through, fresh grasses became overgrown and prickly dry chaparral plants began to dominate the hillsides (Dart-Newton & Erlandson, 2006; Sonnebornast, 2007).

CHAPTER 7 – THE RANCHERS

San Luis Obispo has a rich tradition of ranching and farming (Morrison & Hayden, 1917). Americans moved out west for the open rolling hills and wonderful climate. Some had come out for the gold rush (Angel, 1966). Some had received land grants from Spain and Mexico, living on family plots since the end of the mission period. At the same time, the small town was growing larger around the old mission (Angel, 1966; Dart, 1978; Gamble, 2008).

Ranchers had a close relationship with the land. They depended on good rainfall and soils to support their herds. They hunted deer, quail and other wild birds. Ranchers were environmentalists before the word was common. Ranchers knew that a diversity of plants and animals was essential to the health of the land and their way of life.

Many ranchers felt that land ownership was a sacred duty and maintaining this duty became more difficult as more land was converted to crops and grazing. In the 1940s, 50s, and 60s they fought to protect endangered habitats for coyotes, mountain lions, and condors. While some people thought the coyote was a menace, the people who thought ecologically about the environment knew they were important to keep rodent populations down. If the land could no longer support the majestic mountain lion, it was a sign of big trouble. It was important to save animals such as the California condor in order to develop the skills and mindset it would take to ensure our own survival.

CHAPTER 8 – CONTEMPORARY SAN LUIS OBISPO

Today, there are many things the people of San Luis Obispo share with the people who lived here hundreds and thousands of years ago. We hike the mountains, explore the rivers, and feel a rush when we gaze at a fiery sunset. We live among the trees and wildlife that abound in forested open spaces throughout the city. We visit and celebrate the cultural heritage of the Spanish mission. We gather together every Thursday for fresh locally grown food at the Farmer’s Market and many lives are shaped by the intellectual optimism of Cal Poly University. For everyone who lives here, San Luis Obispo is part of who we are. At the same time, we help shape and reshape the environment and hope that the generations to come continue to cherish and protect the beauty of life and land.
THE ECOLOGY
of SAN LUIS OBISPO

By Heidi Van Campen
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There are two deep valleys that lie on either side of the chain of peaks. A number of creeks flow from the hills through the valley on their way to the sea. There is a chain of hills backing the flatlands of the main valley. In the south lie a lake and wetlands. A great number of plants flourish in the mountains and lowlands. There are unique habitats from stands of pine, through moss draped oak forest to grassy slopes where flowers bloom. And there lived complex communities of insects, birds, reptiles and mammals, but no humans yet.
It was a very special time, for very large animals called mega fauna roamed the lush valleys. Mammoths, mastodons, long horned bison, saber toothed tigers and giant ground sloths lived along with deer and horses.

Between the pine and oak woodlands were grasslands that were home to deer. If you have ever wondered why deer can run so fast it is because they used to be chased by cheetahs! Yes, cheetahs roamed the foothills, grasslands and forests here too.
So where are the giant beasts now? Scientists are not really sure about what happened to the mega fauna. Fossils tell us they nearly all completely disappeared around 13 thousand years ago. No more horses or camels or ground sloths, no more great tusked or saber-toothed tigers. It probably isn’t a coincidence that this is when the first hunter and gatherers came to America. They arrived from the North and came upon the fruitful valley sheltered by winds. Some decided to stay and make this place home. They survived by gathering wild food like roots, nuts, and fruits, as well as hunting large and small game.
The large, slow moving mammoths, mastodons, and giant ground sloths were their favorite game. These animals had never encountered a predator like humans before. The hunters had spears and clubs and worked together with impressive skill to find and bring down the animals. They very likely out-competed saber-toothed tigers and cheetahs for the supply of meat.

Climate change is another thing that probably contributed to the megafauna extinctions. As the Ice Age was coming to an end, the environment started changing rapidly. Grasslands were drying out and expanding and different kinds of plants and animals became better suited to the changing climate. Some of the streams which used to flow all year started drying up, too
THE FIRE-BEARERS

Added to the impressive hunting and gathering skills of people and climate change was the amazing tool controlled by humans: fire. They did not only use fire for light, warmth, and to cook their food, but also to improve their access to animals and plants.

One must know that in many cases, fire does not totally destroy nature, but in some ways, improves it. The people would set fire to grasslands to make the soil more fertile and produce tender young shoots that people and grazing animals like deer find delicious.

Humans burned the woodlands as well to remove underbrush and make openings between oak and pine trees which made getting food easier. Large trees would survive the blaze, especially if it was done regularly, but underbrush and vermin would be cleared away. Just weeks after a burn, berry bushes would appear from the ashes to ripen in the spring and summer.

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The next time foreigners came to the Chumash lands was 230 years later in 1772. Missionaries from Spain led by Father Junipero Sera came to teach the native people Christianity. Our mission, San Luis Obispo de Tolosa, was one of 21 California missions.
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