

Cover Story: Cal Poly Students See the Light at Piedras Blancas

By Scott Roark



Photo by Cal Poly landscape architecture student Flo Pucci

Faiths that have lasted for generations use the structures as symbols of guidance and truth. Benjamin Franklin called them “more useful than churches.” Economists say they’re one of the few “true” public goods, providing a benefit that at some point serves everyone equally, with little cost.

Lighthouses are complex, contradicting and universal symbols. They are also national treasures and a source of shared heritage.

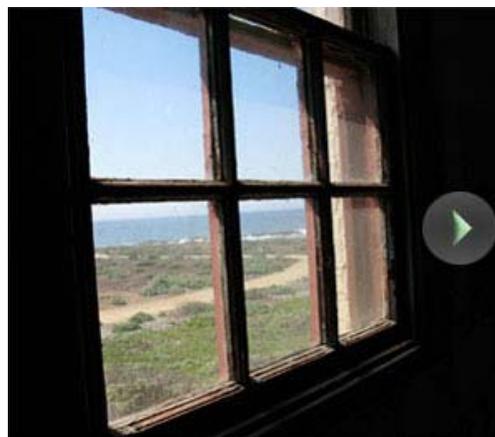
The Piedras Blancas Light Station is no exception. And Cal Poly students and faculty are playing a vital role in its restoration.

Built in 1875, the lighthouse overlooks a sweeping expanse of the Pacific about 50 miles northwest of Cal Poly, nestled against jagged cliffs and hidden coves home to elephant seals and teeming tide pools. Open land and sea surround the tower and buildings.

“Cal Poly students go out to Piedras Blancas and the jaws just drop open,” said Marlene Cartter, chairwoman of the Piedras Blancas Light Station Association Board. “The enthusiasm begins immediately.”

Students and professors from several disciplines have contributed fresh ideas and work. Landscape architecture students have drawn up plans for the property in their senior projects. Journalism students, through their “PR Perspectives” program, are developing collateral materials for public education, marketing and advertising. Retired Cal Poly professors regularly volunteer at the site.

Mechanical engineering students are constructing a replica of a historic water tower and making a model of the clockwork mechanism from the lighthouse’s lens that will be displayed at the light



View to History - the scene from one of the Piedras Blancas Light Station windows. Click the photo for a slideshow of Piedras lighthouse photos
- Photo by Astrid Reeves

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Photo of the Year

station to educate the public on how it works. The station's original lens is on display in downtown Cambria.

All students are doing this work as part of class projects, receiving academic credit and hands-on, real-world experience. It's a win-win said Cartter, a compliance officer in Academic Affairs at Cal Poly and an early supporter of bringing students to Piedras Blancas.

"One of the first projects involving multiple students was in 2007 with a landscape architecture class," she said. "It just took off from there."



To the Top - Spiral stairs in the tower

That came after several faculty members from the Natural Resources Management Department provided advice on removing non-native ice plant surrounding the station, cultivated by the Coast Guard before the Bureau of Land Management took over in 2000.

BLM Light Station Park Manager Jim Boucher said Cal Poly has been an invaluable partner in the restoration. "Students come here with the technical knowledge and the skills to bring this facility to life," he said.

He recalls the stories highlighted in an oral history and brochure put together by one Cal Poly history intern for her senior project.

One involves lighthouse keeper Norman Frances, who testified about the Montebello, a steam-powered oil tanker sunk off the coast of Cambria by a Japanese submarine in 1941. Frances witnessed the sinking from the lighthouse.

The Montebello carried more than 3 million gallons of crude oil, most of which is still in the ship's wreckage on the ocean floor. All 38 crew members survived. The ship's owner, Union Oil Company, was not compensated for the loss because of Frances' testimony. He estimated the ship went down about six miles offshore, outside the three-mile limit imposed by Congress in the War Damage Act.

Before construction began on the light station, the land was part of the 45,000-acre Rancho de la Piedra Blanca. The site fell under U.S. governance when California became a state in 1850. Before Spanish control, it was visited by the ancestors of current Chumash and Salinan people for hundreds of years.

This shared history drives the passion of many light station association members, said Cartter. The association was established in 2004 as the nonprofit partner for the BLM, to support the restoration of the light station and protect its natural and historical significance. The association and BLM envision regular public tours of the station, allowing it to be financially self-sustaining.

Cartter said many people don't realize Piedras Blancas (Spanish for "white rocks") is a working lighthouse. And when completely restored, it will continue to serve as a navigation aid.

The next step in the process depends on future funding – mainly obtained through grants and private support. The focus is to restore the light station to its period of greatest historic significance (1875 to 1939).

Restorations will include the fog signal building, the fuel oil house, the fuel storage shed and the lighthouse itself. Replica construction will include the Victorian residence used by the head light keeper and assistant keeper, the barn, the head light keeper's storage shed and the watch room.

Cartter predicts that Cal Poly students will be involved in nearly all of the restoration and educational outreach. The latest is a grad student, set to work this fall on developing a history program for students from elementary school through college.



In the Light - Grad student Laura Sorveti (left), is one of the Cal Poly students who has been working on the Piedras Blancas Light Station project. Marlene Cartter of Cal Poly Academic Affairs is the chair of the lighthouse association.

- Photo by Matt Lazier



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Gleaming like a shoreline diamond cut from the absent sun, the light of Piedras Blancas provides guidance to wayward vessels by night and a sense of history and heritage by day. It's also easy on the eyes and – many would say – the soul.

"It's truly a magnificent and beautiful place," said Cartter. "I'm grateful that many Cal Poly students will experience it as part of their education."

Below: Students on the lighthouse grounds on a work and study day.



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