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Cal Poly Professor Awarded Grant To Explore Prehistoric Marine Ecosystem; Results Could Help Sustain Marine Life Today

SAN LUIS OBISPO -- Did the hunting of the California sea otter by prehistoric Chumash Indians more than 10,000 years ago put a dent in today's otter population?

Terry Jones, a Cal Poly social sciences professor who was awarded a California Sea Grant, will explore that question and others regarding the ancient marine ecosystem of the Central Coast. And he believes his findings could pave the way to creating useful methods to sustain today's marine ecosystem.

Jones anticipates his findings will show an unusually long exploitation of the sea otter, the key predator in central California kelp forests. He also predicts those findings will substantiate his belief that the Central Coast's kelp forests actually benefited from the hunting of the sea otter.

"While these animals were probably never the main focus of human subsistence, it is anticipated that the archaeological record will show an unexpectedly high frequency of otter exploitation concurrent with regular exploitation of kelp forest fisheries and abalone for at least during the last 6,000-7,000 years," Jones said.

"This suggests that productivity of the Diablo kelp forests was sustained by -- or at least associated with -- regular killing of sea otters.

"Ecological models that provide the basis for conservation programs along the California coast have traditionally incorporated limited temporal perspectives and unclear or naive assumptions about the role of Native American predation in prehistoric ecosystems," Jones said.

"Archaeological faunal remains from the Diablo Canyon sites, excavated 35 years ago but never analyzed, have the potential to provide an unmatched record of human predation in coastal ecosystems over the last 10,000 years."

The Diablo Canyon sites are expected to shed considerable light on questions concerning the earliest human settlement of western North America, according to Jones.

"Preliminary radiocarbon results suggest that the sites are among the oldest coastal middens (refuse heap) on the northeastern Pacific Rim," Jones said, "and site findings should also be directly relevant to alternative

perspectives on their origins and adaptation."

Jones's project was one of 14 new marine science projects to receive funding from the California Sea Grant, a statewide, multi-university program of marine research, extension services, and education activities administered by the University of California. It is the largest of 30 Sea Grant programs sponsored by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce.

The new California Sea Grant projects are slated to begin in March 2004.

For more information, contact Jones at 756-2523 or tljones@calpoly.edu.

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