Wildlands Conservation Science, LLC
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22 December 2023

Subject: Santa Catalina Island Restoration Project

To Whom It May Concern:

Wildlands Conservation Science (WCS) is a small business dedicated to effective wildlands stewardship and endangered species management using innovative methods of landscape-level vegetation and wildlife monitoring, invasive species control and habitat restoration. Much of our work utilizes low-flying helicopters as a platform to achieve these goals. This specialty has given us the opportunity to work on and gain a comprehensive understanding of all eight of the California Channel Islands. Our background gives us a unique, comparative perspective that underlines our ardent support for Santa Catalina Island's proposed restoration project.

WCS is a descendant of Native Range Inc., a New Zealand company that specializes in ungulate removal projects throughout the world. This is the same organization that effectively removed 5,036 feral pigs and the last feral sheep from Santa Cruz Island in the mid-2000s and teamed with White Buffalo, Inc. to remove all introduced Kaibab mule deer and Roosevelt elk from Santa Rosa Island in 2011. WCS has experienced first-hand the solemn professionalism and level-headedness that these pilots and hunters bring to their work.

After successful completion of the Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa Island ungulate removals, WCS was brought in to fly every square foot of both islands using the very same Native Range pilots that had just completed the eradication efforts. Our combined goal was now one of documentation. From the air, WCS mapped the extent of rare plant populations and invasive weed infestations to serve as a baseline for habitat conditions following this first meaningful step toward island-wide restoration. These flights have been repeated in the years following the initial assessments. If we were to describe our observations in a single word, it would be revival.

In the two short years following the removal of deer and elk from Santa Rosa Island, once bare canyon slopes that perpetually slumped into dry washes began to stabilize around verdant streams now lined with willows and wetland vegetation. Eight years following the removal of the last pig from Santa Cruz Island, the federally endangered island bedstraw (*Galium buxifolium*) was documented escaping from the sheer sea cliffs where it had only been known to occur. Without the grazing pressure from sheep and ground disturbance from pigs, island bedstraw was able to reclaim its rightful place on the gentle slopes of the open marine terraces. Its recovery was so substantial, island bedstraw and the now aptly named Santa Cruz Island liveforever (*Dudleya nesiotica*) were just removed from the endangered species list on the eve of the 50th anniversary of the Endangered Species Act. The same story is repeated to the south of Catalina, where four federally protected plant

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species and one bird have been deemed fully recovered after the removal of goats from San Clemente Island.

The restoration of these once imperiled species may seem trivial to some. One might ask, “who cares about a couple plants that no one has ever heard of?” But these are more than inconsequential organisms brought back from the brink of extinction. They are more than just canaries in a coal mine. They are testament that on a rare occasion, humanity can do right by the natural world. Even when the means to achieve that goal feels painfully unjust to ALL PEOPLE. Nobody wants to cause broad-scale loss of life, especially not the biologist saddled with the heady responsibility of preventing extinction. None of the dedicated biologists at the Catalina Island Conservancy would choose this path out of simple expediency. These people see beyond the sensational newspaper headlines and endure death threats and alienation from their local community because they are trying to rebuild something that most haven’t realized they’ve almost lost, a delicate insular ecosystem unlike any place on Earth.

The last northern white rhino was seen walking the open plains of central Africa in 2006. Today, only two rhinos are left, both living out their remaining days in captivity. The same situation currently exists on the Channel Islands. However, in this instance, it’s not some charismatic creature left in a cage to while away its days until the end comes for its kind. In this scenario, a small number of cages euphemistically referred to as “deer exclosures” have been erected around tiny pieces of what the whole of Catalina Island should be — a species-diverse, drought- and flood-resistant, carbon-storing ecosystem that increases the land’s resiliency and ability to support all life.

It’s an unfortunate fact that the presence of mule deer on Catalina Island has relegated the native biodiversity to protective confinement. But like the rhino, the problem can’t be solved by simply opening the cage doors. To meet an enduring objective, hard decisions must be made and the needs of an island ecosystem must be considered.

We would like to leave you with a snapshot perspective of what can come from choosing the difficult path. Below are two images of Santa Cruz Island separated by a span of 45 years. On that island, hard decisions were made by deliberate and well-intended people to end the lives of beautiful creatures. Those actions have allowed the land to heal and go on to support so much more.

In support,

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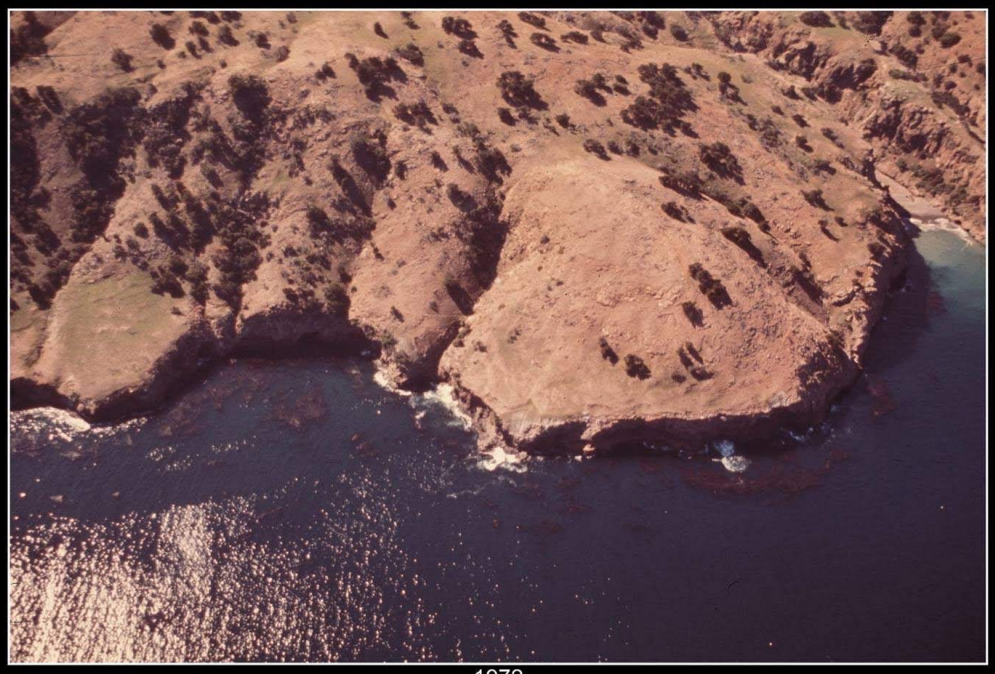
The Recovery of Santa Cruz Island



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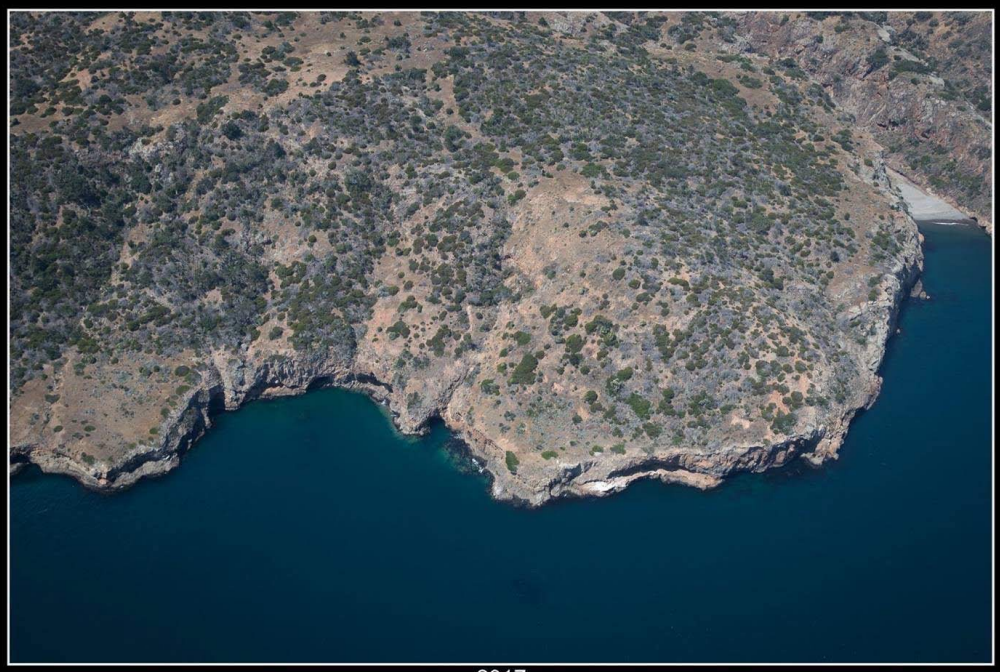

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