CATALINA ISLAND HISTORY

Santa Catalina Island is one the eight Channel Islands stretching along the Southern California coast. Most of the island is mountainous, in fact the Mainland Native Americans called Catalina, "Mountain ranges that rise from the sea". The island is visible from the mainland because of the mountainous terrain and proximity. At its closest point, Catalina is 19 miles from the mainland coast.

SPANISH HISTORY TO PRESENT

The first European to visit the island was Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, the leader of the first Spanish expedition to explore the California coast. In 1542, he stopped at the island for a short time and named it San Salvador, after his flagship. Their contact with the Natives was friendly. In 1602 General Sebastian Vizcaíno, on an expedition from Acapulco to California, arrived at the Channel Islands on the feast day of Saint Catherine of Alexandria. He named Santa Catalina in honor of Saint Catherine. He recorded the Natives as being handsome, friendly and decent people. They stayed on Catalina for four days before sailing north.

The island was infrequently visited by mariners for the next 150 years and no attempts were made at colonization. It wasn't until 1769 that the colonization of California began through an expedition by Spanish missionaries attempting to claim all of California for Spain. Catalina was considered as a possible mission location but the shortage of missionaries and the islands proximity made this impractical. Consequently, Catalina was not a central part of the Spanish missionaries system of converting native Californians to Christianity.

Over the next few years, epidemics due to European diseases, destruction of hunting and trading activities, and violent attacks by other hunters from the Aleutian Islands and Russian fur traders virtually eliminated Catalina's native population. By 1795, the total population was estimated to be 150. The last Natives had disappeared from the island around 1835.

From the beginning of the 1800's to 1850 when California became a state, Catalina was used primarily as a center for smugglers who were avoiding payment for custom duties. Sailors from other nations used Catalina for this purpose as well and hid contraband, including Chinese immigrants, in secret bays and coves. During the 1920's, it was used for sheep and cattle ranching as well as for a backdrop for several Hollywood movies.

The first person to own Catalina was an American from Santa Barbara by the name of Thomas Robbins who received it as a land grant from the Mexican government in 1848. Robbins sold the island to Jose Maria Covarrubias in 1850. In the intervening years, Catalina had several owners, endured a brief gold rush and was occupied by Union soldiers during the Civil War at the Isthmus, specifically the old Isthmus Yacht Club building.

In 1887, George Shatto bought the island for $200,000 with the intent of turning it into a resort. He then began to build the town of Avalon, but soon ran out of money. William Banning purchased the island in 1892 and with family members formed the Catalina Island Company as a commercial management corporation. Roads were built through the interior of the island and glass-bottom boat cruises were begun. Avalon was developed further and promoted as a sport fishing paradise.
A disastrous fire destroyed most of Avalon in 1915 and brought financial problems to the Bannings who sold the island in 1919 to William Wrigley, Jr., a Chicago chewing gum tycoon. After William's death in 1932, Philip K. Wrigley assumed responsibility and control of the Catalina Island Company. The influences and investments of the Wrigleys essentially created the Catalina Island of today.

Today Catalina is a popular tourist location and it was only during World War II (1941-1945) that the Island was closed to the public and it became a military training ground. After the war, a great deal of money was spent in order to restore the facilities and the island was once again opened to the public.

In 1972, the Santa Catalina Island Conservancy was formed as a non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation of native wildlife, geographical features and open-space lands. In 1975, the Conservancy received from the Wrigley family, through the Catalina Island Company, a gift of approximately 42,135 acres valued at 16 million dollars. An Open-Space Easement Agreement was reached at the time between the Conservancy and Los Angeles County, allowing the county to share the use of the island for public access and recreation for the next 50 years.

NATIVE INHABITANT HISTORY

Artifacts and relics found at several sites indicate that Catalina has been inhabited for at least the last 4000 to 5000 years. The Native Islanders called themselves the Pimugnans and referred to Catalina as "Pimu". European settlers to California took the remaining Pimugnans from Catalina to the San Gabriel Mission and thus call them the Gabriellinos. About 900 Pimugnan sites have been found and population estimates range from 2000 to 3000 individuals.

The largest settlements were located on the shoreline near Avalon, Little Harbor, the Isthmus and Johnson's Landing (Camp Emerald Bay). Smaller settlements existed in most of the coves and canyons around the island where arrowheads, digging and hunting implements and "shell midden" material have been discovered.

Prior to contact with the Spanish, these aboriginal tribes lived at a hunting and gathering level of existence, utilizing both marine and terrestrial resources. Their diet included many fruit-producing plants (oaks, cherries, Toyon berries, etc.), small herbs and roots, abalone, turban snails and other shellfish, a variety of fish, marine mammals and some land animals (bats and squirrels).

Catalina Natives were quite industrious and quarried steatite or soapstone (a type of serpentine) out of which they made mortars, bowls, axes and other objects. Bone was used to make fish hooks, flutes, pipes, money and jewelry. These items were not only for personal use, but were also traded with tribes on the mainland for food, hides and obsidian. This was accomplished with large 20-man canoes made of wood and deerskin. Trade was probably a necessity because of the limited resources available on the island.

The Natives worshipped the sun god, Chinig-Chinch, and believed that their souls transmigrated to animals. There are still some rock paintings visible at Torqua caves in the middle of the island.
GEOLOGIC HISTORY

The geologic history of Catalina as well as the other Channel Islands has been disputed for quite some time and the exact mechanisms that contributed to the formation of the island are still not fully understood. However, within the last decade, technology and research methods have improved and added considerably to our knowledge and resolution of some of these problems.

In general, Catalina can be described as the upper part of an elevated northwesterly-trending fault block approximately 1500m (5000ft.) above the adjacent ocean basin floor. The top 619 m above sea level forms the island. Much of the island is dissected by faults where much slippage and uplifting have occurred in the past. Plate tectonic activity of submersion and uplifting were probably the main factors that formed what is now Catalina.

The island's basement rock is metamorphic in origin and is exposed in several places along the NW and SW sides. Some of the oldest rock known to Catalina (Catalina schist) is late Mesozoic, approximately 120,000,000 years old, and had to form under extreme pressure deep within the Earth's crust. Since that time, it has been uplifted from the ocean floor above sea level.

Extensive volcanic activity commenced about 12-16 million years ago (mid-Miocene) and also contributed to the island's formation. Lava ash falls and ancient mud flows are visible on many of the ridges and hilltops, apparently flowing eastward from the Blackjack and Mt. Orizaba area. Pieces of igneous rock and quartz outcroppings found around the island are also indicative of volcanic activity. Some folliliferous mid-Miocene shallow water marine deposits are present at the NE end of the island and some late Miocene deposits (5-7 million years ago) occur on top of Mt. Banning and Bald Peak (430 m). The absence of post-Miocene sediments suggests that by the beginning of the Pliocene (5 million years ago) the offshore area of southern California looked approximately like it does today. Little is known about the Pliocene strata of the island because of their inaccessibility on the deep water slopes. However, during the Pliocene (2-5 million years ago) uplifting and subsidence occurred along with the lowering of the sea level during glaciation.

Up to about 500,000 years ago, Catalina had probably been submerged and re-emerged several times due to block faulting and the changing sea levels. The effects of the raising and lowering of the sea level can be seen by the surf-cut terraces and the surf-carved cobble present at Little Harbor, on the windward side, well above the current surf zone. It is not known just how much of the island was exposed during the emerging and submerging processes.

Complete lack of shallow-water fossils from the floor of the San Pedro basin, the extreme depth of the basin (3000 ft.) and the depauperate fauna are pretty convincing evidence that Catalina was never connected to the mainland during any part of the last 12-15 million years. What happened prior to that is not well understood. The majority of the current terrestrial biota probably arrived entirely over water during the last 500,000 years with some species of lizards colonizing the island as recently as 7000-8000 years ago.
NATURAL HISTORY

The large size of Catalina and its close proximity to the mainland can account for the tremendous diversity of plant and animal life present here. The high variation and topographic relief and the occurrence of fresh water on the island have allowed the survival of nearly 400 species of native plants and 170 species of introduced plants.

Plant communities include maritime desert, grassland, coastal sage-scrub, chaparral, oak-woodland, and riparian woodland. Estimates of the number of insect species range in excess of 2000, many of which are new, undescribed species and subspecies. Spiders and their relatives, also relatively unstudied, are probably just as numerous. The Channel Island Insect Survey is currently assessing research that has been done on all terrestrial arthropods of the Channel Islands and accumulating specimens and locality records for insects and spiders.

Approximately 35-40 species of land birds are known to breed on Catalina. Many more are spring and winter migrants. When these are added to the number of marine birds that are present on the island, there are probably about 200 species on Catalina during the year. The bird populations change continuously on all of the islands with some species disappearing after a few years of residence. At the same time, others are recolonizing from the mainland and adjacent islands.

Amphibians, reptiles and mammals are scarce on Catalina and they reflect the degree of isolation the island has been exposed to during its brief history. One species of frog, two salamanders, three lizards, five snakes, three rodents, one fox and five or six species of bats are known from Catalina. A very small number when compared to coastal southern California. This disharmonic fauna is further emphasized by the absence of any large mammalian predator, but its small size limits its prey to mice and insects.

HOW DID THOSE ANIMALS ARRIVE?

Some animals were introduced to the island either accidentally or deliberately during the last 150 years. The disastrous introduction of goats to Catalina in the early 1800's has done extensive damage to native plants and soil. Pigs were brought over in 1932 and are as destructive as goats. About the same time, mule deer were introduced by California Fish and Game from the Sierra Nevada Mountains. American bison were used to make a movie in 1924 and 12 individuals were released after completion of the film. More were added by the Wrigleys a few years later. A hunting program was initiated by the Catalina Conservancy several years ago in order to control the number of deer, goats and pigs. Other introduced animals include rats, house mice, feral cats, dogs, bullfrogs, Starlings and English Sparrows.

Bald eagles have recently been reintroduced to Catalina with hopes of establishing a permanent population. Since most evidence suggests that Catalina and some of the other Channel Islands were not connected to the mainland during their geologic history, the only way terrestrial organisms could colonize them would have been by over-water dispersal. It is easy for most plants, insects, birds and bats to traverse a barrier of water, thus explaining why they are more abundant than other groups. If an organism cannot fly or be carried by the wind and other animals, it must be carried on or in debris drifting randomly out to sea from the mainland and possibly other islands. Only the hardiest of animals can survive such methods of travel.