

COSTA AZUL: A THREATENED CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

Notes for a talk by

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Why is the Costa Azul area so important as part of the cultural heritage of northern Baja California and southern California?

Human beings have lived here in the region for at least the last 10,000 years, or by native people's own accounts, since the first creator-twins emerged from out of the sea. Jatay, meaning Big Water in the local Kumiai language, has long been known as an area of abundant terrestrial and marine resources. The extensive shell middens, grinding stones and other archaeological features contain the remains of thousands of years of human history and interaction with the coastal environment.

Unfortunately from San Diego to Ensenada, most coastal sites have long since been destroyed, and relatively little is yet known about those who inhabited these lands for the vast majority of their history. What *is* clear is that since prehistoric times, southern California and northern Baja California have been part of the same cultural region; our ancient histories are closely linked. The cultural resources of a major site like Costa Azul can potentially provide crucial clues to understanding settlement patterns, indigenous natural resource management, regional trade patterns, culture change and ancient history for this entire region. In nearby Bajamar, excavations revealed an amazing number of artifacts including many diagnostic indicators that shed light on the prehistory of the region.

Cultural heritage resources can never be replaced, once destroyed they are lost forever. Costa Azul is a major site that needs to be preserved so that these resources can be managed appropriately. It is the only remaining prehistoric cultural landscape between Ensenada and Tijuana where future generations of Baja Californians can walk in the actual places where Baja California's coastal peoples hunted, gathered and fished and see what life on the coast looked like for countless centuries of indigenous inhabitants. The area's zoning designation for low-impact tourism states the obvious: this area, with its magnificent coastal landscapes, its rare and well-preserved biological and cultural resources, its strategic location along the most scenic part of the tourist corridor, should be preserved as a state park or preserve for all Baja Californians, generating sustainable employment through ecotourism and related services, long-term excavations, and park management.

In the US, while government laws regulate cultural resource management, much archaeological work is carried out by private firms. In California alone, hundreds of archaeologists work for private or governmental agencies, much of the work financed by the parties interested in developing land. California has some of the strictest cultural resource laws in the nation.

In contrast, in Mexico, all cultural heritage resource management (including enforcement) is carried out by the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), a federal agency. In all of Baja California,

there are only a handful of archaeologists to protect the state's precious archaeological heritage. To make matters worse, funding priority in Mexico goes to those states with monumental Mesoamerican architecture which helps bring in the tourist dollars. The Baja California delegation of the INAH has worked hard to protect the state's patrimony, but large-scale development has increased exponentially without a similar increase in the INAH's state budget.

Unfortunately this situation combined with the interest of the energy companies in cutting costs and moving ahead with their plans as quickly as possible has led to unrealistic construction timelines that don't consider the normal time needed for appropriate culture resource management. The case of the Bajanorte Gasline, a project of Sempra Energy, provides a chilling example of the difference between one company's stated concerns about complying with environmental and cultural resource laws and regulations and the sad reality of their actions.

The Bajanorte Gasline extends from the Mexicali area to Tijuana, cutting a 25 meter-wide swath for some 222 kilometers. The project, carried out by Gasoducto BajanorteS. de R.L. de C.V., pushed rapidly across the desert, up through the eastern escarpment of the Sierra Juarez range (the Rumorosa area) and was already 50 meters within the Vallecitos Archaeological Site—an important rock art site that has been designated as a protected cultural area by the federal government and is visited by thousands of people every year. The company had not bothered to get any of the normal cultural resource permits (we understand they didn't have an environmental impact report either) and were only stopped through the extraordinary efforts of the personnel of the INAH.

Unfortunately by the time the project was stopped, irreparable damage had already been done to cultural and natural resources. Hundreds of oak and pinyon trees and their habitat had been destroyed along with bedrock mortars and grinding slicks, ancient encampments and untold numbers of archaeological sites. The company had to reroute the swath of the gasline toward the north, however they left the huge scar caused by their errors and have made no efforts toward mitigation of this disaster.

For the rest of the path of the gasline, the INAH's archaeologist worked just ahead of the bulldozers trying to register any sites in order to suggest possible changes in the route. Obviously this way of attempting to preserve cultural resources (only those visible on the surface) is the worst possible option, although it saves companies like Sempra all the time and money which they know it would cost them if they were to carry out the work appropriately.

In conclusion, as an anthropological researcher and an activist, I recommend the following actions:

- 1) Encourage the INAH to hold a meeting of regional coastal archaeology experts (including underwater archaeologists) from both sides of the border to see the Costa Azul site and serve as an advisory board to the INAH throughout this process.

2) If the site must be destroyed in order to sell energy to California then the highest standards for both Baja California and California should be met:

- comprehensive terrestrial and marine studies should be carried out;
- test excavations performed;
- based on these preliminary studies determine if the site qualifies for the National Register of Historic Places;
- If so, develop the necessary management plan;
- Involve local Native Baja Californians;
- Proper processing and curation of excavated materials;
- Materials and the data recovery results should be made available to researchers and the public;
- Funds should be provided for long-term storage, research, exhibition and collections management.

3) Finally, the companies whose businesses will benefit from the destruction of Baja California's cultural heritage should commit to supporting the conservation of similar sites in other areas.