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Harrison Tasoff

An ‘Iconic Headland’

Perched upon the Pacific Coast in sunny Goleta, UC Santa Barbara has an enviable campus that provides a unique suite of opportunities to the community, including dorm-side surfing, on-site marine research and scenic views of the Santa Barbara Channel.

This was not always the case. The seaside location was originally home to thousands of Chumash Indians and later served as agricultural land and a World War II Marine air base. The military presence left an especially pronounced impact on Campus Point — the headland adjacent to the campus beach — which, until recently, still harbored asphalt and concrete foundations as well as carpets of invasive iceplant from that time.

The university’s Cheadle Center for Biodiversity and Ecological Restoration has broken ground on a project to restore the bluff’s native ecology. A series of grants will support the removal of the asphalt pad and the replacement of invasive plants with native flora. The Cheadle Center is working with the Barbareño Band of Chumash Indians to ensure the integrity of the site’s cultural resources, and collaborate on signage that highlights the location’s ecological, geological and cultural heritage.

“Campus Point has so much potential,” said project lead Lisa Stratton, the Cheadle Center’s director of ecosystem management. “It’s this iconic headland that sort of defines UCSB, but it still bears the imprint of degradation from the military era.”

Image



Photo Credit
Harrison Tasoff
Remnants of clay pigeons on the west side of Campus Point recall it’s time as a riflery range during WWII.

Restoration efforts first began in 2012 with the construction of a boardwalk stairway with funding from UCSB, the Coastal Fund and State Coastal Conservancy. Since then, the Cheadle Center has been working on reclaiming the area from invasive iceplant.

However, the task of removing the asphalt pad and restoring the rest of the nearly 7-acre bluff is a major capital project. The Cheadle center has raised slightly more than $150,000 from a mix of local funding sources, university funds and several inspired individual donors.

The university plans to restore a mixture of habitat types including beach dune, coastal scrub and seasonal wetlands. Iceplant has overgrown the bluff since it was

introduced in the 1950s. The monoculture smothers native plants and provides little habitat or food to the region’s wildlife. Cheadle Center staff has used tarps to starve the plants of sunlight and convert them into fertile mulch for the local shrubs that now grace the site’s eastern extent.

The team will start with the south side of the bluff, and hopes to secure more funding to replace fallen trees with native fruiting trees like toyon, elderberry and lemonade berry to support the small woodland on the lagoon side of the headland. Acorns planted in 2005 have already begun to restore the habitat in that area.

It’s one thing to try and bring back native plants — which promote the health of an ecosystem — but the team also plans to take the added step of determining the unique and historical character of Campus Point’s ecology. “Coastal sage scrub is a broad plant community, but I'd say there's a specific flavor to it in the varying regions of California, such as coastal Goleta,” said Chris Berry, the Cheadle Center’s Campus Lagoon steward.

Stratton and Berry are particularly excited by the center’s ongoing success reintroducing increasingly rare native wildflowers and annuals. These plants are incredibly important for supporting native bees, butterflies and other components of the food web. “Unfortunately, these annual flowering forbs tend to get lost and ignored,” Stratton said. “They’re really vulnerable to invasive annual grasses. So bringing them back requires long-term management, controlled burns and careful weed control.”

Image



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UC Santa Barbara
Restoration work on the nearby Lagoon island has replaced invasive grasses with fields of native wildflowers.

The Cheadle Center has seen a lot of success with their prescribed burns on Lagoon Island. A survey of the burn plot in 2020 found 84% native plant cover comprising 33 different species. In contrast, invasive plants accounted for barely 1% of the burned area, according to Berry. While there is no plan to carry out burns at Campus Point, the center continued the practice on Lagoon Island with a prescribed fire in September.

The team will invite local community members to help in the restoration. School groups, student workers and interns will all contribute to the project, as will members of the Barbareño Chumash community.

“You have to continue the connection. We just have to understand how to be more in tune with the land and have more awareness of traditional ecological knowledge," said cultural monitor LoryAnn Velez, a former councilmember for the Barbareño Band of Chumash Indians with an extensive formal background in cultural and historical preservation.

The whole area around Goleta Slough is environmentally and culturally sensitive, with a long history of Chumash presence. Campus Point was undoubtedly a familiar location to past Chumash people. Historic notes and maps preserve the site’s Chumash name, Sismikiw. The nearby Goleta Slough (Sitiptip in Chumash) was once

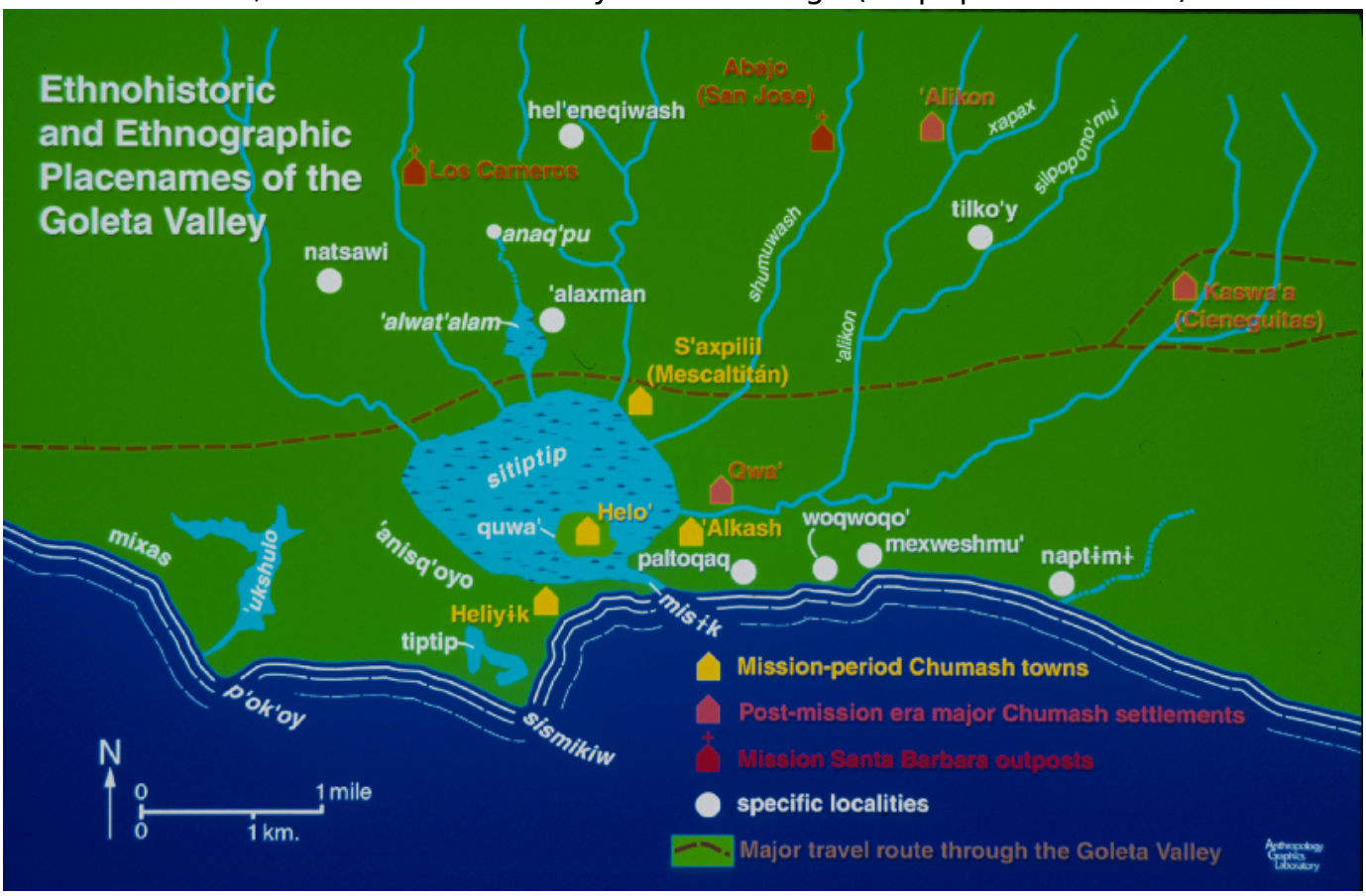


Photo Credit
MICHAEL GLASSOW
A map of Chumash settlements in Goleta prepared by UC Santa Barbara’s Anthropology Graphics Lab.

Natural processes and human activity dramatically reshaped the area around campus over the past 200 years, altering the ecology and cultural record. Large debris flows in November 1861 turned the bay into more of a shallow lagoon. Then in WWII, government airfield construction filled in most of the Goleta Slough, leaving the saltmarsh we see today. This process destroyed half of Mescaltitlan Island (or Helo'), the historical site of a major Chumash village.

Velez appreciates the Cheadle Center's commitment to restoration, saying that their work is bringing "the right spices" to help return Campus Point to its original flavor and prevent further ecological and cultural impacts.

Of course, learning from the past is an important part of building a better future. In this light, the team plans to install interpretive signs as part of the restoration effort. The placards will inform visitors about the site's history, geological processes and cultural heritage. The goal is to foster a connection with the ecology, culture and history of the location.

"The site is really accessible to the campus community," Stratton said, "and the project will restore this amazing headland for generations to appreciate and enjoy."

An earlier version of this story reflected a different funding source and timeline.

Tags
Ocean and Beaches

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.