

We're getting the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary!

by Andrew Christie and Gianna Patchen



Robert Schwemmer/NOAA

After more than ten years on this campaign and over forty years of local advocacy, we are ecstatic to report that on October 11 the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) announced its designation of the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary off the Central Coast of California and released the final designation documents.

In the words of Federal Register Notice 89FR-83554:

“NOAA is designating the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary (CHNMS) in the waters along and offshore of the coast of central California to recognize the national significance of the area's ecological, historical, archaeological, and cultural resources and to manage this special place as part of the National Marine Sanctuary System. The sanctuary boundary encompasses 4,543 square miles of submerged lands and marine waters.”

The sanctuary will protect ocean habitat off 43 miles of the Central Coast. It joins the Channel Islands and Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuaries to our south and north as a hub for research and monitoring projects, volunteer opportunities, education and outreach.

NOAA's designation decision for the sanctuary initiated a 45-day congressional and state review period. After 45 days of congressional session, the Chumash Sanctuary designation will be finalized and set in stone!



Photo by Carole Mintzer

Northern Chumash Tribal Council Chair Violet Sage Walker spoke at the sanctuary designation ceremony at Dinosaur Caves Park in Pismo Beach on Oct. 14.

An Indigenous Cultural Heritage Action Plan will refine and adopt the sanctuary's framework for Indigenous engagement and collaboration. NOAA intends to take an inclusive approach to working with all types of local stakeholders and groups, residents, federally recognized Tribes, Native American Tribes that are not federally recognized, and other Indigenous groups and organizations.

Though the sanctuary's boundaries exclude the area north of Avila to Cambria, a Boundary Adjustment Action Plan is included in the final documents. This plan outlines NOAA's process to consider sanctuary expansion, initiating that process no later than January 2032. Potential expansion northward is outlined as well as other potential areas. To meet the 2032 target, scientific analysis and characterizations of ocean resources could begin as soon as designation is finalized. Future expansion will entail a public review and comment process.

It has been a long journey to this monumental environmental victory, spanning three presidential administrations. The Santa Lucia Chapter of the Sierra Club has been there every step of the way as part of the local alliance that backed the Chumash in their quest.

Our chapter was part of the coalition that worked with the Northern Chumash Tribal Council to draft the nomination for the sanctuary and show NOAA our stretch of ocean is special.

Before and after the submission of that nomination in 2015, the Santa Lucia Chapter of the Sierra Club spent years petitioning, sending postcards and e-mail alerts, writing articles and

letters to the editor, giving interviews to magazines, newspapers and radio and television outlets, tabling at local events, holding fundraisers and film screenings, going door to door to local businesses, hiring interns to work on the campaign, and placing op-eds and full-page ads in the Tribune and New Times. We accompanied the nominators, former Chair Fred Collins and current Chair Violet Sage Walker of the Northern Chumash Tribal Council, as they spoke before city councils, advisory bodies, the county supervisors, and every community group that would have us. The Sierra Club commissioned an economic study that concluded a Central Coast sanctuary would likely result in, conservatively, 600 new jobs and a \$23 million annual local economic boost.

We all persisted, [against much opposition](#). Now the dream is real. Now the work begins.



Management Plan Change between Draft and Final

Boundary Adjustment Action Plan – Phase 2

- Designation of the Final Preferred Alternative to be considered **“Phase 1”**
- Final Management Plan will include a **Boundary Adjustment Action Plan** supporting a **Phase 2** for Sanctuary conservation of the region
 - Strategies will call for additional evaluation of areas to the **west and north** of the sanctuary, as well as **Morro Bay Estuary**
 - To be initiated with first sanctuary management plan review, **5-7 years after designation**, and no later than **January 2032**
 - Other agencies will have been able to complete planning and permitting for offshore wind energy development in the area
 - Conservation options to be considered: **a)** expanding the CHNMS boundary (possible name reconsideration); **b)** expanding the MBNMS boundary southward; **c)** designating a new stand-alone sanctuary; **d)** non-sanctuary conservation measures

More to come NOAA presented its final Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary plan at the Oct. 9, 2024, meeting of the California Coastal Commission.