



## JEDI Makes Waves

The Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary proposal came to Capitol Hill on June 9 when Violet Sage-Walker, vice chairwoman of the Northern Chumash Council, spoke on a panel at Capitol Hill Ocean Week (CHOW), hosted by the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation. The event convened policymakers, scientists, managers, business leaders, conservationists, educators, students, and members of the public over June 8-10 in Washington D.C. to engage in dialogue on significant issues that impact our ocean. CHOW 2021 focused on Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI) to identify the steps we can take as a community to address racial equity and justice in ocean conservation, science and policy making.

[President Biden Should Designate the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary](#)

By [Violet Sage-Walker](#)

June 08, 2021

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I grew up at the beach, and my compass, and the compass of my people, is set by where the ocean is.

Six years ago my father, Chairman of the Northern Chumash tribe, led the public nomination effort to designate the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary, and it has been on the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's list of possible new National Marine Sanctuary sites ever since. If designated, it would be the first National Marine Sanctuary to be indigenous led in its design and management.

My people have lived on our ancestral land and navigated its coastal waters for millennia as protectors and managers, but history has seen our sovereignty over that land taken from us, and we're not alone. The majority of tribal nations are denied access to the very spaces where our ancestors once lived; denied access to the decision-making on our lands by non-tribal governments; and denied the resources necessary to protect and preserve those lands. It is time to reverse some of that legacy of colonization with concrete actions.

The history of the Chumash is awe-inspiring. For the last 15,000 to 20,000 years we have lived along the same stretch of Central California coastline. There are more than a thousand recorded archaeological sites both onshore and offshore that tell our stories. Prior to European colonization, we were coastal traders and open ocean navigators. That way of life had mostly been lost to us until 1976, when the disparate Chumash tribes came together to rebuild the ancient tomol canoes. The tomols allowed us to return to navigating the waters of the Santa Barbara Channel and reconnected us with our ancient island homelands. They helped us to

rediscover the old seafaring ways and to reclaim our heritage as stewards over these waters. The ocean brought our people back together.



My tribe's nomination of the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary six years ago was an opportunity for us to reclaim our identity as an ocean-going people.

The proposed Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary would protect 140 miles of coastal waters from Gaviota Creek in Santa Barbara County to Santa Rosa Creek in Cambria. This area contains biologically productive and diverse ecosystems including large concentrations of kelp, wetlands, and estuaries, as well as extensive cultural Chumash sites.



At the southern edge of the proposed site is an area known as Point Conception, which has been recognized internationally as being of historical significance with regards to spiritual and

cultural archaeological evidence of pre-history. We call it Humqaq, and we regard this “Western Gate” as one of our most sacred sites not only on Chumash lands, but in all of North America. It is the point where the coast of California goes from a North/South bearing to an East/West one. My people believe that this point is the doorway to the afterlife and we consider ourselves its guardians.

If the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary is designated it would exemplify the principles laid out in the Biden Administration’s recently released [\*Conserving and Restoring America the Beautiful\*](#) report, which recommends supporting locally led and locally designed conservation efforts; honoring tribal sovereignty; and providing support for tribal nation priorities.

This report also incorporates and supports California’s efforts to protect thirty percent of land and ocean by the year 2030 (an effort often referred to as “30x30”). The 30x30 effort seeks to leverage the power of our natural areas in the fight against climate change and biodiversity loss. Tribal nations — as protectors of our cultural sites, and with our ecological and historical knowledge — are key to the success of the 30x30 initiative.

My people hold in our hearts deep reverence for Grandmother Ocean, Mother Earth, and all living things. The preservation of our tribe’s spiritual and cultural resources is our heritage and our responsibility. The Biden administration’s designation of the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary would protect ocean life and sacred cultural Chumash sites; strengthen our community; and serve as a model of indigenous-led conservation in local and national efforts to protect 30x30.

*Violet Sage-Walker is vice chairwoman of the Northern Chumash Tribal Council.*