

The Significance of Restoring Santa Cruz Island

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During my graduate student years, my research often took me on flights to southern California. On clear days, when we began our descent into the L.A. area, I would always see Santa Cruz Island and start thinking about it. When I joined The Nature Conservancy, I finally had the opportunity to visit the island. It was even more magnificent than I had imagined — a real hotbed of evolution. Almost all of California, it seems, is compressed into the island's 60,000-plus acres. Many species have made exquisite adaptations to island life. Unusual morphs abound, products of isolation.

I was also struck by how much the landscape has been altered by nineteenth-century settlers. Fennel, eucalyptus, non-native grasses, and the still-evident damage caused by feral pigs and sheep, all mar what should be a pristine jewel. Today, the Conservancy and Channel Islands National Park are doing their best to resolve the problems that earlier generations inadvertently created. We have a fighting chance of restoring this unique piece of California to a natural state close to its condition in 1700, before European settlement. I can think of no other California landscape so large where this could be a realistic goal.

I was born in Sri Lanka, an island in the Indian Ocean, and I understand the role islands play in natural history and regional cultural history. My own research on genetics and carnivore demography is applicable to Santa Cruz Island. All island populations suffer the genetic consequences of isolation, and the only two mammal predators on Santa Cruz — the island fox and the island skunk — are imperiled.

Visiting the island and talking to the staff and the scientists who do research there showed me that we already know a good deal about the natural history of the place. This makes the island ripe for the practical application of focused science. The Conservancy has plans to include our long-term partners—Channel Islands National Park, the University of California Natural Reserve System, the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, and the Santa Barbara Botanical Gardens—in future research, monitoring, and restoration efforts.

The Conservancy's long-term goal is to help restore Santa Cruz Island's unique habitats, native species, and natural communities to full health. The restored "Galapagos of North America" will be a remarkable legacy for future generations.

M.A. Sanjayan joined The Nature Conservancy of California as Director of Conservation Science in 1998. Sanjayan received his master's in biology from the University of Oregon and his Ph.D. in 1997 from the University of California, Santa Cruz, where he worked with Dr. Michael Soulé, a pioneer in the field of conservation biology. His dissertation focused on genetic and demographic consequences of population isolation, using pocket gophers as subjects.