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Diverse Paradise
Frolicking Off California's Channel Islands
TUSCANY COOKS WITH PASSION · WINDSURFING PUERTO RICO

DIVERSE PARADISE

WITH SUNLIGHT-SPLASHED CATHEDRALS OF KELP AND SEA LIFE OF STUPEFYING VARIETY, THE UNDERWATER DIVERSITY AND BEAUTY OF THE CHANNEL ISLANDS ARE RIVALED BY ONLY A FEW PLACES ON THE GLOBE.

STORY BY KEN MCALPINE PHOTOGRAPHY BY NORBERT WU

Forty years is enough time to diminish a love for anything, but this is not the case for Dick Madsen.

Madsen peers over the side of the *Double Jump*, strokes his goatee, and cackles.

"Pretty, pretty water," he says. "We've got good vis."

Indeed, the water here off tiny Santa Barbara Island is a cobalt blue, and the visibility, while not the jaw-popping, 100-foot-plus stuff the Channel Islands can serve up, is still respectable. Looking down from the *Double Jump*, Madsen's twenty-five-foot charter dive boat, we can see thick strands of kelp stringing their way down to a sandy bottom forty feet below.

Madsen first dove the Channel Islands right here off Santa Barbara Island in 1955, and if you need a reminder of how much the world's changed since then, count the number of bomb shelters and lawyers. But from where we stand, it doesn't look like much has changed since volcanic explosions first thrust the smallest of California's Channel Islands above the Pacific. Fog presses down. Seabirds whirl along dark, basalt cliffs streaked with lichen. A damp wind snorts, ruffling the water. There is nothing else. Thirty-eight miles to the east, Los Angeles stews in a bouillabaisse of call waiting, gridlock, and liposuction.

Madsen, fifty-nine, has dropped beneath the waters off the eight Channel Islands some 3,000 times. Familiarity hasn't dampened his enthusiasm. "One of the seven diving wonders of the world, these islands," he says, eagerly cramming himself into a frayed wetsuit that looks like its been on every one of his dives. "But you have to see it to believe it."

Which is why, when Madsen goes down, I'm going with him.

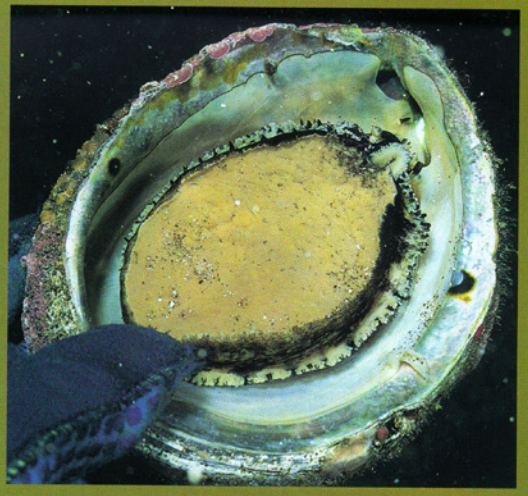
THE EIGHT CHANNEL ISLANDS — Santa Catalina, San Clemente, Santa Barbara, San Nicolas, Anacapa, Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa, and San Miguel — are sprinkled off Southern California from roughly Santa Barbara to San Diego, ensconced in an enormous baylike scoop of coast known as the Southern California Bight. The islands are an odd mix of familiarity and mystery. Anacapa and Santa Cruz can be seen looming large from shore; in summer months, Santa Catalina, about twenty miles from the Los Angeles-area ports of San Pedro and Long Beach, is routinely inundated by thousands of tourists spilling from enormous, high-speed ferries.

But unless you happen to talk to a park ranger or a *Jeopardy!* contestant, you probably won't find anyone who can name all eight islands. Fewer still know what a diving jewel the islands are. But divers who do know will tell you stories of sunlight-splashed cathedrals of kelp and sea life of stupefying variety.

Comparing the sea life of San Miguel with that of Catalina might be equated to comparing the musical tastes of Tipper Gore and Mick Jagger. And the two islands are only a little over 100 miles apart, good news for divers who prefer a short boat ride to jet lag and rude customs clerks.

In fact, the underwater diversity of the Channel Islands is rivaled by only a few places on the globe — the Galapagos Islands, the barrier reefs of Australia and the Caribbean, and a few other locales. That's what Jack Engle of the Marine Science Institute at the University of California, Santa Barbara tells me. A marine biologist, Engle is one of the foremost experts on the Channel Islands, having studied them for the past twenty-five years. It's a job that also gives him a convenient excuse to dive the place.

That eight distinct ecosystems are separated by roughly a finger's length of map might seem surprising, admits Engle,



PROTECTING THE WEALTH OF LIFE BENEATH THE SEA IS AN IMPORTANT KEY TO THE FUTURE OF PLACES LIKE THE CHANNEL ISLANDS. HERE, NATIONAL PARK SCIENTISTS (CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE) TAKE COUNT OF THE ABALONE LIVING IN WIRE AND CONCRETE "CONDOMINIUMS." SOME SPECIES OF ABALONE ARE ON THE VERGE OF EXTINCTION, BUT WITH THE HELP OF PEOPLE SUCH AS THESE NATIONAL PARK SCIENTISTS, ABALONE, ALONG WITH SPINY LOBSTERS AND KELP (LEFT), WILL CONTINUE TO FLOURISH IN THE CHANNEL ISLANDS.

LIFE IN THE CHANNEL ISLANDS IS THE STUFF THE DISCOVERY CHANNEL IS MADE OF. MANY MARINE SPECIES DEPEND ON KELP FORESTS SUCH AS THIS ONE OFF SANTA CATALINA ISLAND (ABOVE) FOR SURVIVAL. OFF THE COAST OF SANTA BARBARA ISLAND (LEFT, MIDDLE), BRITTLE STARS CRAWLING AROUND ON A BAT STAR (LEFT, BOTTOM), AND SCHOOLS OF DOLPHINS FROLICKING ABOVE AND BELOW THE SURFACE (RIGHT) ARE A TINY SAMPLING OF SIGHTS TO BE SEEN.

until you realize that the Channel Islands sit smack-dab between cold, nutrient-rich water steaming down from the north, and warmer, clearer water humming up from Baja California. So the northern islands (San Miguel and Santa Rosa) are dominated by cold-water species, the southern islands (San Clemente, Santa Barbara, and Catalina) feature warmer-water denizens, and the islands in between (San Nicolas, Anacapa, and Santa Cruz) are a mix of the two.

Engle has made exhaustive scientific documentation of such facts, but this hasn't stifled his sense of wonder one bit. "Swimming through the beds of giant kelp and seeing the incredible diversity of life there, it's just amazing," Engle says. "Things can be brighter and more conspicuous on tropical reefs, but I think there are more different kinds of things to see in the kelp beds. You never quite know what's going to turn up."

So why aren't the islands overrun by resorts peopled with beet-faced divers sucking down mai tais and name-dropping dive spots?

Well, for one thing, five of the islands — San Miguel, Santa Rosa, Santa Cruz, Anacapa, Santa Barbara — and the water surrounding them extending out one nautical mile are part of the Channel Islands National Park Service, and Club Med is not a part of the Park Service plan. A sixth island, San Clemente, is routinely rocked by Navy exercises — a distraction to even the most focused diver. But most of all, the Channel Islands can be demanding. The water is cool to shriveling; winter waters off the northernmost islands can drop below fifty degrees, and even during summer at the southernmost islands, you're lucky if surface waters hit seventy. It can get rough, too. Madsen takes divers out to the Channel Islands year-round, but in stormier winter months, he lets clients decide whether they're willing to risk barfing or not. Tides, winds, and surface swells fuel underwater currents of appreciable speed, whipping inattentive divers off on an E-ticket ride to American Samoa.

You might write off Madsen's unswerving devotion to the Channel Islands as lunacy — a sound enough argument in a state where it's often hard to tell who's on what side of the asylum door — but he's not alone.

"The Channel Islands are an extraordinary place," says David Doubilet. A contract photographer for *National Geographic*, and one of the best underwater photographers in the world, Doubilet knows a thing or two about dive spots. "Southern California's kelp forests are some of the most beautiful places in the world."

This assumes there is kelp; a safe enough assumption twenty years ago, but not so safe now. Any biologist will tell you that nature moves in cycles — species boom and wane, downturns and upswings are part of life's roller-coaster tapestry.

But something else is happening at the Channel Islands. Madsen nods out to sea, toward a reef a half-mile away from where the *Double Jump* rolls at anchor. He first dove the reef in the late Fifties. Back then, dives were almost guaranteed to produce lobster and abalone dinners. Ten years later, Madsen began noticing there were fewer lobsters and abalone. As time marched on, he noticed something else, too.

"It wasn't cyclical," he says softly. "They just didn't seem to come back."

"IT'S A VERY STRANGE BUSINESS

in this country," says Gary Davis. "We started setting aside areas of land as national parks and wilderness 120 years ago. In Yellowstone, you don't cut down the trees or shoot the rabbits. But there are no national parks in the marine environment that are completely protected — where we don't harvest things. I think a lot of people would actually be shocked to know that in the national

park here at the Channel Islands, there's very little that's actually protected."

We are aboard the *Pacific Ranger*, whumping our way through early morning fog out to Anacapa Island. On board the fifty-six-foot Park Service vessel are a half-dozen of some of the country's most eminent marine biologists; learned, gray-haired fellows with a closetful of degrees and published works. But today, what they really are is a bunch of schoolboys, giddily playing hooky from office boredom and making no attempt to hide their glee.

A research marine biologist for the United States Geological Survey, when it comes to enthusiasm Davis takes a back seat to no one. But like his fellow scientists, Davis is serious about his work, and for more than thirty years that work has centered around figuring out how to better protect marine life within national parks.

Before Channel Islands National Park was established in 1980, Davis strove to see that the congressional decree establishing the park also called for a long-term monitoring program of the islands' underwater health — not an unreasonable request, given roughly half the park is under water. That came to be, which was a wonderful thing, except that most of what Davis and his fellow researchers seem to be monitoring is the steady, and sometimes shocking, decline of marine species.

Case in point: abalone, the reason for today's trip. These meaty little mollusks once peppered nooks and crevices off the islands (and the mainland), spending their days sucking up drifting algae and, depending on their sex, spewing eggs and sperm into the surrounding water. Problem is, abalone tastes good. Thus was fostered a methodical serial depletion of abalone species that has made their individual worth prettier still. First, pink abs were harvested. When they got scarce, commercial and recreational divers started plucking up red abs, then green, then white, then black. In Hong Kong, diners agreeably shell out $400 for an abalone dinner, and the result isn't surprising.

"We're talking about some species on the verge of going extinct," says Davis.

Abalone aren't the only thing taking a beating off the Channel Islands. Recent years have seen massive die-offs of sea stars and sea cucumbers. Giant black sea bass, once plentiful around the islands, were nearly wiped out (though they appear to be slowly rebounding since a 1982 ban made it illegal to catch them). Pacific angel sharks, once common, are hard to find. Perhaps most disconcerting, the islands' kelp beds seem to be taking a hit, too. In many spots, swaying, luxuriant fields of green are gone, reduced to barren scrabble littered with sea urchins. The dwindling of the kelp beds is particularly troubling, since it is the fabric on which the survival of many other marine species rests.

But it's abalone that concern us now. What biologists are trying to do is help the abalone bounce back. In waters just off the shoreline of Anacapa, they've set up a small habitat of seven wire-mesh cages. Inside those cages are stacked concrete blocks ("Little condominiums," says Davis), and pink abalone collected from around the islands. The reasoning here is simple. Currently, in their natural state, the abs are few and far between. By massing them in one spot, the biologists hope to produce a substantive and concentrated squirt of sperm and eggs, which will hopefully drift off and create new progeny downstream. If the experiment works with pink abalone, similar efforts might be expanded to other species.

As the captain drops anchor, Davis asks that I keep the location of this randy, miniaturized Miami Beach a secret. "We've got about 700 adults on one reef," he says. "In about four hours, a competent diver could make $30,000 out here."

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ALTHOUGH VERY CLOSE TOGETHER, THE ISLANDS MAKE UP EIGHT DISTINCT ECOSYSTEMS. ON CATALINA ISLAND, YOU MIGHT RUN INTO A DEEP-WATER OCTOPUS (LEFT). KEN MCALPINE AND DICK MADSEN (CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE) EXPLORE THE KELP FORESTS OFF SANTA BARBARA. OFF ANACAPA ISLAND, THE BRIGHTLY COLORED SPANISH SHAWL NUDIBRANCH DECORATES THE OCEAN FLOOR. CALIFORNIA SEA LIONS LOVE TO MINGLE WITH DIVERS IN SANTA BARBARA. "URCHIN BARRENS" ARE WHAT SEA URCHINS LEAVE BEHIND AFTER GRAZING ON THE KELP FORESTS.