

“Wetlands Protectors” vs. Big Oil in Southern California:

Oil Drilling, Wetlands Restoration, Indigenous Sovereignty, & the Struggle for the Future of the Los Cerritos/Puvungna Wetlands in Long Beach, CA

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Introduction

On December 13, 2018, the California Coastal Commission¹ approved a controversial “land swap” in the Los Cerritos Wetlands, located in the Southern California cities of Long Beach and Seal Beach, at the border between Los Angeles and Orange counties near the mouth of the San Gabriel River.² According to the proponents of the Los Cerritos Wetlands Restoration and Oil Consolidation Project, in exchange for “restoring” 30 acres of 154 acres of wetlands which have been degraded by a century of oil drilling, Beach Oil Minerals Partners (a business partnership which includes the main oil-drilling company Synergy Oil & Gas) would gain access to 12

¹ In 1972, amidst the rise of the environmentalist movement in California and the United States more broadly, California voters passed Proposition 20, “The Coastal Initiative,” meant to protect California’s coastal regions from overdevelopment and ecological degradation. Prop. 20 mandated the creation of the California Coastal Zone Conservation Commission (the predecessor to the current California Coastal Commission) as well as the California Coastal Plan which would detail policies to protect California’s coastal areas. Based on the Plan, the California state legislature passed the California Coastal Act in 1976, which was signed into law by Gov. Jerry Brown. Since then, the California Coastal Commission has been the primary state regulatory and quasi-judicial agency that regulates the use of land and water resources along the California coast. (Diamond, Jordan et al. [2017]. *The Past, Present, and Future of California’s Coastal Act*. <https://www.law.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Coastal-Act-Issue-Brief.pdf>.)

² Wisckol, Martin. (2018). “Controversial Long Beach wetlands deal approved, more oil drilling expected.” *Long Beach Press-Telegram*. <https://www.presstelegram.com/2018/12/13/controversial-long-beach-wetlands-deal-approved-more-oil-drilling-expected/>.

acres of land—7 acres of private property that have, thus far, been used primarily for a popular pumpkin patch in the fall and a Christmas tree sales site in the winter, and 5 acres of public land that have been intended for ecological restoration.³

Despite the much smaller land area, oil production would increase substantially. While the existing 74 wells produce about 300 barrels of oil a day, the proposed construction of 120 new oil and water wells in the 12-acre zone (along with a fossil gas-fired power plant that would power the electricity needs of the oil extraction operations) would increase production to 24,000 barrels daily, with an estimated total reserve of 200 million barrels of oil to be unearthed over the following decades.⁴ The restoration of the 30 acres of wetlands would be financed by both Beach Oil Minerals and a proposed “mitigation bank” which would allow participating companies and agencies, including the Port of Long Beach, to offset their polluting activities by purchasing “mitigation credits” that would fund the bank.⁵ Meanwhile, revenue for the City of Long Beach from this proposed

³ Edwards, Andrew. (2017). “Pa’s Pumpkin Patch site could see 50 oil wells as Long Beach considers proposal.” *Long Beach Press-Telegram*.
<https://www.presstelegram.com/2017/11/27/long-beach-to-consider-land-swap-that-would-allow-oil-drilling-on-pumpkin-patch-property-other-sites/>.

⁴ Saltzgaver, Harry. (2018). “Long Beach wetlands land swap with oil company about to be approved by Coastal Commission.” *Long Beach Press-Telegram*.
<https://www.presstelegram.com/2018/08/07/coastal-commission-poised-to-approve-oil-wetlands-land-swap/>.

⁵ *Long Beach Press-Telegram*. (2016). “Oil company receives preliminary OK to swap Los Cerritos wetlands for new drilling.”
<https://www.presstelegram.com/2016/08/11/oil-company-receives-preliminary-ok-to-swap-los-cerritos-wetlands-for-new-drilling/>.

expansion in oil production would be expected to increase from the current amount of about \$50,000 to roughly \$4,000,000 annually.⁶

Despite the expected economic benefits for Beach Oil Minerals Partners and for the city governments of Long Beach and Seal Beach, and despite the promise of a wetlands restoration project that would purportedly seek to revitalize the water quality as well as plant and animal life of the 154 acres of degraded wetlands by removing all pipes, wells, and other oil facilities, local Indigenous and environmentalist groups have staunchly opposed the proposed oil-wetlands land swap. The grassroots group Protect the Long Beach/Los Cerritos Wetlands, the Los Angeles chapter of the Sierra Club, representatives of the Tongva and Acjachemen nations, and other concerned individuals, attended hearings throughout 2017 and 2018 for the proposed land exchange at the meetings of the Long Beach City Council and the California Coastal Commission, expressing their adamant opposition to the considerable increase in oil production.

The opponents of the project argue that the ecological restoration and revitalization of the Los Cerritos Wetlands should be the sole course of action taken, and that local and state government agencies should not link the goal of wetlands restoration with an oil company's desire for more profits. They argue that the wetlands are both ecologically important and highly culturally significant, particularly for the Tongva and Acjachemen nations, which consider the "Puvungna Wetlands" (as many of their

⁶ "The Promise: Reinvesting in Long Beach for the long term." *Los Cerritos Wetlands Oil Consolidation & Restoration Project*. <http://loscerritoswetlandsrestorationplan.com/the-plan-los-cerritos-wetlands-restoration/project-objectives/>.

members refer to the Los Cerritos Wetlands) to be a shared Tribal Cultural Landscape and Sacred Site, as the wetlands are the location of the ancient villages of Puvungna and Motuucheyngna. Indigenous and other environmentalists also argue that expanded oil drilling is unnecessary, illogical, and dangerous, as the entire region around the Ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles have the worst air quality in Southern California due to decades of oil drilling and refining as well as the diesel-emitting activities of the shipping and trucking industries of the ports. Moreover, the wetlands themselves are located atop the Newport-Inglewood earthquake fault line, with expanded oil drilling potentially placing the region at a greater risk for oil spills. Unconventional methods of oil drilling, moreover, could also enhance seismic activity, as has been the case in sites where hydraulic fracturing (a.k.a. “fracking”) and other “newer” methods of oil and gas extraction have been conducted in order to obtain hydrocarbon resources located even deeper in the Earth’s crust. Finally, in the context of the global climate crisis and the concomitant increase in oceanic heating, the wetlands are vulnerable to sea-level rise and thus could be inundated with flooding in the coming decades, along with large portions of the Los Angeles-Orange County region more broadly.

Though the California Coastal Commission approved the land swap in December of 2018, grassroots activists have continued their struggle to solely promote the ecological restoration of the entire Puvungna/Los Cerritos wetlands while banning all oil drilling and other fossil fuel

operations. The activists formed a 501c3 organization called Puvungna Wetlands Protectors, through which they launched a lawsuit against the California Coastal Commission to prevent the planned oil drilling expansion from occurring, arguing that that Coastal Commission abused its authority and mandate based on the California Coastal Act. On March 11, 2021, however, Judge Mary Strobel of the Los Angeles Superior Court denied the request of the Puvungna Wetlands Protectors for the oil drilling project to be cancelled. In addition to the lawsuit, these “wetlands protectors” (who include, among their ranks, “water protectors” who faced chemical weapons attacks by the US government during the standoff against the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline at the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe Indian Reservation in 2016) have also been networking with other environmental justice and Indigenous groups in the region. The Los Angeles chapter of the Sierra Club has spoken out against the oil-wetlands land swap, and the wetlands protectors have also received support from SoCal 350 Climate Action, the Sunrise Movement - Los Angeles, Azul (a Latinx marine conservation organization), and members of the Acjachemen and Tongva Nations.

In many ways, the struggle to protect the Puvungna/Los Cerritos Wetlands is part of a larger effort to not only promote ecological sustainability, reduce pollution, and mitigate the climate crisis, but also crucially, in a US settler-colonial context,⁷ to advance the sovereign rights of the Tongva and Acjachemen Nations, which consider the wetlands to be

⁷ Cattelino (2008, 2011), Whyte (2018), Simpson (2014)

culturally significant and sacred lands. Anishinaabe scholar Kyle Whyte (2018:134-5) defines settler colonialism as referring to:

...complex social processes in which at least one society seeks to move permanently onto the terrestrial, aquatic, and aerial places lived in by one or more other societies who already derive economic vitality, cultural flourishing, and political self-determination from the relationships they have established with the plants, animals, physical entities, and ecosystems of those places. When the process of settler colonialism takes place or has already occurred in some region, the societies who are moving in or have already done so can be called 'settlers,' and the societies already living there at the beginning of settlement, 'Indigenous peoples.'

In Southern California, the Tongva, Acjachemen, Chumash, and other Indigenous nations have endured centuries of colonialism since the 18th century, under successive Spanish, Mexican, and US governments.⁸ As Whyte notes, the process of settler colonialism not only erodes the economic, political, and cultural autonomy of Indigenous peoples, but it also “violently disrupts human relationships with the environment” (2018:137). Indeed, the socio-ecological relationships that Tongva and Acjachemen peoples had developed over centuries with the wetlands and other ecologies of Southern California had been violently disrupted, as Spanish settler-colonial ideologies devalued the ecological and economic practices of the Indigenous peoples by imposing a political-economic and infrastructural system of missions, pueblos, and ranchos on Indigenous lands. Beginning with the US annexation of Alta California in 1848, the US federal and California state governments imposed a suite of policies

⁸ Singleton, Heather Valdez (2004).

encouraging agricultural production, real-estate development, and, beginning in the 1920s, extensive oil drilling in Los Angeles and Orange counties, further marginalizing the Indigenous nations.

Nonetheless, Indigenous peoples of Southern California have persevered in the face of settler-colonial rule. Tongva, Acjachemen, and members of Indigenous nations from other parts of the United States (who now reside and/or grew up in Southern California) continue to participate in annual pilgrimages and other ceremonies at culturally significant sites—including the locations of ancient Indigenous villages, ceremonial sites, and burial grounds—in the Puvungna Wetlands as well as other parts of the Southern California coastline, from Panhe (the site of an ancient Acjachemen village located in present-day San Onofre State Beach in the southernmost part of Orange County) all the way up to Puvungna (the site of an ancient Tongva village in what is now the campus of California State University - Long Beach [CSULB]). Indigenous people continue to engage in prayer, ceremony, healing, and communal gathering in honor and remembrance of the Indigenous ancestors that have lived in the California coast for millennia. Indeed, one Acjachemen woman, Rebecca Robles, has referred to the effort to protect the wetlands as “our Standing Rock.”⁹

Methodology

⁹ Interview with Anna Christensen.

This research project on the fate of the Puvungna/Los Cerritos Wetlands is a part of the LABYRINTH Project, headed by Dr. Christopher Kelty of the UCLA Institute for Society & Genetics (ISG). The LABYRINTH Project is funded by the UCLA Sustainable LA Grand Challenge, which seeks to promote research, policies, and strategies for Los Angeles County to attain “100% renewable energy, 100% local water, and enhanced ecosystem health by 2050.”¹⁰ The other LABYRINTH research projects include investigations into various sustainability and biodiversity concerns in Los Angeles, including human-coyote relations, the situation of feral cats, the complexities surrounding rats and rat poison, and the political ecology of lawns. The research on the oil-wetlands land swap was conducted by Bradley Cardozo, a PhD candidate in UCLA’s Department of Anthropology, and Maria Zarifis, a UCLA undergraduate senior majoring in Human Biology and Society. Bradley engaged in ethnographic research with grassroots environmental justice and Indigenous activists, while both Bradley and Maria conducted background research on the history, ecology, and politics of the Los Cerritos Wetlands. Maria also conducted technical research on the ecology, seismology, and climatology of the ports/wetlands region.

For our contribution to the LABYRINTH Project, which began in June 2019, we sought to conduct research on issues of sustainability and environmental justice in the ports region of Los Angeles County (which includes the areas surrounding the Ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles). A

¹⁰ “Grand Challenges: Sustainable LA.” *UCLA Grand Challenges*. <https://grandchallenges.ucla.edu/sustainable-la/>.

colleague of ours in the LABYRINTH Project, PhD candidate Aditi Halbe of UCLA's Department of Anthropology, came across a news article in the *Long Beach Press-Telegram* regarding the proposed oil-wetlands land swap in the Los Cerritos Wetlands that was approved by the City Council of Long Beach as well as the CA Coastal Commission. We then conducted research on what the oil-wetlands land swap deal was and why it was approved, reading newspaper articles (particularly in the *Long Beach Press-Telegram* and the *Los Angeles Times*), blog posts published by the Los Angeles chapter of the Sierra Club, social media posts from the Protect the Long Beach/Los Cerritos Wetlands group, and meeting minutes of the Long Beach City Council posted online. We also engaged in a broader study of the history and contemporary impacts of oil drilling and oil refining in Los Angeles County. We reviewed relevant scholarly articles about the ecology of the Los Cerritos Wetlands, climatological factors including projected impacts of sea-level rise, and studies that have analyzed the connections between oil drilling and seismic activity, particularly in light of the location of the Los Cerritos Wetlands (as well as the subterranean Long Beach and Seal Beach Oil Fields) amidst the Newport-Inglewood earthquake fault line.

From July to December 2019, Bradley conducted ethnographic field research in the coastal regions of Los Angeles and Orange counties, as well as participant observation and interviews with environmental justice and Indigenous activists in locations in which activist actions and ceremonial activities have taken place. These include Downtown Los Angeles, California

State University - Long Beach, Downtown San Juan Capistrano, and Newport Beach City Hall. Some of the activist actions included: the monthly #ClimateStrikes in Downtown Los Angeles (which are a part of the global movement for climate strikes and mobilizations inspired by Greta Thunberg), mobilizations sponsored by the Food & Water Watch as well as Sunrise Movement - LA to support a major solar power deal at the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP), and an action in support of the Acjachemen Nation at the city hall of San Juan Capistrano. Bradley also attended a meeting of the California Coastal Commission in the Newport Beach City Hall in support of a related initiative to protect the Great Blue Herons, for which the Los Cerritos Wetlands serves as an important nesting area. The wetlands are a key site in the Pacific Flyway, a migratory bird route that spans North and South America.¹¹

Finally, Bradley attended a Bear Dance ceremony at Puvungna, a site that has been reserved for Native American ceremonies, rituals, and communal gathering on the campus of California State University - Long Beach (CSULB). The Bear Dance that Bradley attended at Puvungna was the culmination of the 22nd annual "Ancestor Walk"—an annual pilgrimage in the fall made by Tongva, Acjachemen, and other Indigenous people which takes place at sacred sites along the Southern California coastline, including the ancient Acjachemen villages of Panhe and Putuidem (in the Orange County towns of San Clemente and San Juan Capistrano,

¹¹ Louis Sahagun. (2008). "Long Beach, firm seal wetlands deal." *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2008-nov-12-me-wetlands12-story.html>

respectively) as well as Tongva sites in Los Angeles County, including the Puvungna Wetlands and culminating in Puvungna Village at CSULB.

Oil Drilling in Long Beach

Los Angeles County has had a complicated relationship with the oil industry since the discovery of oil in Echo Park in 1892. From the beginning, oil drillers and residents have had conflicting interests in terms of the safety, health, and other implications of active wells. The oil industry in the city of Long Beach boomed in 1921 when the locally prominent Bixby family began leasing some of their land to Royal Dutch Shell Company, which drilled the Alamitos oil well on Signal Hill. Soon after, Signal Hill became a popular and lucrative location for oil drilling. In 1922, the “oil rush” in Long Beach began, and competition for land was so intense that damage to wells occurred and proper well spacing was often ignored. By 1922, thirty-seven companies were operating in the Long Beach Oil Field, making it one of the most rapid oil-field developments in the history of California.¹² California, moreover, became one of the world’s leading “petro states,” with the Los Angeles basin described by later observers as the “Saudi Arabia” of the 1930s.¹³ California was also the leading oil producer in the United States at the time, accounting for 40% of the country’s oil

¹² Ames, L. C. (1987). “Long Beach Oil Operations - A History.” In *Oil Producing Areas in Long Beach: Pacific Section*. Clarke, D.D., and Henderson C. P., eds. American Association of Petroleum Geologists Geologic Field Guide to the Long Beach area. pp. 43-56.

¹³ Sadd, James and Bhavna Shamasunder (2015). “Oil Extraction in Los Angeles: Health, Land Use, and Environmental Justice Consequences.” In *Drilling Down: The Community Consequences of Expanded Oil Development in Los Angeles*. Liberty Hill Foundation: Los Angeles, CA.

production, with peak production reaching 133 million barrels of oil annually by the 1960s.¹⁴ To this day, Los Angeles is home to the largest urban oil field in the United States.

In Long Beach, oil extraction had become the city's primary industry, sparking both a population boom and a multi-million dollar economic boom in real estate as well as retail and other commercial activities. The landscape of Long Beach (and many parts of the Los Angeles basin more broadly) was transformed from ranches and farmland into oil wells, oil derricks, and other facilities connected to the petroleum industry.¹⁵ Specifically in the Los Cerritos Wetlands, Marland Oil Company began drilling for oil on the Bixby family-owned Rancho Los Cerritos (which encompassed the present-day Synergy Oil drilling site) in 1926, thus opening the Seal Beach Oil Field to commercial oil extraction.¹⁶ By 1927, 70,000 barrels of oil were being extracted per day in the Seal Beach Oil

¹⁴ Rapiere, Robert. (2019). "Why The Shale Boom Left California Behind." *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rapiere/2019/03/10/why-the-shale-boom-left-california-behind/#20c8f6cb44e5>.

¹⁵ "Chapter 3: Environmental Setting, Impacts, and Mitigation Measures." "Section 3.4: Cultural Resources." *Los Cerritos Wetlands Oil Consolidation and Restoration Project, Draft Environmental Impact Report*. (July 2017). www.longbeach.gov/globalassets/lbds/media-library/documents/planning/environmental/environmental-reports/pending/los-cerritos-wetlands-restoration-and-oil-consolidation-project/3-04_culturalresources.

¹⁶ Almost 2 decades after the US annexation of Alta California as a result of the Mexican-American War (1846-48), Rancho Los Cerritos was purchased by the Bixby family, an economically powerful Anglo American family, in 1866. At the time, the ranch was managed by Jotham Bixby, considered to be the "Father of Long Beach" ("History: The Bixbys, the oil boom and beautification." *Los Cerritos Wetlands Oil Consolidation & Restoration Project*. <http://loscerritoswetlandsrestorationplan.com/project-site/history/>). The Bixby family was a key player in developing California's ranches and real estate industries throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries; at one point, the Bixby family had owned most of the cities of Long Beach, Seal Beach, and Los Alamitos (Schoch, Deborah [2007]. "Tension over wetlands." *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2007-jul-29-me-marshes29-story.html>).

Field. In 1929, Marland Oil Company was consolidated into Conoco (Continental Oil Company). At the present-day Synergy Oil site, peak production reached 193,880 barrels of oil monthly in the 1930s (6,463 barrels per day). Beginning in 1951, the Bixby Ranch Company began leasing oil drilling rights to different third-party companies. Finally, in 2013, Los Cerritos Wetlands, LLC purchased the present-day 154-acre Synergy site from the Bixby family, with Synergy Oil & Gas, LLC in charge of the oil-drilling operations (i.e., Los Cerritos Wetlands, LLC is the landowning company, while Synergy Oil is the company in charge of the actual oil drilling). If the oil-wetlands “land swap” goes through, these 154 acres of degraded wetlands will be transferred to the ownership of the Los Cerritos Wetlands Authority (LCWA), a public agency mandated to ecologically restore the Puvungna/Los Cerritos Wetlands, while a 12-acre zone of land (encompassing the so-called “Pumpkin Patch” site as well as a 5-acre LCWA-owned site) will be transferred to the ownership of Synergy Oil (a.k.a. Beach Oil Minerals), which will begin major oil drilling operations there.

A “Degraded” Wetlands

Adverse ecological, climatological, seismological, public health, and safety impacts of oil drilling have been a part of Los Angeles County’s oil industry as well as the experiences of oil-impacted residents from the beginning. In the early 1940s, for example, the first physical consequence of

oil drilling was noted — subsidence. Subsidence is defined as the gradual sinking of the land surface, which has affected industrial facilities, buildings, roadways, bridges, and low-lying areas that carry the risk of flooding. Long Beach became nicknamed the “Sinking City,” as land sunk over two feet per year, costing the city millions of dollars in damages.¹⁷ The Puvungna/Los Cerritos Wetlands, meanwhile, have been polluted and degraded by a century of oil drilling.

It wasn't always like this. In centuries past, the Puvungna Wetlands had consisted of a 2,400-acre stretch of healthy coastal salt marshes, bays, lagoons, estuaries, sloughs, river mouths, and alkali meadows, and these environs supported an abundance of wildlife.¹⁸ In precolonial times, moreover, Tongva communities lived in thriving villages throughout Tovaangar (the ancestral lands of the Tongva people, which encompasses present-day Los Angeles County), including the coastal villages of Puvungna (in and around the present-day CSULB campus) and Motuucheynga (Seal

¹⁷ Moreover, air pollution and water contamination from both oil drilling and the burning and refining of oil in nearby refineries (including in the Wilmington neighborhood of Los Angeles and the city of Carson) have caused alarmingly higher rates of respiratory illnesses, heart disease, cancers, dizziness, nosebleeds, and other health problems for local residents (Sadd and Shamasunder 2015). Several local environmental justice organizations - including Stand Together Against Neighborhood Drilling - Los Angeles (STAND-LA), Communities for a Better Environment (CBE), and East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice - have taken strong stances against any new oil drilling, oil refining, and other fossil fuel operations in Los Angeles County, and they have called for a 2,500-ft. buffer zone to be implemented between all existing oil drilling sites and homes, schools, parks, clinics, hospitals, and other sensitive land-use areas. With over 70% of LA's oil operations located within half a mile of neighborhoods that are majority low-income communities of color, the adverse health and ecological impacts of Southern California's oil industry present a stark case of environmental racism, classism, and injustice.

¹⁸ Stein et al. (2007). *Historical Ecology and Landscape Change of the San Gabriel River and Floodplain*. Southern California Coastal Water Research Project (SCCWRP) Technical Report #499. February 2007, pp. 66-67.
http://www.rmc.ca.gov/grants/resources/499_historical_ecology.pdf.

Beach), as well as important settlements in the Southern Channel Islands, including Pimu (Santa Catalina Island), which was a significant ceremonial site connected to Puvungna. Puvungna is considered to be particularly sacred as it was the “place of emergence” of the Tongva people where “their world and their lives began.”¹⁹ The Tongva (as well as the Acjachemen and Chumash peoples) had a strong maritime culture in which they regularly traveled by sea both along the California coast as well as across the Bay of Santa Catalina and Santa Monica Bay to get to and from the Southern Channel Islands. They obtained fish and other marine resources through the use of fishing technologies like plank canoes, and they established elaborate trading networks, using shell-bead currency.²⁰

This relationship that Southern California Indigenous peoples have had with the coastal environment was violently severed by settler-colonial rule, beginning with the Spanish colonial expedition of Gaspar de Portola in 1769, followed by the establishment of the infamous system of California Missions, including the San Gabriel Mission in 1771, built on the Tongva village of Sibagna. Not unlike what occurred at the other Spanish missions built throughout California, about six thousand Tongva people died at the San Gabriel Mission, due to both the spread of diseases and the brutal mistreatment of Indigenous peoples by the mission authorities.²¹ Several uprisings were staged against the San Gabriel Mission by Tongva people,

¹⁹ Green, Sean and Thomas Curwen. (2019). “Mapping the Tongva villages of L.A.’s past.” *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/projects/la-me-tongva-map/>.

²⁰ “Chapter 3.” (2017). *Los Cerritos Wetlands Oil Consolidation and Restoration Project, Draft Environmental Impact Report*.

²¹ Singleton (2004).

including an attempted rebellion in 1785 involving a celebrated Tongva heroine named Toypurina, identified by some historians as Tongva shaman (Ortega 2018:15-17).²² Nonetheless, the intimate relationship that Tongva people had with the plants, animals, and other parts of the wetlands' ecosystem was drastically altered by the imposition of Spanish settler-colonialism, which included the establishment of the aforementioned San Gabriel Mission, the pueblo of Los Angeles, and several ranchos/rancherias throughout the region, including Rancho Los Cerritos. This disruption of the Indigenous relationship to the land continued during the period of Mexican rule (1824-1848), followed by the era of US rule in California beginning in 1848, in the aftermath of the Mexican-American War (1846-48).

Today, roughly 500 acres remain of the Puvungna Wetlands, with only 100 of those acres consisting of relatively unscathed and healthy marshes, including the Steamshovel Slough, the only ancient salt marsh in Southern California and considered the contemporary "jewel of Long Beach."²³ The wetlands are home to endangered species, including the California least tern, the Belding's savannah sparrow, the Sandy Beach tiger beetle (on which the Belding's savannah sparrow feeds), and Southern tarplant.²⁴ More broadly, more than 90% of all of the historic coastal wetlands of Los Angeles and Orange counties have vanished, due to oil drilling, pollution,

²² Ortega, Christopher E. (2018). *Tongva Hospitality, Resistance, and Self-Determination: Long Beach, CA's Place in Prehistory and Native American History*.

²³ Cope, Jeff A. (2015). *Coastal squeeze of vegetation zones in the Los Cerritos Wetlands: The effect of sea level rise*. Master's Thesis. California State University - Long Beach (CSULB), p. 4. <https://pqdtopen.proquest.com/doc/1657409087.html?FMT=ABS>.

²⁴ Schoch, Deborah. (2007). "Tension over wetlands." *Los Angeles Times* <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2007-jul-29-me-marshes29-story.html>.

road building, and residential and commercial (over)development.²⁵ This situation of increasingly vanishing wetlands in Southern California is alarming. Healthy wetlands ecosystems provide critical ecological services, including the sustaining of plant and animal biodiversity, cleaning and filtering of water, and sequestering of carbon dioxide (and thus helping to mitigate the contemporary climate crisis).²⁶

The portion of the Puvungna/Los Cerritos Wetlands that are slated for the oil drilling/wetlands restoration “land swap” are crisscrossed by roads and highways — including the Pacific Coast Highway (PCH, a.k.a. State Route 1), Second St., and Studebaker Rd. — as well as various waterways, including the San Gabriel River, the Los Cerritos Channel, and Alamitos Bay. There are also several commercial shopping centers, including Marketplace Long Beach and Marina Pacific Mall, and the popular Pa’s Pumpkin Patch is located at the intersection of the PCH highway and the San Gabriel River — very close to where the river flows into the Pacific Ocean. Various pumpjacks prying the earth for oil are sprinkled throughout the wetlands (as well as throughout the cities of Long Beach, Signal Hill, Carson, and the Wilmington neighborhood of Los Angeles). The Synergy Oil drilling site is located between the PCH Highway on the west and Studebaker Rd. on the east, and between 2nd St. on the south and the Los Cerritos Channel on the north (which flows into Alamitos Bay, which in turn

²⁵ Wisckol, Martin. (2019). “Endangered wetlands offer vital wildlife habitat and a reason to fight about coastal development.” *Long Beach Press-Telegram*. <https://www.ocregister.com/2019/04/19/wetlands-offer-vital-wildlife-habitat-and-often-a-reason-to-fight-about-coastal-development/>.

²⁶ Cope, Jeff A. (2015), p. 3).

empties into the Pacific Ocean). The Synergy site consists of industrial buildings as well as pumpjacks, oil derricks, drill pipes, mud pits, engines, and other facilities and machinery associated with oil drilling. Much of the rest of the site consists of large swathes of dry dirt and grey residue from the oil drilling operations. In the northern portion of the site adjacent to the Los Cerritos Channel, some portions of dry grass can be seen. There is also a sparse scattering of some shrubbery around the site, as well as a few native Californian palm trees (the California fan palm). The Synergy Oil site is fenced off to the public, as only employees are allowed in the compound. The sights and smells of the place certainly give the impression of a “degraded” wetlands.

In terms of governance and ownership, the portion of the Los Cerritos Wetlands that are slated for the land exchange are held by a hodgepodge of public and private entities. As mentioned, Synergy Oil & Gas holds 154 acres of the wetlands,²⁷ while the 7-acre Pumpkin Patch site is owned by Lyon Living, a local real-estate and property management company. To the northeast of the Pumpkin Patch site are 33 acres owned by the City of Long Beach, which leases the land to Synergy Oil which, in turn, operates 13 oil wells there. Finally, to the northeast of the City-owned site and to the east of the Synergy-held site are 5 acres of publicly-owned land managed by the Los Cerritos Wetlands Authority (LCWA). The LCWA is a California governmental agency formed in 2006 for the purpose of providing:

²⁷ The official owner of the land is Los Cerritos Wetlands, LLC, which has Synergy Oil & Gas, LLC operate the oil wells.

a comprehensive program of acquisition, protection, conservation, restoration, maintenance and operation and environmental enhancement of the Los Cerritos Wetlands area consistent with the goals of flood protection, habitat protection and restoration, and improved water supply, water quality, groundwater recharge, and water conservation.²⁸

The LCWA is a joint-powers governmental agency consisting of representatives from four state and local government entities: (1) the California Coastal Conservancy,²⁹ (2) the San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy (RMC),³⁰ (3) the City of Long Beach, and (4) the City of Seal Beach. Despite the conservationist and habitat protectionist mandate of the LCWA, the LCWA agreed to relinquish the 5 acres that it owns to Synergy Oil / Beach Oil Minerals for the company's plans to expand its oil drilling operations.

This situation in the Puvungna/Los Cerritos Wetlands is not unlike that of other coastal wetlands in the United States. In anthropologist Jessica Cattelino's study of the cultural politics of water in the Florida Everglades, Cattelino examines how the water and other ecological features of the Everglades have been perceived and valued differently by Seminole and

²⁸ "The LCW Authority." *Los Cerritos Wetlands Authority*. <http://intoloscerritoswetlands.org/los-cerritos-wetlands-authority/>.

²⁹ In 1976, the California state legislature passed a companion bill to the California Coastal Act, establishing the California Coastal Conservancy, a non-regulatory state agency meant "to protect and improve natural lands and waterways, to help people get to and enjoy the outdoors, and to sustain local economies along California's coast." The California Coastal Conservancy provides funding and technical assistance to local communities, local governments, NGOs, and other groups and individuals to help conserve, protect, and enhance California's coastal environments. ("About the Conservancy." *Coastal Conservancy, State of California*. <https://scc.ca.gov/about/>).

³⁰ The Rivers and Mountains Conservancy (RMC) was created by the California state legislature in 1999 "to preserve open space and habitat in order to provide for low-impact recreation and educational uses, wildlife habitat restoration and protection, and watershed improvements within our jurisdiction" ("About Us." *San Gabriel & Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy*. <http://www.rmc.ca.gov/about/intro.html>).

Miccosukee Indians, environmentalists, real-estate developers, and the millions of other South Florida residents who rely on the Everglades for their water needs. Cattelino notes how, during the mid-19th century, “Everglades politics have been dominated by three settler imperatives: to make land agriculturally productive; to develop a permanent residential population; and, more recently, to restore the Everglades.” A comparable situation has taken shape in the Puvungna Wetlands, but unlike the federally recognized Seminole Tribe of Florida, the tribes representing Tongva and Acjachemen peoples are not yet federally recognized, but nonetheless are recognized by the state of California, with important implications for the local and state agencies with regulatory power over the wetlands.

Land Swap: Restoring Wetlands, Drilling for More Oil

The oil-wetlands land swap proposed by Beach Oil Minerals / Synergy Oil would result in the restoration of 30 acres of wetlands on the Synergy site in exchange for the 12 acres of land in the Pumpkin Patch site and the LCWA-owned site. The restoration of the remaining 75 acres (of the 154 total acres of the Synergy property) would be the responsibility of the LCWA.³¹ The swap would allow Synergy Oil to build a new 2-story office building and parking lot on the Pumpkin Patch site, and it would give them the right to engage in slant drilling (also known as “directional drilling,” in

³¹ Cantrell, Ann. (2018). “ANOTHER VIEW: No More Oil Drilling.” *The Grunion*. https://www.gazettes.com/opinion/another_view/another-view-no-more-oil-drilling/article_e6fd09c6-06f5-11e9-8fa5-ffe758d5ff35.html.

which the oil well is drilled at an angle instead of vertically) and to use water injection wells. On both the Pumpkin Patch and LCWA sites, Synergy Oil would construct 120 new oil wells and water injection wells, new pipelines, and new processing and storage operation facilities. The company's proposed slant drilling technologies would use water injection wells to pump out oil from beneath the earth; this would require enormous amounts of groundwater that would be used to extract the oil, after which the polluted wastewater would be re-injected into the wetlands. Thus, it is important to note that, despite the claim on the website of the Los Cerritos Oil Consolidation & Restoration Project that there would be a "95% reduction in the oil production footprint,"³² oil production would, in fact, increase considerably (despite the reduced number of acres of land slated for drilling) from the current amount of 300 barrels of oil a day to 24,000 barrels daily, with an estimated total reserve of 200 million barrels to be unearthed over the coming decades from the Seal Beach Oil Field. Moreover, Synergy Oil would be using slant drilling technologies that would be polluting the Pumpkin Patch and LCWA sites, which would have ecological ramifications throughout the wetlands.

Concomitantly, the Los Cerritos Wetlands Authority (LCWA), after relinquishing its current 5-acre patch of land that has been meant for ecological conservation and stewardship, would gain access to the Synergy site in order to attempt to restore it to a healthy, natural wetlands

³² "Reducing our footprint, restoring our wetlands." *Los Cerritos Wetlands Oil Consolidation & Restoration Project*. <http://loscerritoswetlandsrestorationplan.com/the-plan-los-cerritos-wetlands-restoration/>.

ecosystem by unearthing all oil wells, tanks, pipelines, and other associated machinery and facilities, then remediating and revegetating the area (including with native plant species), which would help to clean the water and air while also providing a better habitat for birds and other wildlife. The plan also includes the proposed construction of a visitor's center, parking lot, a public walking trail, and new sidewalks and bike trails.³³

In terms of financing, while Synergy Oil & Gas / Beach Oil Minerals would be responsible for at least the initial costs of removing unused pipelines, storage tanks, and wells, the restoration of 30 acres of the wetlands ecosystem on the Synergy site would be funded through a "mitigation bank." A mitigation bank is a bank approved by certain "state and federal agencies to sell compensatory mitigation credits for projects resulting in unavoidable impacts to waters of the U.S., waters of the State, and other regulated jurisdictional resources."³⁴ The mitigation bank must be approved by an Interagency Review Team (IRT), which includes various California state and federal agencies, including the California Coastal Commission, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and the Environmental Protection Agency. If approved, both the IRT and the mitigation bank's sponsor (in this case, Synergy Oil) would facilitate the selling of credits to private companies and government agencies; after purchasing such

³³ "Benefits: Where public and private interests come together for the greater good." *Los Cerritos Wetlands Oil Consolidation and Restoration Project*. <http://loscerritoswetlandsrestorationplan.com/the-plan-los-cerritos-wetlands-restoration/the-plan-2/>.

³⁴ "Frequently Asked Questions: Mitigation Bank.." *Los Cerritos Wetlands Oil Consolidation and Restoration Project*. <http://loscerritoswetlandsrestorationplan.com/frequently-asked-questions/>.

mitigation credits, the entities could then continue engaging in their own polluting or ecologically damaging activities in wetlands and other ecosystems elsewhere. If the mitigation bank fails to find a market (and thus cannot sell enough credits), then Synergy Oil would be responsible for all the costs.

Ramifications: Earthquakes, Oil Spills, Sea-Level Rise, and the Climate Crisis

The proposed oil drilling expansion in the Puvungna/Los Cerritos Wetlands is complicated by a series of ecological, seismological, and climatological factors. First, the region's seismology — specifically, the wetlands' location amidst the Newport-Inglewood fault line — has brought understandable concerns about oil drilling in an area already prone to earthquakes. On the one hand, the Los Cerritos Wetlands Oil Consolidation & Restoration Project contends that their new oil wells would be constructed in consonance with the region's geology, claiming that the wells would have casing and cement to keep fluids and pressures contained and are "being designed to withstand a 7.5 magnitude earthquake."³⁵ On the other hand, broader geological studies have demonstrated that there is indeed a link between oil drilling and a rise in earthquakes (which would have impacts on the human and natural environments more generally, not just on the oil pipelines). Rather than the drilling itself, the injection of

³⁵ "Frequently Asked Questions: Fracking and Earthquakes." *Los Cerritos Wetlands Oil Consolidation and Restoration Project*. <http://loscerritoswetlandsrestorationplan.com/frequently-asked-questions/>.

wastewater into underground wells after drilling is actually what increases pressure and affects faults underground. In the Dallas-Fort Worth area of Texas, for example, seismologist Beatrice Magnani and her colleagues (2017)³⁶ found that the fault history in the area showed no seismic activity for 300 million years until wastewater injections from drilling sparked a surge in earthquakes in recent times; since 2008, in fact, earthquakes have been unprecedentedly surging throughout Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas.³⁷

Moreover, while scientists have known about the risks of injecting fluids into the ground since the 1960s, growing evidence is making the situation even more concerning. Evidence suggests that the risk of increased earthquakes ramifies beyond the disposal site and can last for more than a decade after drilling stops. Because the wastewater has very high salinity and often contains radioactive material, the water must be buried deep underground which, while reducing the likelihood of it entering human drinking-water sources, actually increases the risk of triggering earthquakes.³⁸ In fact, in 1933, one of the deadliest earthquakes in Southern California history took place when the Newport-Inglewood fault line ruptured. A study carried out by scientists from the US Geological Survey assessed possible factors that contributed to the earthquake's intensity;

³⁶ Magnani, Maria Beatrice, Michael L. Blanpied, Heather R. DeShon, and Matthew J. Hornbach. (2017). "Discriminating between Natural versus Induced Seismicity from Long-Term Deformation History of Intraplate Faults." *Science Advances* 3, no. 11 (November 1, 2017): e1701593. <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.1701593>.

³⁷ Kuchment, Anna. (2017). "Drilling Reawakens Sleeping Faults in Texas, Leads to Earthquakes." *Scientific American*. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/drilling-reawakens-sleeping-faults-in-texas-leads-to-earthquakes/>.

³⁸ Kuchment, Anna. (2017).

according to state oil drilling records between 1900 and 1935, changes in oil production were followed by some of Los Angeles's strongest earthquakes.³⁹

In addition to earthquakes, the proposed oil drilling expansion project also increases the risk of oil spills in the wetlands. Ecological studies of the impacts of oil spills have shown that, when oil spills occur in coastal regions and when the shore is inundated with oil, much of the fauna and flora are wiped out. Of all wildlife, moreover, oil spills pose the greatest risk to seabirds; this would have alarming ramifications for the Puvungna/Los Cerritos Wetlands, which serves as an important site in the migratory bird route known as the Pacific Flyway in which millions of waterfowl and shorebirds migrate between South America and the Arctic every year.⁴⁰ Damage to resources, such as fisheries, typically take priority over damage to ecosystems because of human commercial interests.⁴¹ The Puvungna Wetlands have already been damaged by decades of oil drilling and other economic and residential practices, and a potential oil spill would kill even more plant and animal life while also threatening the health of people living and working in the vicinity.

³⁹ Lin, Rong-Gong, II. (2016). "Southern California's deadliest quake may have been caused by oil drilling, study says." <https://www.latimes.com/local/la-me-ln-oil-drilling-earthquake-20161031-story.html>.

⁴⁰ Palminteri, Sue. (2018). "Inside the Effort to Preserve Migratory Bird Habitat in Central California." *Pacific Standard*. <https://psmag.com/environment/inside-the-effort-to-preserve-migratory-bird-stopovers>.

⁴¹ Kingston, Paul F. (2002). "Long-Term Environmental Impact of Oil Spills." *Spill Science and Technology Bulletin* 7, no. 1-2 (June 2002): 53-61. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1353-2561\(02\)00051-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1353-2561(02)00051-8).

Finally, in our era of anthropogenic climate change, sea levels are expected to rise considerably due to increases in oceanic heating and glacial melting. Geographer Jeff Cope (2015) contends that the Puvungna/Los Cerritos Wetlands will undoubtedly be impacted by rising sea levels along the Southern California coastline, with the degree of impact dependent on the rate and extent of the sea-level rise that occurs. The wetlands will be subject to “coastal squeeze,” a process in which the plant and animal life of salt marshes and other coastal wetlands ecosystems — which normally migrate inland when sea-level rise occurs — are unable to retreat to more inland areas due to blockage from coastal infrastructures like seawalls, waterway structures including river channels and canals, streets and highways, and residential and commercial developments. In other words, the plants, animals, and birds that live in the Puvungna Wetlands will be “squeezed” between a surge of seawater from the Pacific Ocean and human-built coastal infrastructures on the Long Beach and Seal Beach shorelines, threatening the ability of the wetlands ecosystem to migrate, adapt, and survive.

Restoration “Outweighs” Increased Oil Production: Project

Proponents Make their Case

The oil-wetlands land swap was approved by the Long Beach City Council in January of 2018,⁴² and the California Coastal Commission (whose

⁴² Saltzgaver, Harry. (2018).

approval was considered to be the biggest hurdle) authorized the plan in December of 2018,⁴³ though the land exchange has not yet occurred as the state Coastal Commission is being faced with an impending lawsuit by the Puvungna Wetlands Protectors. The land swap has been controversial and divisive within the Long Beach community. Project proponents claim that the plan is beneficial because it would bring 154 acres of (degraded) wetlands into the public domain and attempt to restore the polluted ecosystem. John McKeown, the CEO of Synergy Oil & Gas, framed his company's actions in altruistic terms, stating, "It's one thing to leave the wetlands alone, not touch them... It's another thing to restore them, to actually spend money restoring and bringing back [the] habitat."⁴⁴

McKeown thus believes that his company's plans to cover at least the initial costs of the ecological restoration of the wetlands (with subsequent costs intended to be covered by the proposed mitigation bank), and the overall idea of wetlands ecologists actively rehabilitating the Synergy site rather than merely leaving the site as is, displays an ethical motive in Synergy Oil's land swap proposal. In other words, the oil company could simply profit from expanded oil drilling and not invest any money in ecological restoration. Thus, Synergy Oil, McKeown contends, is demonstrating a sense of corporate responsibility by proposing a restoration plan for the degraded wetlands instead of proposing no restoration efforts at all.

⁴³ Wisckol, Martin. (2018).

⁴⁴ Belk, Sean. (2015). "Oil operator shares vision to restore Los Cerritos Wetlands, consolidate drilling and vacate habitat." *Signal Tribune*.
<https://signaltribunenewspaper.com/26378/uncategorized/oil-operator-shares-vision-to-restore-los-cerritos-wetlands-consolidate-drilling-and-vacate-habitat/>.

Long Beach city councilmember Roberto Uranga, meanwhile, has insisted that the intended land swap is “an opportunity that occurs once in a lifetime,” and that the benefits of saving wildlife and restoring habitats in the Synergy site “far outweighs the oil production” that would substantially increase in the Pumpkin Patch and LCWA sites.⁴⁵ Councilman Uranga, it should be noted, in addition to serving on the Long Beach City Council, also serves as both a commissioner on the California Coastal Commission and a board member of the Los Cerritos Wetlands Authority (LCWA); his role on the LCWA board is by virtue of his position as a board member of the San Gabriel & Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy (RMC), one of the 4 governing agencies of the LCWA (along with the CA Coastal Conservancy and the city councils of Long Beach and Seal Beach).⁴⁶ Uranga has thus been able to exercise considerable influence over governmental decision-making regarding the fate of the Los Cerritos Wetlands based on his ability to vote to approve the land swap multiple times by virtue of his presence on the Long Beach City Council, the CA Coastal Commission, and the LCWA board.

Indigenous and Environmental Justice Activists fight back

⁴⁵ Wisckol, Martin. (2018). “Controversial Long Beach wetlands deal approved, more oil drilling expected.” *Long Beach Press-Telegram*. <https://www.presstelegram.com/2018/12/13/controversial-long-beach-wetlands-deal-approved-more-oil-drilling-expected/>

⁴⁶ “Oil company receives preliminary OK to swap Los Cerritos wetlands for new drilling.” (2016). *Long Beach Press-Telegram*. <https://www.presstelegram.com/2016/08/11/oil-company-receives-preliminary-ok-to-swap-los-cerritos-wetlands-for-new-drilling/>.

Needless to say, there has been strong pushback against the land swap by a network of local Indigenous and other environmental justice activists, some of whom have been involved in environmentalist and Indigenous rights advocacy in Southern California for decades. For these activists and tribal members, the “land swap” is considered to merely be a ploy by a petroleum company and its government accomplices to “greenwash” their oil drilling expansion project. (Wanna add something from Winona LaDuke and Deborah Cowen’s article “Beyond Wiindigo Infrastructure” [2020]).

Tribal leaders of the Tongva and Acjachemen nations have strongly denounced the proposed expansion in oil drilling. In a letter that was read at the California Coastal Commission’s meeting on December 13, 2018, Tongva and Acjachemen elders expressed their adamant opposition to the land swap by reminding the Commission of the cultural and ecological importance of the wetlands, the importance of proper tribal consultation, and the general importance of honoring and respecting the Indigenous peoples of California, who have endured two and a half centuries of disenfranchisement, exploitation, and genocide.

In the letter, Chief Anthony Morales, the Tribal Chair of the Gabrielino/Tongva Band of Mission Indians, criticized the California Coastal Commission for “a lack of proper tribal consultation,” and thus the Commission’s move to approve the oil drilling expansion was not in compliance with the Commission’s own Tribal Consultation Policy. Chief

Morales also lambasted the Cultural and Archaeological Resources Report written by Beach Oil Minerals as a “farce.” He stated that the wetlands are a “Tribal Cultural Property” and that Puvungna has served as “a spiritual gathering place for many tribes, birthplace of Chingishnish, lawgiver and god.” Moreover, Gloria Arellanes, a member of both the Gabrielino/Tongva Band of Mission Indians and the Ti’at Society (dedicated to the continuation of Tongva, Chumash, and Acjachemen traditions of building and riding traditional canoes known as Ti’at) emphasized the importance of her tribe’s use of the sacred wetlands for ceremonial purposes: “We use sacred sites to have a connection to the ancestors. Now we’ve been squeezed by buildings, and roads, and oil, stripped of these places we depend on.” She also reminded the Commission of the existence of burials and cog stones on the wetlands, as further proof of the wetlands’ sacredness and cultural importance. She also pointedly asked, “What is the purpose of the Coastal Commission if not to protect the coast? Long Beach now smells like oil.” She also recognized the ecological and spiritual importance of keeping oil and other fossil fuels in the ground by comparing oil to blood: “As blood runs through our veins, oil runs through the Earth.” Arellanes identified the Puvungna Wetlands as the Indigenous people’s house of worship: “The Los Cerritos Wetlands is our church. This is where we pray. This is where we go to remind people of who we are.”

Another tribal leader, Rebecca Robles, a member of the Acjachemen nation, also emphasized the spiritual, cultural, and ecological importance of

the Puvungna Wetlands in the letter. She stated that the wetlands were where her ancestors fished and gathered tule plants (used for weaving baskets and mats as well as for boat and house construction), and that it serves as “the last remaining ceremonial space.” Robles asserted the profound responsibility that the Acjachemen and Tongva people have to protect the wetlands: “This is our birthright: to be able to walk on the land, to put our tule boats in the water, to see the stars. Our ancestors are native to this place and have lived here for tens of thousands of years. It is our responsibility to care for this land, and we don’t take it lightly. This is our Standing Rock.”

In addition to tribal elders of the Tongva and Acjachemen nations, other Indigenous people and environmental activists have taken a strong position in opposition to the oil-wetlands land swap. The grassroots group Protect the Long Beach/Los Cerritos Wetlands was formed by activists who attended hearings of the Long Beach City Council, the California Coastal Commission, and other relevant government agencies throughout 2017 and 2018 to voice their fierce opposition to any new oil drilling in the wetlands.

I (Bradley) first learned of Protect the Long Beach/Los Cerritos Wetlands after seeing the group mentioned in an article in the *Long Beach Press-Telegram*.⁴⁷ I discovered that they had a Facebook Group page, and, in September of 2019, I contacted two members of the group: Anna Christensen and Tahesha Knapp Christensen. As it turned out, the two

⁴⁷ Saltzgaver, Harry. (2018).

women planned to attend a hearing of the California Coastal Commission on Thursday, Sept. 12, 2019 regarding threats to the habitat of the Great Blue Herons which use palm trees in the Puvungna Wetlands as nesting sites, and they invited me to attend the hearing and to discuss the issue of protecting the wetlands. I learned that Anna and Tahesha are mother and daughter, respectively, and that Tahesha is a citizen of the Omaha Nation in Nebraska (as was her father), though she resides in Long Beach, where she was born and raised.

The meeting of the state Coastal Commission took place in the council chambers of the beautiful Newport Beach City Hall. I was informed that I could find Anna and Tahesha in the cafe of the Newport Beach Public Library, which is adjacent to the city hall. When I arrived (around noon time), I found them sitting at a table with a few other people. The two women were each wearing “hats” that they made to resemble the head, face, and beak of a Great Blue Heron. I walked to the table and introduced myself, and, in turn, Anna and Tahesha introduced me to their friends at the table who were activists representing environmental organizations in Southern California, including SoCal 350 Climate Action,⁴⁸ Azul,⁴⁹ the

⁴⁸ “We envision equitable clean air and water and a stable climate through a fossil-fuel-free future, empowering our Southern California communities to join together for environmental, social, and economic justice.” (“About.” *SoCal 350 Climate Action*. <https://social350.org/about/who-we-are/>.)

⁴⁹ “We treasure the life-sustaining force of the ocean, as well as the physical and spiritual nourishment it provides us. We are a Gente powered and led effort, focused first on celebrating our rich Latino conservation traditions and connecting them to current solutions. Our work is based in authentic engagement, community building, and collaboration.” (“About Us.” *Azul*. <https://azul.org/en/who-are-we/>.)

Environmental Justice Coalition for Water (EJCW),⁵⁰ the American Indian Movement - Southern California chapter (AIM SoCal),⁵¹ and a watchdog group critical of the handling of 1,600 tons of radioactive waste in the now-defunct San Onofre Nuclear Power Plant.⁵² All of the activists at the table were attending the meeting of the California Coastal Commission to advocate for various environmental causes before the commissioners. As I would later learn after attending actions in the Los Angeles / Orange County area throughout the fall of 2019, the members of these Southern California organizations regularly see and support each other at various actions to promote environmental justice and Indigenous sovereignty in the region.⁵³

Anna and Tahesha were scheduled to speak before the commissioners of the CA Coastal Commission later that afternoon regarding the Great Blue

⁵⁰ "The Environmental Justice Coalition for Water (EJCW) is a statewide coalition of grassroots groups and intermediary organizations building a collective, community-based movement for democratic water allocation, management, and policy in California. EJCW empowers the most under-served communities, including those of low-income and communities of color throughout California to advocate for clean, safe, and affordable water." ("About EJCW." *Environmental Justice Coalition for Water*. <https://ejcw.org/index.php/about/>.)

⁵¹ "American Indian Movement Southern California, (AIM SoCal), is an inter-tribal organization that works within the areas of sacred sites protection, preservation of culture [and] language, ending the exploitation of Native American Spirituality and cultural misappropriation. AIM SoCal takes direction from the territories that we are living on as guests, such as Chumash, Tongva, Tataviam, Kumeyaay, Cauhilla and Acjachemen Nations. ("About Us." *American Indian Movement Southern California*. <https://aimsocal.org/about.html>.)

⁵² McNary, Sharon. (2019). "The Nuclear Cleanup At San Onofre Isn't Moving Fast Enough, Congressmen Say." https://laist.com/2019/04/17/the_nuclear_cleanup_at_san_onofre_isnt_moving_fast_enough_congressmen_say.php.

⁵³ I was delighted to meet with this group of Southern California environmental justice and Indigenous advocates, particularly in light of my own experiences with the Philippine Movement for Climate Justice (PMCJ), a grassroots coalition in the Philippines with whom I conducted research for my doctoral dissertation. I was reminded of the type of coalition-building that PMCJ does with other environmental and social justice organizations in the Philippine capital of Manila and throughout the country. (Cardozo, Bradley. [2016]. "Coal in the Philippines: A Filipino American's Perspective." *350.org East Asia*. <https://world.350.org/east-asia/coal-in-the-philippines-a-filipino-americans-perspective/>.)

Heron nesting sites, and while waiting, we were able to discuss the issue of protecting the Puvungna/Los Cerritos Wetlands as well as to learn more about each other's work and lives. Anna, who is white, worked as a high school teacher for 15 years, and she also spent several years working as an art instructor at California State University - Long Beach (CSULB). Tahesha grew up in Long Beach with a diverse Native American community representing nations from both Southern California (including the Tongva, Acjachemen, and Chumash nations) and, like her own Omaha heritage, nations from across the United States.⁵⁴ Los Angeles County is home to the largest concentration of American Indians in the United States.⁵⁵

Anna has been an advocate for environmentalist causes and a supporter of Indigenous rights for decades. In fact, when she was an art instructor at CSULB in the early 1990s, she played an important role in the activist actions to save the sacred parcel of land on campus called Puvungna.⁵⁶ From the 1970s until the early 1990s, the Puvungna site on the

⁵⁴ Tahesha says that she was raised in an Indigenous ceremonial tradition in Southern California in which she, along with her mother, brother, and other relatives and friends, attended pow wows, bear dances, and other special events and occasions to pray, dance, sing, and gather together at sacred Indigenous locations in the region.

⁵⁵ "Largest Population of American Indians in the U.S." *Los Angeles Almanac*. © 1998-2019. Given Place Media. <http://www.laalmanac.com/population/po15c.php>.

⁵⁶ As mentioned, Puvungna is the name of the ancient Tongva village that had encompassed the present-day CSULB campus and surrounding environs, including the Puvungna/Los Cerritos Wetlands. The eventual recognition and regular use of the Puvungna site on campus as a sacred Indigenous ceremonial site can be traced back to the 1960s and 70s, amidst the rise of both Red Power and the environmentalist movement in California. In the 1970s, campus construction workers unearthed the remains of Native American ancestors in the Puvungna site, and the knowledge that the CSULB campus had been the location of Tongva burial grounds inspired Tongva, Acjachemen, and other Indigenous and allied students and community members to both promote American Indian Studies on campus and to fight for Native rights more broadly in the United States. (Loewe, Ronald. [2016]. *Of Sacred Lands and Strip Malls: The Battle for Puvungna*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers).

CSULB campus had been used by both organic gardeners and Native Americans on campus, and it has been listed as both an archaeological site on the National Register of Historic Places and a sacred site on the “sacred lands file” of the California Native American Heritage Commission.⁵⁷ In the early 1990s, however, the CSULB administration sought to transform Puvungna into a strip mall, and in 1992, the administration bulldozed the Organic Garden. After the destruction of the garden, Native American activists and other environmentalists waged a prolonged, years-long struggle against the CSULB administration, including a legal battle that went all the way to the California Supreme Court.⁵⁸ Because of those efforts, Puvungna has been, thus far, preserved as a sacred site for ceremony and gathering.⁵⁹

During the struggle in the 1990s to protect Puvungna, Anna Christensen had been vocally opposed to the CSULB administration’s efforts to bulldoze the Organic Garden and transform Puvungna into a strip mall. She joined the protests against the destruction of the Organic Garden and Sacred Site.⁶⁰ She has remained a strong advocate for environmentalism

⁵⁷ “Remembering the Sacred Site of Puvungna: A Presentation to the Native American Heritage Commission.” July 19, 2019. *California Native American Heritage Commission*. <http://nahc.ca.gov/2019/07/public-meeting-notice-and-agenda-friday-july-19-2019/>.

⁵⁸ Loewe, Ronald. (2016).

⁵⁹ However, Indigenous community members and their allies remain vigilant and protective over the site, particularly in light of recent actions since October 2019 by the CSULB administration to have mounds of dirt dumped on the sacred site from other locations on campus, heightening fears that the administration could be reviving their attempts to transform Puvungna into a parking lot, commercial center, dormitory, and/or other development purposes. (“Protect Puvungna.” *GoFundMe*. Created July 23, 2016.

https://www.gofundme.com/f/CCRPA?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=p_cp+share-sheet&fbclid=IwAR06i6c8ZfajAgK3nJLN9jHFh8enX1INfn0SWi2nGhX5ttPOcVbAr7NkV7k.

⁶⁰ Anna had protested by standing in front of the bulldozers. She was arrested (and released later that night) for that act, and she lost her faculty position at CSULB.

and Indigenous rights in the Long Beach and Orange County region since then, regularly attending relevant meetings of government agencies as well as rallies and actions in support of environmental conservation and the rights of the Tongva and Acjachemen nations. In several newspaper articles that I found when doing research on environmental issues in the Long Beach area, Anna was interviewed and quoted in the articles regarding her opposition to both the oil-wetlands land swap and to city efforts to remove trees that serve as nesting sites for Great Blue Herons in the wetlands. An article in *The Grunion*, a local Long Beach community news source, described Anna as “a prominent environmental activist in east Long Beach.”⁶¹

Tahesha, meanwhile, has continued in her mother’s footsteps. Tahesha was raised in an Indigenous spiritual and communal tradition in Long Beach and surrounding areas, and she received her undergraduate degree from California State University – Long Beach. She has worked as a legal assistant and is currently a campaigner for Greenpeace – Los Angeles. One of the most powerful experiences in Tahesha’s life was her participation in the actions led by members of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and other Native American communities against the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (#NoDAPL) in 2016.⁶² Although the pipeline was eventually constructed and commercially operational by 2017, Tahesha says

⁶¹ Saltzgaver, Harry. (2018). “Activist Tries To Block Tree Removal On Marina Drive.” *The Grunion*. http://www.gazettes.com/news/environment/activist-tries-to-block-tree-removal-on-marina-drive/article_88b4bf68-83b4-11e8-87d1-8781de0aa4a3.html.

⁶² Along with other water protectors, Tahesha was attacked with pepper spray and water cannons by the police.

that her experience at Standing Rock was inspirational and transformative for her, allowing her to expand her network of friends and allies and emboldening her to continue her work and advocacy in Southern California.

Back in Long Beach, Tahesha and her mother remain staunch protectors of both the Puvungna site on CSULB's campus and the Puvungna Wetlands. Both the Puvungna Wetlands Protectors (the 501c3 organization) and the grassroots group Protect the Long Beach/Los Cerritos Wetlands are now focused on generating greater public support for their mission to protect the wetlands. To do this, they have been networking with other Indigenous and environmentalist groups in the region, and they have been spreading awareness at various actions for environmental and climate justice in Los Angeles and Orange counties, including the Youth Climate Strike in Downtown Los Angeles on Sept. 20, 2019, an Indigenous-led rally outside of the Brazilian embassy at the Wilshire Blvd. - La Cienega Blvd. intersection in Los Angeles in protest against the Brazilian government's destructive actions in the Amazon rainforest, and a rally near the San Juan Capistrano City Hall to pressure the city council to honor their previous resolutions to dedicate a sacred parcel of land called Putuidem (an ancient Acjachemen village) to the Acjachemen Nation. (The city council was being seduced by promises of increased governmental revenue from a glamping [glamorous camping] company that wanted rights to the site; fortunately, after public pressure from the Acjachemen Nation and their allies, the city council affirmed their commitment to protect Putuidem.) I have also been

personally working with Anna, Tahesha, and other Puvungna Wetlands protectors to create a podcast about their work; the podcast will be facilitated by the Sunrise Movement - Los Angeles (which I joined last September 2019).

After learning more about Anna and Tahesha's important advocacy, as well as the Indigenous philosophical and spiritual worldview that informs and inspires their lives, I came to understand how profoundly the struggle for Indigenous sovereignty underpins the entire struggle to protect the Puvungna Wetlands from more oil drilling, pollution, and degradation. Environmental conservation and Indigenous sovereignty, in this case, go hand in hand. Protect the Long Beach/Los Cerritos Wetlands argues that the government should phase out all fossil fuel extraction operations (and ban all proposed fossil fuel investments) and instead invest in restoring the entire Los Cerritos Wetlands. Restoring the entire wetlands would help to heal the land, foster a greater abundance of plant and animal life, naturally filter and clean the water, help to improve the air quality of the entire region in the vicinity of the ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles (which have the worst air quality in Southern California), and enhance the quality of life of the people of Long Beach and the broader ports region.

Critically, moreover, the protection of the Puvungna Wetlands would protect sacred lands of the Tongva and Acjachemen nations, which have faced centuries of settler-colonial rule under the Spanish colonial government (which coerced many Tongva and Acjachemen into Mission San

Gabriel and Mission San Juan Capistrano, respectively), the Mexican government, and the United States. Indeed, the Puvungna Wetlands are part of a broader network of sacred sites across the Orange County - Los Angeles County coastlines. This became most apparent to me after I participated in a Bear Dance ceremony that Tahesha and Anna invited me to at the Puvungna site at CSULB on Saturday, October 5th, 2019. The Bear Dance, which took place in the evening after dark, was the culmination of the 22nd annual Ancestor Walk. This annual pilgrimage was initiated over two decades ago by the late beloved Acjachemen elder Lillian Robles to honor the ancestors and sacred lands of the Acjachemen and Tongva nations. The Ancestor Walk is meant for Tongva and Acjachemen people, other Indigenous people, and their family and friends to visit sites across the Southern California coast that were locations of ancient Indigenous villages, burial grounds, and ceremonial sites. At each site, the pilgrims gather together, pray, and honor the ancestors. The pilgrimage begins in Panhe, the site of an ancient Acjachemen village in what is now San Onofre State Beach at the southernmost part of Orange County. The pilgrims then caravan to the sites of other Acjachemen villages, including Putuidem (in San Juan Capistrano) and Genga (in Costa Mesa near the Santa Ana River). They then go to Bolsa Chica, where both archaeological artifacts and burial grounds are located. Afterwards, they visit Motuucheyngna (the site of an ancient Tongva village in what is now Seal Beach). The Ancestor Walk then culminates in Puvungna, where the beautiful Bear Dance ceremony takes

place. I found the Bear Dance to be a beautiful and healing gathering in which approximately a hundred people (possibly more) gathered around a great fire, with the aroma of burning sage permeating the meadow.

In this research project, I learned that the struggle over the fate of the Puvungna Wetlands entails far more than the important issues of ecological conservation and restoration, fossil-fuel extraction, and the climate crisis. The protectors of the Puvungna Wetlands have referred to their struggle as “Our Standing Rock” to affirm their role as protectors of both the environment and sacred Indigenous lands. The mission of preserving and restoring the wetlands to clean the air and water and heal the land is intertwined with the quest to promote and expand Tongva and Acjachemen sovereignty in Southern California.