“Good Fish”—Implications of the Fish Remains at Early Rancho Los Cerritos

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Abstract

The bony remains of ocean fish were recovered from two archaeological deposits dating from the 1840s at Rancho Los Cerritos, near present Long Beach, California. These bones indicate the continuance of local Native Tongva fishing into the historic era. The sample is small, but the represented species indicate traditional fishing was pursued both to the offshore kelp beds utilizing boats and along nearshore waters. Most parsimoniously, the fish are interpreted as trade and social interaction between coastal Native Tongva fishermen and Native laborers residing at Rancho Los Cerritos.

Prologue

With his father, the youthful but stout Native Tongva fisherman lugged their tule canoe into the bay, paddled seaward in the morning calm and tied their craft onto a giant sea kelp. Their fishing gear had been smoked for proper luck, and their gourd float with offerings to the ocean spirits was still tied onto a nearby sea kelp frond. They soon captured several grand bonitos, shiny big fish. While paddling back to their village, the younger man spoke with his father who agreed that the largest bonito could be taken to the Native family at Rancho Los Cerritos. The young fellow ran the five miles inland to Cerritos and offered the fresh prize to the Native family there. The mother carefully prepared and cooked the tasty fish for dinner. The young fisherman sat next to the mother’s attractive daughter, and when her daughter and the handsome young fisherman embraced after the grand meal, the smiling mother turned and proclaimed, ‘Good Fish.’

Juan Temple’s Historic Rancho Los Cerritos and Native Indians

Rancho Los Cerritos, now a historic landmark in the City of Long Beach, was a portion of the vast colonial land grant of 1784 to Manuel Nieto. Legal title to the Rancho Los Cerritos property was purchased from descendants in 1843 by Juan Temple. Construction of Temple’s grand adobe ranch house was begun the next year, 1844. Temple was a highly successful and wealthy Los Angeles merchant (Engstrand 2000).

Native Indians were prominent in the development and ongoing early operations of Temple’s Rancho Los Cerritos enterprise. The census of 1850 reported 22 Natives as “California”/”Indian” being present including 10 woman, as well as 14 non-Indians. The adult men each were enumerated simply as “laborer” under the ranch “Manager,” Jose Roco (Newmark and Newmark 1929:79–80). A surveyor’s map of 1852 depicted “Indian Huts” situated just northwest of the big adobe ranch house (Map 454A, Los Cerritos Rancho archives). However, the Native Indian families were gone when the summer 1860 census was undertaken (Dwelling #1257). Additionally, there is abundant archaeological evidence for Native Indian presence and involvement in the ranch activities in the early years.

Temple’s Rancho Los Cerritos thrived with the regional cattle economy, until that economy pursuit collapsed in the great droughts of the early 1860s.

The Bixby family in 1866 bought the property, lived in the big ranch house, and maintained a successful sheep ranching operation through the 1880s (Engstrand 2000).

The Archaeology of Early Rancho Los Cerritos

William S. Evans, Jr., the initial curator of this landmark property recognized two significant archaeological treasure troves of buried material culture artifacts soon after he began his tenure in 1957. Trained in archaeology at UC Berkeley, Evans initiated and organized volunteer archaeological explorations of these two important heritage features. One archaeological feature was designated as the "Area 1" deposit, while the other was designated as the "Island" deposit. Investigations concluded that the "Area 1" deposit had been an open erosional arroyo about 65 feet north of the ranch house; subsequently this arroyo partially had been infilled over many decades with household trash, including some butchered sheep remains. The "Island" deposit feature, situated about 80 feet west of the adobe ranch house, was concluded to have originated as a barrow pit for adobe clay in the original construction of the adobe ranch house; subsequently, it had been infilled with construction debris, layers of butchered and often incinerated cattle bone, plus abundant early domestic trash (Evans 1969).

The historical archaeological materials in both of these depositional features necessarily would date from 1844 and thereafter. Both deposits included broken and discarded Native produced ceramics, as well an occasional marine fish bone. When the Rancho Los Cerritos archaeological collections were being reorganized, the senior author recognized these fish items as having unusual significance. These special bones then were set aside for further analyses and identification. All the recovered archaeology materials were transferred in 2005 to be curated at the rancho (Evans and Chace 2005).

The principal published report on the Rancho Los Cerritos archaeological explorations is entitled "California Indian Pottery, A Native Contribution to the Culture of the Ranchos" (Evans 1969). This important publication described the broken and discarded Native produced ceramics encountered in both the "Island" and the "Area 1" deposits, which were classified as Cerritos Brown Ware.

The archaeological depositions within each of the two deposits were somewhat stratified, but comprehensive analyses and tight dating have not been realized. The cultural materials within the early "Island" trash deposit essentially has been dated within the 1844–1860 period (Evans 1969; LeVine 1975; Evans and Chace 2005). Besides the Native ceramics, this pit debris also included a variety of Native stone tools, several stone arrow points, some bone tools, plus a few glass trade beads (Steve Iverson, personal communication 2010). This deposit contained masses of butchered cattle bone (Evans et al. 1970) and many clothing buttons (LeVine 1975). Present also were abundant broken pieces of imported, colorful, Anglo-American ceramic tablewares of the period; some of these tableware sherds carried annual British Registry marks exclusively of the 1850s (Evans and Chace 2005).

In contrast, the materials within the "Area 1" deposition appeared to span a much longer period. Recovered were some early materials probably from the 1840s—broken Native ceramics (Evans 1969), as well as later dated buttons (LeVine 1975), plus other materials clearly from the 1866–1885 Bixby era occupation (Evans and Chace 2005).

The fish bone specimens mostly were recorded as recovered from the lower portions of the two archaeological deposits. Although not specifically dated, they probably are best understood as early refuse from the 1840s.

Fish Bone Specimens

Twelve fish bones were recognized within the Rancho Los Cerritos collection when the materials were being reorganized in 2005. The senior author recognized these little items as having unusual importance (Evans and Chace 2005). Although not representing a robust sample in quantity, their modest presence implicates unusually significant heritage. Mark Roeder, an ichthyologic specialist, generously offered to identify them. For several initially enigmatic specimens, Roeder enlisted the confirmation aid of Dr. Thomas A. Wake of the UCLA Zooarchaeology Lab (Table 1).

Major heritage implications emerge from these identified bones; they represent the variety of marine fish consumed at historic Rancho Los Cerritos. This variety typically are those caught by the prehistoric aboriginal fishermen of the region utilizing their traditional practices. All could have been taken by aboriginal hook-and-line technology. Nearshore open-water habitat is preferred by bonito, barracuda, and halibut; open-water habitats often are adjacent to kelp beds, the preferred habitat of sheephead. However, a boat is required for this open-water fishing, such as the aboriginal balsa canoe. Nearshore rocky habitat is preferred by surf perch, rockfish, and some sheephead; these fish could have been captured from rocky shoreline areas (Eschmeyer et al. 1983, Allen et al. 2006).

Many prehistoric archaeological sites in the region with identified fish remains reflecting the open-water hook-and-line fishing technology requiring Native watercraft have been documented for the southern California coast (Gobalet et al. 2004, Noah 1998) and for the Channel Islands (Turnbull et al. 2015; Newcomb and Gust 2017). The fish specimens identified from Rancho Los Cerritos modestly add to this documentation. Importantly, they significantly extend this recognized Native tradition into the historical era.

Gobalet (personal communication 2019) insightfully notes that bonito predominate in this historic Cerritos collection, and he reflects that this may indicate Spanish enhancement to the aboriginal technology. The region's Native fishermen at Mission San Gabriel were encouragingly organized like a guild by the Spanish Padre Jose Maria Zalvidea following his arrival there in 1806 (Dakin 1939:271; Geiger 1969:267).

Table 1. Identified Fishes.

Feature	Catalog #	Unit	Level (in)	Common Name	Taxon	element	Notes
Area 1	1	1-E3	30–36	Pacific bonito	*Sarda chiliensis*	precaudal vertebra	
	2	1-D4	12–18	Pacific barricuda	*Sphyraena argentea*	vertebra fragment	calcined
	3	1-G4	0–6	Pacific bonito	*Sarda chiliensis*	precaudal vertebra	
	4	1-G4	6–12	California halibut	cf. *Paralichthyes califonicus*	vertebra fragment	
	5	1-G4	12–18	California sheephead	*Semicossyphus pulcher*	precaudal vertebra	
	5A	1-G4	12–18	Pacific bonito	*Sarda chiliensis*	precaudal vertebra	
	7	1-D4	18–24	Pacific bonito	*Sarda chiliensis*	caudal vertebra	
	11	1-F4	12–18	rockfish or sculpin	Scorpaenidae	caudal vertebra	
Island	6	IS-A	36–42	surf perch	*Rhacochilus toxotes*	precaudal vertebra	
	8	IS-C	30–36	Pacific bonito	*Sarda chiliensis*	precaudal vertebra	burned
	9	IS-SW	BBL	California sheephead	*Semicossyphus pulcher*	atlas vertebra	burned
	10	IS-C	30–36	bony fish	Osteichthyes	vertebra fragment	burned

Implications and Conclusions

First, these diverse marine fish bones indicate that a local coastal settlement of traditional Native Tongva fishermen persisted into the 1840s at nearby San Pedro harbor, about five miles distant from Los Cerritos.

Second, the recovered bones indicate that the aboriginal Tongva fishermen at the harbor almost certainly traded with the Native laborers resettled at the new inland Rancho Los Cerritos colonial establishment.

Third, this trade was more than a single occurrence. These fish bones support the proposition of trade and positive social interaction between the coastal Native Tongva fishermen and the Native laborers then residing at Cerritos. The enumerated Native laborers of early Rancho Los Cerritos benefited in positive ongoing social relations with the Native Tongva fishing specialists and enjoyed their "Good Fish."

Most parsimoniously, the tale in the earlier Prologue is validated, attested in the Cerritos archaeology.

Epilogue

… When her daughter and the handsome young fisherman embraced after the grand meal, the smiling mother turned and proclaimed, 'Good Fish.'

Acknowledgments

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This contribution actually was composed as a lamentful ode honoring two crucial and close colleagues, now gone. Sadly, Mark A. Roeder passed on in early 2019; he had generously undertaken the identification of these fish specimen years ago. Additionally, this accounting recognizes William S. Evans, Jr., who passed in 2009; 'Bill' initiated and organized the all volunteered Cerritos archaeology.

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