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Barks and Recreation: Conservation, Coexistence, and Community at La Jolla Cove

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Executive Summary

The recent recovery of various pinniped populations following their protection under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) has been largely hailed as a conservation success. At the same time, many coastal and marine zones have begun to experience a rise in human-wildlife conflict due to increased proximity between humans and pinnipeds. La Jolla Cove is a public beach in San Diego, California where humans and California sea lions come into close regular contact and where the public debate over how best to balance between ensuring public access to the coast with protecting local wildlife has continued to simmer over decades. By creating a short documentary film to explore human-wildlife interactions at La Jolla Cove and highlight the range of beliefs on how to address the issue, viewers will be invited to reflect on their relationship to marine wildlife and develop an informed perspective on how best to build peaceful coexistence between species on public land and oceans. At a time when the environment is changing and marine species are showing up in new locations across the world, exploring the interspecies dynamics at play in La Jolla Cove can help provide timely insights into the ways in which people and wildlife navigate sharing space and how to more peacefully coexisting on a more crowded planet.

Background

As the human population has increased and anthropogenic development and activity has spread across terrestrial and marine environments alike, wildlife has been forced to adjust to living within diminished habitats and shifting ecological conditions. While some species have adapted to survive within the Anthropocene, other species have benefited from protections under various conservation-focused laws and regulations. Marine mammals are a prime example of the latter, where regulations following the passage of the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) in 1972 resulted in widespread increases in populations of marine mammals in the United States, in what has broadly come to be considered as one of the great modern conservation success stories in the United States (Sharp 2024). One marine mammal species that has shown a marked recovery following protections under the MMPA is the California sea lion (*Zalophus californianus*), whose populations have been steadily increasing since 1975 and are currently estimated to be around 257,000 individuals (NOAA Fisheries 2025). Residing mainly in coastal areas, California sea lions rely on sandy beaches and rocky coves as safe sites to haul out and rear their young, with many in the west coast population establishing themselves in the Channel Islands. Over time, factors like increasing populations and rising sea temperatures have resulted in overcrowded habitats and shifting availability of prey, all of which has resulted in sea lions moving into new areas throughout coastal California. One of those new locations is in La Jolla, California, where, starting in the late 1990s, a steady stream of California sea lions began hauling out on the rocks surrounding Point La Jolla and La Jolla Cove, growing into a rookery that is currently estimated to have around 250-300 individuals (Flemming 2024).

In terms of its human inhabitants, La Jolla Cove has long been altered by different waves of change and development. La Jolla's first human inhabitants were the Kumeyaay people, who settled in La Jolla over 9,000 years ago and established seasonal camps on the coastline, collecting marine resources for various purposes (Friends of the Coast Walk 2023). Following the Spanish and Mexican periods and the eventual admission of California to the United States in 1850, the urbanization of La Jolla began in earnest in the mid 1880s with anticipated arrival of the railroad and construction of the historic cottages in 1894 (Hollins n.d.). By the 1920s, La Jolla Cove had emerged as a major tourist destination, and alongside the creation of Scripps Institution of Oceanography in 1903, the San Diego-Scripps Coastal State Marine Conservation

Area (SMCA) in 1929 (becoming California's first MPA), and the La Jolla Ecological Reserve in 1970, all served to establish La Jolla as a major global location for marine research and conservation (Frausto 2024).

The La Jolla of 2025 is known as an affluent hotspot for tourism, marine recreational activities, real estate and development, shopping, dining, and more recently, as a locus for human-pinniped controversies. Starting in the 1990s, harbor seals began hauling out in the La Jolla Children's Pool, steadily growing in numbers and kicking off a decades long debate over the space and the decision to implement spatial closures to the Children's Pool starting in 1992 and seasonal closures beginning in 2013. In terms of sea lions, reports and news stories began to describe the animals hauling out and beginning to birth and raise their pups in the La Jolla Cove/Point La Jolla area starting in the late 1990s through early 2000s. In 2019, the sea lion rookery at Point La Jolla was officially designated by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries (NOAA), as defined as a breeding colony that produces at least 50 pups per season. At Point La Jolla, debates over balancing ensuring coastline access with protection of pinnipeds ensured and resulted in an emergency seasonal closure in 2021, pupping season closures in 2022-23, and eventually with the San Diego City Council vote to close public access to Point La Jolla year-round in 2023 (Flemming 2024). At La Jolla Cove, just adjacent to Point La Jolla, the summer of 2024 saw an onslaught of news stories about sea lion pup deaths and recordings of negative interactions between humans and pinnipeds, with human interference speculated by the media and some local stakeholders to be the cause of up to seven sea lions pups dying in 2024 (Flemming 2024). While recent coverage focusing on the potential human causation of pup mortalities has largely come without evidence or context about natural California sea lion pup mortality, which averages around 15-20% within their first month and higher during years with warmer water temperatures, the increased focus has brought discourse of the state human-pinniped relations to the forefront and created pressure for a response (CalEPA 2018).

Despite the fact that the NOAA recommends people stay at least 50 yards away from pinnipeds, and that the MMPA strictly prohibits the harassment, hunting, capturing, or killing of marine mammals, adherence to those guidelines in La Jolla Cove has remained low and agreement about what exactly constitutes harassment has remained murky (California Coastal Commission 2022). The current controversy in La Jolla Cove has seen a range of passionate advocates and local groups coming forward to express their different opinions for understanding the problem and solutions to pursue, ranging from closing the cove to the public to a proposal to relocate the sea lions elsewhere (Flemming 2024). One challenge to addressing the issue is overlapping jurisdictions in La Jolla Cove, with the City of San Diego consistently arguing that NOAA is ultimately responsible for enforcement of the MMPA, NOAA asserting that it's a city management issue and that they must prioritize efforts to protect endangered or threatened animals, as mandated by the ESA, and the California Coastal Commission being forced to be involved whenever a CCC permit has been required to implement closures (Flemming 2024). In recent years, mounting public pressure has resulted in the City of San Diego and NOAA developing measures including the installation of new signage and increased presence of enforcement and educational figures in the space. Despite these efforts, many advocates have argued that these measures are not enough and have questioned the lack of proactive action in the face of what they see as persistent human-wildlife tension (Mackin-Solomon 2022).

In terms of the overall landscape of human-wildlife conflict involving pinnipeds, many studies have sought to understand the frequency of conflict in the fishing industry as it remains the predominant source of human-wildlife conflict with California sea lions, with one recent study estimating that global fisheries interact with pinnipeds one-third of fishing days and that

around 14% of catch is lost to pinniped predators (Jackson et al. 2024). Less research has been focused on understanding the human-behavior side to growing human-pinniped interactions occurring on coastal and/or public land, causing many local officials and key stakeholders to rely on their own perceptions and understandings of the issue to dictate how they are engaging on it. Beyond exploring the human side of interactions, understanding the impact that the regular exposure to humans is having on the local sea lion population remains an uninterrogated space. By exploring what's known about pinniped culture, including communications, societal interactions, and intelligence, understandings about the potential impact of anthropogenic behaviors on the La Jolla rookery can be gained.

Some experts have argued that the experience in La Jolla Cove is likely to be replicated across other cities as overcrowding, changing water temperatures, and shifting prey availability will continue to disrupt pinniped populations and likely result in them continuing to move into new locations up and down the California coast (Flemming 2024). Beyond pinnipeds, climate change-driven ecological changes are causing marine wildlife to show up in new and unexpected places and resulting in humans reevaluating our willingness to share space and which species deserve anthropogenic affections and protections. Because of its potential application across other geographies into the future in the Anthropocene, exploring the La Jolla Cove as a microcosm for the dynamics at play during interspecies conflict could help to serve as a predictor for what the future might hold in changing, more crowded public spaces.

Initial Research Questions

- ★ **Policy & Management:** What are the main drivers and conditions shaping the evolving relationship between humans and pinnipeds in La Jolla Cove? What are some different perspectives and ideas about the best humane coexistence strategies to use in spaces where humans and wildlife are coming into closer and more regular proximity with each other, such as in La Jolla Cove? What are the main concerns among visitors, residents, and key stakeholders about maintaining the status quo in La Jolla Cove? Where do people believe past attempts to change people's behaviors may have fallen short? Who do people believe should be responsible for making those changes, and what role should local organizations and businesses play in it all?
- ★ **Pinniped Perspectives:** What impact is the close proximity to humans having on the La Jolla Cove sea lion rookery, in terms of their behaviors, health, culture, etc.? What can be learned from the life cycle and social behavior of California sea lions which could be relevant in understanding both animal and human behaviors in the cove? What could the future hold for the La Jolla sea lion rookery, considering the options that have been put on the table for management? How can shifting populations of pinnipeds in other geographies be understood in contrast to what's happening in La Jolla Cove?
- ★ **Lessons from History:** How should the current controversy in La Jolla Cove be understood within the context of the history of anthropogenic use of and development in La Jolla? What can be learned about the past policy and regulations implemented to protect local pinnipeds at the Children's Pool and Point La Jolla which could be applied to the current moment in La Jolla Cove? What can be learned from how the Kumeyaay people lived and interacted with local wildlife and how does it contrast with now?
- ★ **Public Opinion:** How does exploring different attitudes and beliefs help with understanding the current reality of human-pinniped interactions in La Jolla Cove? How do up-close interactions with marine megafauna impact people's perceptions of the ocean and its inhabitants, desire to interact with and take action to protect the environment, and willingness to engage with discussions regarding climate change?

How can knowledge of public opinion help to lessen tensions when navigating the balance between ensuring public access to space with protecting wildlife?

- ★ **Human-Animal Relationships:** Is there something about pinniped morphology and behavior which impacts people's perceptions of them and the tenor/frequency of human-pinniped interactions? What other factors could be driving individual behavior during human-pinniped conflicts in La Jolla Cove? Do people believe that peaceful coexistence between species in La Jolla Cove is important to the success of San Diego's economy, public health, and the local conservation movement? How can understandings about animal culture, intelligence, and sentience help to shift understandings about what's currently occurring in La Jolla Cove? How could new efforts to deepen the human-animal connection, such as those to develop technologies to communicate with animals, as well as those to reframe the legal status of non-human beings, play a role in shifting perceptions of marine animals and the protections they deserve?

Methodology

- A. I conducted **background research** to explore initial research questions, exploring topics such as California sea lion behavior and conservation trajectory, the history around anthropogenic use of and development in La Jolla, and the tenor and dynamics surrounding of human-pinniped relationships over time at the Children's Pool, Point La Jolla, and La Jolla Cove, and broader human-wildlife frameworks for understanding interspecies dynamics at play.
- B. I collected and assembled **archival footage**, including footage of change in La Jolla Cove over time, footage of California sea lions in La Jolla over time, news stories about La Jolla Cove, Point La Jolla, and the Children's Pool, and footage depicting people and animals recreating in the space.
- C. I conducted **5 on-camera interviews with key stakeholders and experts** (including additional 9 interviews on background) to explore the range of perspectives for understanding interspecies relations in La Jolla Cove and ways to improve them, using a set questionnaire to explore topics (see Figure 1). Interviewees included:
 - a. Carol Toye, Co-leader, Sierra Club Seal Society
 - b. Dr. Zachary Schakner, Research Fish Biologist, NOAA Fisheries
 - c. Nick DeNezzo, Supervisor of Rescue, SeaWorld Rescue
 - d. Dr. Shermin de Silva, Assistant Professor, UCSD
 - e. Dr. Stanley Rodriguez, Commissioner for the State of California and President Emeritus of Kumeyaay Community College
- D. I conducted **32 on-the-fly on-camera interviews** with a random assortment of visitors to La Jolla Cove to explore perceptions of sea lions, La Jolla Cove, and how humans and wildlife are interacting in the space (see Figure 2 for on-the-fly questionnaire).
- E. I collected **b-roll and audio** focused on capturing both the range of human and sea lion behavior and interactions in the space (see Figure 3 for equipment list).
- F. I assembled elements into a **short documentary film** (~15 min), to be submitted to film festivals and presented to a variety of audiences (See Figure 4 for project timeline).

Goals

The main goal of the making a short documentary film was to explore a local marine conservation issue from different perspectives and present the story of the human-pinniped relationship in La Jolla Cove in a way that feels honest and representative of the current reality for those most involved. The hope is that this film will be a productive addition to the conversation around human-pinniped management in La Jolla Cove and help to tell the stories of the key stakeholders and visitors in an empathetic, nuanced, and respectful way. In many ways, the story of La Jolla Cove is in contrast to more typical conservation stories, in that the animal center to the story is considered 'of least concern' by the IUCN and the space being contested is in a highly-trafficked destination, beloved by tourists and locals alike, located at the center of a major metropolitan city. Given that context, another objective of the film is to tell a non-conventional, less predictable story about how success in conservation is defined on different timescales and the range of views that are emerging in the debate over how to balance protecting wildlife with ensuring public access and freedom to move throughout parks and wild spaces which remain. Another goal of the film is to encourage viewers to reflect on their relationship with marine animals and past interactions with wildlife, ideally persuading viewers to be more likely to feel positively about sharing space with other species and more likely to pursue more peaceful and positive interactions with wildlife in the future. At base, the hope is that viewers will walk away with a deeper sense of curiosity about and respect for the California sea lion and the complicated relationship they share with humans. At a time when some marine animals are coming into closer and more regular proximity with human populations in many coastal and marine spaces across the world, understanding strategies for building peaceful coexistence between species and decoding a path towards creating positive interactions has never been more important, and the hope is that viewers will take an active role in forging their interspecies relationships into the future.

Impact

In terms of shorter-term impacts, the goal is to submit the film to at least three film festivals, ideally including ones that could get the film in front of conservation-curious audiences, as well as some among the general public and/or residents of San Diego. In order to maximize impact, ideally, some of the festivals might be during the height of sea lion pupping season (late May through October). Impact will be measured by how many film festivals, conferences, or other public forums (online and in-person) the film is accepted into and the relative quality of those venues, interest by relevant organizations to promote or collaborate around the release of the films, efficacy of promotion in advance of those festivals, and the ability to draw audiences to attend the screening(s). In terms of longer-term impacts, the ability of the film to spark conversations around human-wildlife interactions in La Jolla Cove and get people to think about the issue from a different perspective can be measured by any press, social media, or in-person conversations that might result from people seeing the film. Success in this realm can also be measured by the ability to bring together people, ideally local officials and key stakeholders, who were previously opposed to speaking about this issue and get them to engage in respectful and collaborative dialogues about creative ways to build peaceful coexistence strategies together.

Figure 1: STAKEHOLDER/EXPERT INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Intro	Can you state your name and share a few sentences about yourself or your work?
	To start out with a very broad question, how do you feel about the ocean? How does the ocean make you feel?
	Do you have any stories to share that speak to your connection to the ocean or its inhabitants?
La Jolla	Can you tell me about the first time you visited La Jolla Cove and what it was like?
	Imagine that I've never been to La Jolla Cove and I asked you to describe the scene on an average day in 2025. What would I see, hear, smell, etc?
	In your opinion, what makes La Jolla Cove special?
	Do you have any stories about a past experience in La Jolla Cove that characterizes how you relate to the place or why its important to you?
Sea Lions	Turning to the California sea lion, do you have any favorite facts to share about their bodies, behaviors, barks, etc?
	Do you have anything to share about your understanding of sea lion intelligence, specifically?
	What can you share about the population trends of the California sea lion?
	Thinking about visits to La Jolla over the years, when is the first time you can remember seeing sea lions hauling out in the cove?
	What factors do you think could have contributed to the sea lions establishing a rookery in La Jolla Cove, aka, birthing/raising their young here?
	In your experience, how do long-time residents of San Diego feel about the sea lions?
	In your experience, how tourists and visitors to San Diego feel about the sea lions?
	How do <i>you</i> feel about the sea lions, personally?
How do you think the local sea lions feel about us?	
Conflict	How do you think people's attitudes about sea lions relates to how we treat them? Do positive feelings translate to respectful behavior?
	Overall, would you describe the current relationship between humans and sea lions in La Jolla Cove to be more positive or negative?
	Can you describe the first time you witnessed an up-close interaction with a sea lion in La Jolla Cove and what it was like?
	When you witness someone getting too close to a sea lion, how does it make you feel?
	Why do you think some people like to get so close to sea lions in the cove? What compels them?

	Have you noticed any trends among the people who tend to get too close to the wildlife in the cove?
	What impact do you think the up-close interactions with humans have in an urban coastal setting be having on local sea lions, in terms of the speed of habituation, health, behaviors, etc?
	On the whole, what do you think are some of the major threats facing the California sea lion? How does human-wildlife conflict on coastlines fit?
Management	Do you have any thoughts to share about the impact of the debate and eventual seasonal closure of the Children's Pool?
	Do you have any thoughts to share about the impact of the permanent closure of Point La Jolla?
	How do you think the history re: management at the Children's Pool and Point La Jolla is playing out today in cove, if at all?
	Why do you think the issue of pinniped management has remained so controversial locally over the years?
	What are some past strategies that you think have been successful in protecting wildlife and people in La Jolla?
	What are some tangible changes that you believe could be made that would improve interspecies relations, in terms of signage, enforcement, etc. ?
	Are there any outside-the-box solutions that you'd like to put out there for consideration?
	Looking beyond government agencies, who do you feel should take the lead on protecting local wildlife while ensuring public access in a community?
	If nothing changes, what do you think the future holds for La Jolla Cove and its non-human inhabitants?
Lessons	What do you think are some 'lessons learned' from the decades of pinniped-controversy in La Jolla?
	What role do you think the mainstream media has played in creating a narrative of conflict? What has the media gotten wrong in past coverage?
	Do you think it's likely that marine megafauna could be coming into closer contact with humans in the future in other cities?
	Do you think La Jolla Cove can become an example of a place that has built peaceful coexistence between species?
	Thinking about a future on a more crowded planet, are there current examples of peaceful coexistence between species that come to mind?
	What will cities of the future have to learn from La Jolla Cove?
	Is there anything else you'd like to add about anything we've covered today, any additional thoughts or comments?

Figure 2: ON-THE-FLY INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Can you please say your name and what brings you down to the cove today?
IF RESIDENT How often do you come to the cove? How long have you been coming here? What keeps you coming back? Do you remember the first time you came here? Were there sea lions?
Did you see or interact with any sea lions today? How close did you get?
How close do you think it's ok for people to get to them?
How do the sea lions make you feel?
How do you think the sea lions feel about us/people?
Can you do an impression of a sea lion?
Do you have anything else to share about La Jolla Cove and the sea lions?

Figure 3: EQUIPMENT

Type	Category	Use
Canon XA 10	Camera	Public interviews; verite; b-roll
Canon 5D Mk4	Camera	Stakeholder interviews; b-roll
Sony Wireless Lavaliers	Sound	Stakeholder interviews; verite
Blimp	Sound	Stakeholder interviews
Omni Microphone	Sound	Public interviews; natural sound
Tascam DR-100mkIII 2-Track Audio Recorders	Sound	all

Figure 4: TIMELINE

	Feb 17-23	Feb 24-Mar 2	March 3-9	Mar 10-15	Mar 17-23	Mar 24-Apr 6	Apr 7-13	Apr 14-20	Apr 21-27	Apr 28-May 4	May 5-11	May 12-19	May 19-25	May 25-31	Jun 1-7	Jun 8-14
Collect archival footage	Light Purple	Light Purple	Light Purple	Light Purple	Light Purple	Light Purple										
Conduct background research	Dark Purple	Dark Purple	Dark Purple	Dark Purple	Dark Purple	Dark Purple										
Contact potential interviewees	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green	Light Green								
Conduct pre-interviews		Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green								
Draft questionnaire			Red	Red	Red	Red										
Finalize questionnaire							Brown									
Send materials to CAC		Orange														
CAC Meeting #1			Pink													
Conduct stakeholder interviews						Teal	Teal	Teal	Teal	Teal	Teal					
Conduct on-the-fly interviews						Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue					
Collect b-roll						Dark Blue	Dark Blue	Dark Blue	Dark Blue	Dark Blue	Dark Blue					
Send materials to CAC							Orange									
CAC Meeting #2								Pink								
Send materials to CAC									Orange							
CAC Meeting #3										Pink						
Send edit to CAC												Orange				
CAC Meeting #4														Pink		
Editing						Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue
Draft deliverable due to CAC													Red			
CAC feedback due														Red		
Final deliverable due															Red	
Capstone Symposium																Red
Final signed deliverable due																Red

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