



PRESERVING THE SACRED

MARCH 18, 2022



Keep the Putuidem Village and Northwest Open Space Real

By Jeanne Ferris

Why do people feel a need to gather at the peaks of the Himalayas? The Ganges River? —or how about the Lourdes Grotto? What makes that land more sacred or deserving of respect than what’s left under the Acjachemen’s feet? The earth in San Juan Capistrano is a stronghold of powerful memories held alive by their descendants, the Juaneño Band of Mission Indians (Acjachemen).

Despite legal measures and conservation efforts made today, potential development violates recognized open spaces and Indigenous cultural sites in California.

So why must there always be a call to action to protect sacred land in perpetuity? We have all watched one of those dystopian science fiction movies—more concrete than earth, making the future bleak and soulless, leaving us gasping for fresh air and clean water—and relieved it is only fiction.

But is it only fiction?

A Call to Action

A recent call to action affects the last remaining 29 acres in the Northwest Open Space of San Juan Capistrano; it is a rare and protected 65.5 acres. And within it, after eight years of prevailing, the newly celebrated Putuidem Village Park finally opened in December of 2021.

—the mother village for the Acjachemen people.

Surveys conducted by Greenwood and Associates, including McKenna et al. 2010 surveys, confirmed the discovery of Acjachemen burials and other archaeological artifacts.

This confirmation elevated the far reaches of Acjachemen ancestry and spirituality, particularly since a high school leased the land from a private party to build a football field over 29 acres of more *re*burials and, adding insult to injury—named it JSerra Catholic High School.

And now, the last remaining undeveloped acreage is in contention by developers wanting to lease the land because of “rezoning.” The San Juan City Council is meeting in April 2022 to review several lease proposals. San Juan Capistrano residents had already voted twice to tax themselves through a bond to purchase the land and keep it as open space. Yet not one resident challenged the city council’s agenda.

Any potential development would undoubtedly create a residual negative impact and disturb Putuidem’s spiritual noteworthiness, whether commercial or residential.

California Cultural Resource Preservation Alliance, Inc. (CCRPA)—one of 14 organizations opposed to leasing the remaining parcel of Northwest Open Space—was formed in 1998 with Lillian Robles (an Acjachemen descendent, revered elder, and a prominent activist), Dr. Patricia Martz, a former professor of anthropology at California State University, Los Angeles, including other concerned individuals.

“This alliance was in response to the accelerated development in Orange County that was destroying many sites with cultural significance,” Dr. Martz said. “We needed to be able to intervene before it was too late.”

The one development that prompted CCRPA into formation—an area dated back 9,000 years that was supposedly protected became rezoned—allowed a developer to build a gated residential community in Newport Beach over former Acjachemen burial grounds.

A bulldozer discovered human remains during excavation—six hundred ancestors in total were recovered and reburied elsewhere. Furthermore, the developer nor the residents showed any respect to commemorating the Acjachemen peoples’ former resting place with, at the very least, a permanent memorial.

“Some of the groups that may not have signed our letter in the first place are now concerned about losing other open spaces,” Dr. Martz said. “Ideally, the best thing the city could do is to put that land [Northwest Open Space] in a conservation easement that would restrict [ground disturbance].”

An inquiry to the Honorable Derek Reeve, Mayor, and the San Juan Capistrano City Council members for a statement remains unanswered.



Photo courtesy of Rebecca Robles.

Respecting Religion

“We place great value in our spiritual connection to the land; we need to look at the land not as surplus, but as valuable and should be protected,” Rebecca Robles (daughter of Ms. Lillian Robles) said.

She serves as Culture Bearer for the non-profit *United Coalition to Protect Panhe*. “When I was young, we went outdoors; nature was our university. [Dr.] Lisa Miller wrote *The Awakened Brain*, which is about the new science of spirituality. She used science to prove spirituality heals.”

The Awakened Brain: The New Science of Spirituality and Our Quest for an Inspired Life describes “groundbreaking research from MRI studies to genetic research, epidemiology, and more with an on-the-ground application for people of all ages and all walks of life. Dr. Miller gives compelling examples to substantiate that “the engagement of spirituality provides, among other benefits, insulation against addiction, trauma, and depression.”

“I see the suffering in the way that we are living,” Ms. Robles said. “Teen suicides and drug addiction are endemic in California, the angst that young people feel [become overwhelming] —the town over is San Clemente, they call it Heroin High.”

Panhe

On March 27, a community event called *Panhe* celebrates another Acjachemen spiritual place: San Onofre State Beach and San Mateo Campground, in San Clemente.

The event features Native Californian storytelling, singing, dancing, flute performances, vendors, artisans, children’s activities, and plant demonstrations.

Admission is free, and there is off-site parking and a complimentary round-trip shuttle throughout the day from the Concordia Elementary school. *United Coalition to Protect Panhe* sponsored the event in partnership with California State Parks. The official media sponsor is the San Clemente Times.

Permanent Protection

Dear members of humanity let’s not let life imitate art. Leave the fiction where it belongs and challenge the written agenda.

Instead, let’s preserve the last vestiges of open space and join the wise forces who wish for permanent protection that surrounds the religious sites of the First People of California. Leave more earth than concrete for our great-grandchildren and the Acjachemen to connect with its natural beauty and roam free without fences. Keep it real.

Panhe event details and directions: www.sanoparks.org

For participant information, please contact: rerobles1@gmail.com