NATIVE AMERICAN ROCK ART IN THE SANTA MONICA MOUNTAINS: 
A POST-WOOLSEY FIRE CONDITION REPORT

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In early November 2018, the very destructive Woolsey Fire began immediately northeast of the well-known Burro Flats Painted Cave Site Complex, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. On the following day, the raging fire, which caused widespread destruction, reached the Pacific Ocean some 20 miles to the southwest. The Burro Flats Complex includes numerous loci of rock art, and the area that was incinerated also contains abundant rock art. With the assistance of numerous researchers, we examined all of the rock art sites in the Santa Monica Mountains and Simi Hills in order to determine the post-fire condition of these sites. Fortunately, this research showed that almost all of the rock art escaped destruction, although one rock art panel was destroyed and two others were damaged.

The Santa Monica Mountains, including the Simi Hills to the north, are host to numerous Native American sites with pictographic components. Sites CA-VEN-195 and CA-LAN-717 are both outstanding examples of such Native American art. Any damage to these or any of the other rock art sites in the area would be a serious loss. So it was that, beginning early in the afternoon of November 8, 2018, all of the regional rock art sites, and indeed almost everything else in the Santa Monica Mountains, was threatened with destruction when the Woolsey Fire started near the northeast edge of Burro Flats, south of Simi Valley (Figure 1). Santa Ana winds were gusting at 70 miles an hour where the fire began, and flames quickly spread throughout the steep terrain, overwhelming the arriving firefighters. The fire engulfed the well-known National Register of Historic Places listed Burro Flats Painted Cave complex shortly after it began. By the late afternoon of November 9, the fire had crossed the entire range and reached the Pacific Ocean at Malibu, more than 20 miles south-southwest from where it had started. Over the next few days, large parts of the mountains burned—from Malibu Canyon/Las Virgenes Road on the east to beyond the Ventura County line to the west. The Woolsey Fire was one of the worst in the history of the state. Three people were killed, at least 1,600 homes and other structures (some historic) were destroyed or severely damaged (e.g., Peter Strauss Ranch, Paramount Ranch, Sepulveda Adobe), over 250,000 people were evacuated (including the entire population of Malibu), and some 97,000 acres were burned. At the same time, a smaller fire, the Hill Fire, was ablaze near the west end of the mountains. Although the damage was not as severe from that fire, 8,000 to 10,000 additional acres were burned. Given this widespread and catastrophic destruction, it became necessary to consider what negative effects the Woolsey and Hill fires might have had on the Native American rock art of the region.

Therefore, this article is intended to briefly describe the post-fire condition of the pictographic rock art of the Santa Monica Mountains and the Simi Hills. To this end, the descriptions here are in summary form, except in a few cases where recent research supplements the established literature (e.g., Knight 2001, 2016a). In order to determine post-fire site conditions, I helped coordinate field examinations of all the sites with pictographs in these areas. The inspections were made by a variety of knowledgeable people, including Native Americans as well as professional and avocational archaeologists. The information collected included numerous photographs, sometimes of the pictographs both before and after the fires, and I selected the examples seen here. The selections are designed to give readers a general idea of the style and “mood” of each site. The Saddlerock Ranch site (CA-LAN-717) was the first place that was field checked, only one day after the area had burned. Most appropriately, this check was made by members of the Santa Ynez Chumash Reservation Fire Department, who were participating in the fire response effort. The field check of the last site to be reached was made during early March 2019, when it finally became possible to access the “Treasure House” (CA-VEN-195).
The Woolsey and Hill fires are the most recent of which I am aware. There were many others in the past, however, and at least some of them could have affected whatever pictographs existed at the time. As such, it was necessary to ask, “Is there any evidence of damage to any of the area rock art from fires previous to the Woolsey Fire?” Not surprisingly, the answer is “Yes.” We can examine pre-Woolsey Fire photographs from the Saddlerock Ranch site (CA-LAN-717) that show the paintings are superimposed on smoke blackening and numerous spalls, while photographs of the Gilmore Ranch site (CA-VEN-57) show that the paintings have also been placed over/onto smoke blackening. In these two cases, we can clearly see that these sites had burned in the past. Also, at CA-VEN-35 (which did not burn in 2018), it is obvious that spalls undoubtedly caused by fires developed subsequent to the creation of the paintings.

Following this brief consideration of fire damage prior to 2018, it is then necessary to ask, “Are there any obvious differences in the condition of any of the Santa Monica Mountains area pictographs before the fires of 2018 versus after the fires? Again, the answer is “Yes.” Fortunately, most of the pictographs in the 2018 fire areas survived, but one pictograph was destroyed and two were negatively affected (described below).

Before proceeding, a couple of comments are in order. The first is about scale. With the exception of a few of the paintings at Burro Flats Painted Cave and the dominant motif at CA-VEN-8, none of the Santa Monica Mountains area paintings exceeds 20 cm in length, with most being in the 10 to 15 cm size range; panels, where they exist, are mostly less than 2 x 1 m. Second, as noted above, the Woolsey Fire began near...
the northeast edge of Burro Flats, at the former Santa Susana Field Laboratory. NASA-contracted archaeologists have completed a post-fire condition assessment confirming that the beautiful Chumash-style Burro Flats Painted Cave main panel (CA-VEN-1072, Locus 10) and the small group of paintings at Locus 6 both survived the Woolsey Fire. Locus 13, a small set of black linear markings was, unfortunately, destroyed. According to the archaeologist who examined the site, “The oak tree that was growing out of the rock shelter caught fire and burned to its roots, causing the interior of the rock shelter to spall, taking the rock art panel with it” (Phil Reid, personal communication 2019). The two small pictographs at nearby CA-VEN-1413 also survived, as did those at CA-VEN-1772/H, the little-known Burro Flats Burro Pictograph Site (Knight 2016b, 2017, 2018). These three sites were not inspected during our investigation and are not discussed further.

**SITE DESCRIPTIONS**

Descriptions for the sites in our study are listed by State of California trinomial number (i.e., CA-LAN-# or CA-VEN-#). The State of California primary number (i.e., 19-# for Los Angeles County or 56-# for Ventura County) is also provided. I have included names for the sites, where and when they are in common use. In a few cases, I have taken the liberty of adding “Pictograph” or “Pictograph Site” to the name to distinguish the sites with pictograph components from other sites in the same area. I have not repeated all of the alternate names for every site, but the alternate names can be found in Knight (2001).

**CA-LAN-48/49 (19-000048/49), Nicholas Flats Site**

The Chumash-style pictographs at the Nicholas Flats site were apparently destroyed sometime during the 1950s. Green (1935) sketched a few of the pictographs (Figure 2), which indicate that the individual paintings were mono-chrome but that five different colors were used. If this indeed was the case, this would be the only site in the Santa Monica Mountains where more than one color was used, with the possible exception of CA-VEN-314 (see below) (Knight 1997:47, 116, 2016a: 24-26). The Woolsey Fire made it possible to closely examine all the rock formations in the Nicholas Flats site area for the first time in many years. Despite this, none of the people who have examined the area have been able to relocate any paintings. As noted above, sketches were made of some of them (Green 1935; see Figure 2), but they were never photographed.

**CA-LAN-78 (19-000078)**

This site consists of two loci with indistinct red pictographs (Figure 3). The thickly wooded site area was burned in the Woolsey Fire. Smoke blackening was present under the pigment at Feature 1 prior to the Woolsey Fire, which did not cause any obvious additional damage (see Knight 1997:48, 2001:21, 2016a:26).

**CA-LAN-188 (19-000188), Three Springs Canyon Site**

There are at least six reported red Chumash-style pictographs at the Three Springs Canyon site (Green 1935) (Figure 4) that have been inundated by the waters of Las Virgenes Reservoir (see Knight 1997:52, 123-
Given that this site has been underwater for about half a century, it is assumed that the paintings no longer exist, but sketches were made by Green (1935; see Figure 4).

CA-LAN-340 (19-000340), Santa Maria Canyon Pictograph Site

The Santa Maria Canyon Pictograph site (CA-LAN-340) consists of a long, shallow cave. A few simple pictographs can be seen in the back of the cave, including an easily visible set of interconnecting red lines and several not so visible short black lines (Figure 5). The last fire in the area occurred some 20 years ago, and the canyon is currently host to a mature oak woodland and chaparral environment, which is “ripe” for the next fire. However, the threat to the pictographs is not fire but graffiti. The site is in state-managed open space and it is in an area that is scenic and easily accessible to the public, so it has, unfortunately, become a party place (see Knight 1997:56, 2001:23, Figures 7-8, 2016a:26).

Figure 3. Pictographs at CA-LAN-78, Feature 1, after the Woolsey Fire; natural light (left), enhanced (right).

Figure 4. Sketches of rock art elements at CA-LAN-188 (from Green [1935:Figure 8]; no scale). The element on the top right is solid red.
CA-LAN-354 (19-000354), La Sierra Canyon Pictograph Site

This site consists of a small rock shelter with a pictograph panel measuring ca. 60 x 60 cm. The largest painting is in good condition and depicts a Chumash-style anthropomorph (Figures 6 and 7). The thickly wooded site area was burned in the Woolsey Fire, but the pictographs were not damaged (Knight (1997:57, 127, Figure 12, 2001:24, Figure 9, 2016a:24-26). There are two other sites in the immediate area with residual red pictographs (CA-LAN-316 and CA-LAN-4289).
CA-LAN-403 (19-000403)

CA-LAN-403 consists of a few very faded Chumash-style pictographs in a shallow rock shelter. The thickly wooded site area was burned in the Woolsey Fire and the adjacent ranch house burned to the ground, but the painted area was not impacted. This site is not illustrated here.

CA-LAN-717 (19-000717), Saddlerock Ranch Site, Cave of the Four Horsemen, Cave of the Four Equestrians (suggested name)

This site consists of two pictograph panels on different faces of a large boulder (Figure 8). The thickly wooded site area was burned in the Woolsey Fire, and all of Saddlerock Ranch was devastated. Almost all of the residences and facilities, as well as the surrounding oak woodland and chaparral, were incinerated. Thankfully, a few members of the staff refused to abandon the horses, llamas, cattle, and other animals, and all of them were saved. The main panel, which is mostly in good condition, is in the back of a large forward-leaning rock shelter, which is kept clear of brush to facilitate access for visitors; undoubtedly because of this, the beautiful paintings survived the fire intact.

Photographs taken at CA-LAN-717 before the Woolsey Fire show that a considerable amount of smoke blackening and spalling was already present. This suggests that at least one previous fire had affected the inside of the shelter and that contemporary brush control efforts helped prevent this from happening in 2018 (Knight 1997:79-80, 174-184, Figures 59-68 [after Reinhardt 1981], 2001:30, 2016a:24-26).

CA-LAN-743 (19-000743)

CA-LAN-743 consists of a small area covered with red and white painted stripes, measuring ca. 20 x 10 cm (Figure 9). The site area was burned in the Woolsey Fire. The pictographs are still visible but are
now smoke blackened. This pictograph is exposed to the elements and it is possible that some or all of the blackening will eventually wash away (Knight 1997:82, 2001:31, 2016a:26).
CA-LAN-748 (19-000748), Goat Buttes Pictograph Site

The Goat Buttes site consists of a pictograph panel that is approximately 3 m long by about 1 m in height (Figure 10). The site area was burned in the Woolsey Fire, but the pictographs were not damaged. The site is in the Eastern Chumash (Ventureno)/Western Tongva (Fernandeno) interface region (Knight 1997:83). Hyder and Condi (1990) made the case that it was probably made by Chumash people, but I feel that it is more similar to paintings seen in Serrano (e.g., CA-LAN-164, CA-LAN-1302) and Vanyume (i.e., CA-LAN-447) territories (Knight 2001:31, 2016a:10-11; Knight and Hnatiw 2019:6; Knight et al. 2009:8-9).

CA-VEN-8 (56-000008), Highway 23 Pictograph Site (suggested name)

The area where CA-VEN-8 is located did not burn in 2018. The site itself consists of a set of red pictographs in a shallow rock shelter (Knight 2001:33). The paintings were “retouched” sometime in the 1970s (Figure 11). The variation in condition and color of the superimposed obvious red pigment versus the underlying faint red pigment supports this idea, as does the relatively large size of the central figure (ca. 60 cm in height), given that almost all the other Santa Monica Mountains area paintings are much smaller. It is assumed that the faint background figures in the enhanced version (Figure 11, right) are “original” (i.e., prehistoric) and the dark large central element is relatively modern.

CA-VEN-35 (56-000035), Upper Conejo Grade Pictograph Site (suggested name)

This site consists of a long narrow rock shelter, with numerous Chumash-style pictographs on the ceiling (Figure 12). The thickly wooded site area last burned in the 2013 Springs Fire, which cleared away all the thick brush around the rock shelter and made it possible to directly observe the adjacent ground for the first time in many years. Despite careful examination of the area by professional archaeologists and others during our study, no archaeological deposit was observed, although it is still possible that a buried deposit is present. Smoke blackening and spall damage to the paintings from range fires can be seen in Figure 12 (Knight 2001:34).

CA-VEN-57 (56-000057), Gilmore Ranch Rock Shelter

The pictographic component of the Gilmore Ranch Rock Shelter consists of seven loosely grouped pictographs (Figure 13). The thickly wooded site area was burned in the Woolsey Fire but the pictographs were not damaged (Knight 2001:35-36).
Figure 11. Pictographs at CA-VEN-8; illuminated (left), enhanced (right).

Figure 12. Pictographs at CA-VEN-35; left (illuminated), right (DStretch).

Figure 13. Pictographs at CA-VEN-57 after the Woolsey Fire.
There are numerous pictographs at this site, which is at the bottom of a steep rocky arroyo. Access can be difficult when the poison oak is at full growth. The site is best known for a low area underneath a large boulder that is host to several red handprints (Figure 14). Robert Wlodarski (personal communication 2019), who studied the site around 1980, reported that there were at least 60 children’s handprints that were visible at that time. Other pictographs, including multiple aquatic motif images, are also present. It has been reported that following the wet winter of 2019, the rock shelter is currently full of mud and plant debris. The site area last burned in the 2013 Springs Fire (Knight 2001:37).

CA-VEN-195 (56-000195), Boney Mountain Pictograph Site, “Treasure House of Prehistoric Cave Art” (or more simply, “The Treasure House”)

The pictographs at CA-VEN-195 are artistically and aesthetically the finest example of Chumash rock art in the Santa Monica Mountains (Figures 15a-b). The setting includes a wonderful view of the towering massif of Boney Mountain to the immediate north and a commanding view of the Pacific Ocean and Santa Barbara Island, in the distance, to the south.

The entire site area burned in the Woolsey Fire, and although the property owner’s house, facilities, and almost all the vegetation on the surrounding mountain were incinerated (see Figure 15b), none of the paintings were damaged. This was undoubtedly because in 2016 the property owner trimmed back the brush around the rock shelters that have pictographs to facilitate access by visitors (note the difference between the pre-fire background vegetation in Figure 15a (top left) versus the post-fire background vegetation in mid-March 2019 in Figure 15b. This was a good thing, since one rock face with no paintings some 50 feet away from the lower panel was spalled clean over at least 50 percent of its surface by the 2018 fire (see Figure 15b). Clearly, trimming back the chaparral (mostly laurel sumac) saved the paintings from probable destruction. The site and the pictographs were described by Garvin (1978), Gibson and Singer (1970), Knight (2001:40), Knight and Larson (2012), and Larson and Knight (2014).

CA-VEN-203 (56-000203), Upper Carlisle Canyon Cave (suggested name)

This site consists of a very small pictograph panel (ca. 20 x 15 cm) in a small cave. The paintings are simple red and black cross-hatching (Figure 16). The thickly wooded site area was burned in the Woolsey Fire, but the pictographs were not damaged. This is one of two sites (the other being CA-VEN-242; see...
Figure 15a. Pictographs at CA-VEN-195 before the Woolsey Fire (illuminated, upper left) and lower panel after the fire (enhanced, upper right).

Figure 15b. Aerial image of the area around CA-VEN-195 after the Woolsey Fire.

below) that were identified within the Circle X Boy Scout camp, which is now part of the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area (Knight 2001:41).

CA-VEN-242 (56-000242), Upper Carlisle Canyon Rock Shelter (suggested name)

CA-VEN-242 contains a small but interesting pictograph panel in a shallow rock shelter. The site area was burned in the Woolsey Fire, but the pictographs were not damaged (Figure 17). This is one of two sites (the other being CA-VEN-203; see above) that were identified within the Circle X Boy Scout camp (Knight 2001:42, Figure 19).
CA-VEN-314 (56-000314), Camarillo Quarry Pictograph Site (suggested name)

This is perhaps the most enigmatic pictograph site in the Santa Monica Mountains. Pictographs certainly did exist here in the past, but what the pictographs actually looked like is somewhat of a mystery. This is now
impossible to determine since the paintings were destroyed by rock quarrying activities some 50 years ago. As to the origins of a little-known modern painting of the art (Figure 18), apparently the Camarillo Historical Society performed an excavation of the site in 1967, and an artist named Ruth Smith created the painting at that time (Maxwell 1994). Upon careful examination, however, it appears likely that Smith took a few liberties with the composition. Although the art is clearly Chumash in style, the stylized tomol (plank canoe) and the associated anthropomorphs are just a little too stylized, which makes one suspect that the artist may have added personal touches and perhaps (likely) incorporated a few images from other Chumash rock art sites. While there is no way to know for sure about the accuracy of the Smith painting, I have included it here because so little is known about the site and the pictographs. I do note that if the Smith painting is even close to accurate, in terms of numbers of individual elements and color variations, then the CA-VEN-314 paintings would have made the site one of the most significant rock art locales in the Santa Monica Mountains (Knight 2001:43).

CA-VEN-632 (56-000632), Oakbrook Park Site (suggested name)

The rock art at Oakbrook Part consists of multiple loci with minor pictograph components, cupules, and/or bedrock mortars. The entire site area was burned in the Woolsey Fire; Locus J, which consisted of a swordfish motif and a few adjacent black lines, was damaged by being covered in soot (Figures 19 and 20). The site has not been checked in detail, and it is possible that other pictographs may also have been damaged or destroyed (Knight 2001:45). It is noted here that in July 2020, following the winter rains of 2019-2020, it was observed that much of the soot had washed off and the swordfish could again be seen, just barely. Thus, it appears as if the CA-VEN-632 swordfish image was damaged, but not completely destroyed.
Figure 19. Swordfish pictograph at CA-VEN-632 before the Woolsey Fire. Caroline Ward Holland (Fernandeño Tataviam) is burning sage around the swordfish (enhanced).

Figure 20. Swordfish pictograph at CA-VEN-632, before the Woolsey Fire (left) and after the fire (right).
CONCLUSION

It is always necessary to keep things in perspective, and in this case, we can be grateful that the Woolsey Fire—as terrible as it was—did not cause nearly as many deaths as did the Paradise Fire, which was burning at exactly the same time in northern California. Having said this, for many people in the burn area, it was a close call. One property owner told me that her family’s neighborhood was overwhelmed in only minutes “by an avalanche of fire; next time they tell us to evacuate, we will.” I note that she and her husband were able to save their home but, sadly, it was the only residence in the neighborhood to survive the fire. The personal homes of the people that lived at CA-VEN-195 and at CA-LAN-717 were entirely destroyed, and the vegetation at and adjacent to the beautiful pictographs on those properties was virtually incinerated. Only the fact that the property owners had cut back much of the adjacent chaparral saved those paintings from destruction. So here is a definite reminder that most of the private property owners that have the privilege of “owning” these wonderful places are good stewards and we should all be grateful to them.

It was also very heartening that so many people immediately volunteered to help examine the rock art sites in the impacted area. Members of the Santa Ynez (Chumash) Fire Department checked the Saddlerock Ranch site while the ruins of the adjacent ranch structures were still smoldering. Professional archaeologists and staff from the National Park Service (Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area) and from California State Parks, other professional archaeologists (like myself), and several knowledgeable avocational rock art researchers all made personal efforts to visit the sites. Several of these researchers used the opportunity to take current photographs of the paintings which were—some for the first time—analyzed using DStretch photo enhancement. It is hoped that this brief report will remind readers of how grateful we should all be, first of all for the more than 1,000 first responders for their bravery and service in keeping the Woolsey Fire from being even more destructive than it was, and also for the wonderful heritage of Native American pictographic rock art that can still be found throughout the Santa Monica Mountains and surrounding area.

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