

## The Catalina Conservancy's First 20 Years: Private Conservation Comes of Age

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**Abstract.** Review of historical documents and interviews with principals reveal (1) various options considered prior to establishing the nonprofit Santa Catalina Island Conservancy, (2) factors inhibiting a preservationist philosophy on the island, and (3) significant events leading to the conservancy's formation.

**Keywords:** Santa Catalina Island; conservation; restoration; Santa Catalina Island Conservancy; Wrigley; open-space easement; Santa Catalina Island Co.

On 14 February 1975, at 4:15 p.m., Philip Knight Wrigley signed documents that transferred ownership of 82% of Santa Catalina Island from the Wrigley-controlled Santa Catalina Island Company to the nonprofit Santa Catalina Island Conservancy. The conservancy's Articles of Incorporation state that its purpose is solely charitable: "To preserve native plants and animals, biotic communities, geological and geographical formations of educational interest, as well as open space lands used solely for the enjoyment of scenic beauty . . . subject to reasonable restrictions concerning the needs of the land" (Santa Catalina Island Conservancy 1972). At that time, this transaction was the second-largest transfer of acreage from private use to public and philanthropic purposes in the United States. It was believed to be the largest such transfer in California (Santa Catalina Island Conservancy 1975).

Some people trace the origins of this event back to 5 December 1919, when Philip Wrigley's father, William Wrigley, Jr., made his first visit to Santa Catalina. William Wrigley vowed it would be his lifelong project to create a resort where people could come for fun and relaxation, but without a "Coney Island" atmosphere. Wrigley dedicated himself to improving the infrastructure and facilities of Avalon, but left the undeveloped interior relatively untouched (Santa Catalina Island Company 1972, 1973).

While acknowledging the strength of William Wrigley, Jr.'s vision for the island, there were additional factors that contributed to the formation of the Santa

Catalina Island Conservancy. According to testimony of a number of the principals involved, these include:

1. Strong sense of stewardship felt by the descendants of William Wrigley, Jr., regarding Santa Catalina, and their view of the island as a link to this country's western heritage;
2. Results of the Wrigley-commissioned development plan undertaken by William Pereira and Associates, which delineated significant problems associated with development and which concluded that the bulk of Santa Catalina could not be developed;
3. Botanical investigation of the island by Robert Thorne of the Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden;
4. Early conservation efforts implemented by ranch manager A. Douglas Propst, which established that the natural beauty and value of the island could be enhanced;
5. Lack of response of other conservation agencies to Wrigley initiatives; and
6. Negotiation of an open-space easement with Los Angeles County, resulting in reduction of property taxes and helping insure tax-exempt status.

The following is an account of the events that led to the establishment of the Santa Catalina Island Conservancy, as remembered by individuals closely involved. These individuals' personal remembrances not only shed light on the specific factors associated with the founding of the conservancy, but also help establish the mood of the times, adding dimension to the events. Given the absence of written documentation of island history, this information becomes especially significant.

### Introduction

William Wrigley, Jr. purchased Santa Catalina Island in February 1919 in conjunction with the Pasadena real-estate firm of Blakenhorn, Hunter, and Dulin. Wrigley, an energetic man with a variety of interests, also had a pen-

chant for establishing projects wherever he went (Wrigley-Rusack 1986). He had taken to wintering in Pasadena and was looking for something to keep him busy in southern California. The original intention of the syndicate that bought Santa Catalina in 1919 was to subdivide the island for quick profit.

Accompanied by his wife on his first visit to Santa Catalina, Wrigley saw what he called its potential. He decided he didn't share his partners' view, and that he would develop the island as he saw best. Fortunately, he had the where-with-all to buy out his partners and proceed with his own agenda. William Wrigley is said to have had 2 interests relative to Santa Catalina: to provide a "reasonably priced recreation area for Southern California visitors," and "to establish a comfortable and prosperous environment for those who lived in Catalina Island year round" (Wrigley-Rusack 1986).

William Wrigley's only son, Philip, assumed control of the Santa Catalina legacy upon his father's death in 1932 and initiated an early California theme for the island. His words reflect family feelings of proprietorship about Santa Catalina and suggest the island's attraction: "Being an island, we can control a definite plan over a period of years, unhampered by outside commercialism . . . Gradually we may be able to make all of Santa Catalina Island a monument to the early beginnings of California" (Angle 1975). Part of the early California that Wrigley sought to create involved the natural environment. Speaking at the time he was building El Rancho Escondido, his Arabian horse ranch in the center of the island, Wrigley further described his feelings:

I am not going to allow it to be spoiled through development. It is going to stay just as it is, in all of its rugged beauty. That is the trouble with so many of our beautiful places in California. They have been landscaped and developed until, after all, everything is artificial. Beautiful, it is true, but to me, nature in its rough ruggedness has a greater appeal . . . The cottonwoods are going to stay in the canyons, the scrub oak and cactus on the hills, the moss-covered boulders and jagged cliffs where nature put them. It is the one place that I have found where there is still the call of the wild, where one can get close to nature and away from the intruding hand of man (Angle 1975).

### The High Price of Stewardship

The Wrigley-controlled Santa Catalina Island Company, originally established in 1895 by William, Hancock and Joseph Brent Banning after William Banning purchased the island in 1892, acted as benefactor, cheerleader and guiding force. The company either

directly or indirectly controlled the economic well-being of the island (Moyses 1993). However, by mid-century, the mantle of stewardship began to weigh heavily on the Wrigleys. World War II had disrupted island operations, and government occupation of island property had left some in disrepair (Renton 1993). The expanding post-war population of southern California increased property values, and public agencies were quick to increase taxes proportionately. The Santa Catalina Island Company was finding it more and more difficult to assume all the costs of operating a pleasure resort—from advertizing to road building—in a time when the island was not in the mainstream of California tourism. In a 1948 newspaper interview, Wrigley took stock of postwar island operations and estimated that the Santa Catalina Island Company, SCI—as it was called locally—was spending a dollar-and-a-half for every dollar it made.

To cauterize the leaking cash flow, certain of the company's island operations were spun off or leased to outside operators. As early as 1944, Philip Wrigley proposed giving the city of Avalon as many company-owned properties as it could handle. A Chamber of Commerce was formed to assume some of the responsibility of promoting the island. After a series of costly labor confrontations, the steamship operation, the primary provider of cross-channel transportation, was eventually sold to an outside company; control of island freight was spun off as a separate independent enterprise. In 1963, an agreement was arranged with Southern California Edison for that company to take over the water and power operations on the island. In part it was this Edison agreement that sparked another important element of the belt-tightening program. The power company had negotiated a minimum guarantee as a condition of assuming responsibility for electrical service. Given that the island's current population couldn't support as high a level of demand as was required, it seemed logical that some kind of expansion loomed in the future. The decision was made to investigate the possibility of developing the interior.

### The Pereira Plan

The firm selected to draft a long-range plan for Santa Catalina Island was William L. Pereira and Associates. Hollis Moyses, who joined the Santa Catalina Island Company in 1962 as budget director and 2 yr later was promoted to treasurer, recalls that the firm's commission was to evaluate possible avenues of potential development and to present a reasonable plan as to how this might be accomplished. Moyses estimates completion of the Pereira plan took at least 4 yr and involved extensive review of the island, from its geology to its economy. The Pereira firm had undertaken a similar plan for the Irvine Company in Orange County. Moyses's opinion is that Philip Wrigley invested between \$500,000 and \$600,000

of his own money in what came to be called the "Pereira Plan," and that the tab for such an effort today might run as much as \$5 million (Moyses 1993).

The 4 yr of study resulted in a master plan for Santa Catalina. Development was to be centered on Avalon (expected to have a population of 12,000 by 1980), the Two Harbors area at the isthmus (6,000 by 1980), and other coves with direct access to the water. On-island transportation was to be provided by electric cars and a cog railway running the length of the island, with moving stairways connecting the coves to the central railway. One projected market, Moyses remembers, was relatively well-to-do people who could make Santa Catalina their primary residence and commute by plane or helicopter. The community at Two Harbors was to be centered around a marine-science laboratory to be run by a consortium of local universities with the University of Southern California in the lead (Angle 1975; Bombard 1993; Given 1993).

There were a number of obstacles to implementing such a far-reaching plan: developing an adequate fresh-water supply; sewage, and trash removal; establishing adequate medical facilities for the size of the envisioned population; and clarifying the company's primary goals. Would Santa Catalina be a bedroom community for Los Angeles or a well-healed retirement community for a select few?

Among those who had first-hand experience with the natural environment of Santa Catalina or otherwise knew the island well, the Pereira plan raised some questions. Doug Propst, who had come to Santa Catalina in September, 1953 and who at the time managed the island's range, knew its interior as well as anyone. Propst remembers his own concern and that of others that the plan would be difficult to implement and that significant practical considerations had not been adequately addressed (Propst 1993a).

One aspect of the Pereira recommendations had important ramifications for Santa Catalina's future. Faced with making zoning recommendations that would eventually be included in the long-range plan for the island, Pereira's staff set aside large areas of open space, mostly in the interior (then called the uplands). There were no legal guarantees of preserving such a designation, however, and this was another factor that concerned Propst. The "legal glue" that Propst felt was lacking would be incorporated in subsequent coastal planning (Propst 1993a). Despite such limitations, the Pereira plan's designation of undeveloped open space in the interior of the island became important to the long-term disposition of Santa Catalina.

### Building on Open Space

Moyses remembers that, although the Pereira staff did a comprehensive research in its effort to delineate those

factors necessary for establishing an independent island community, it could not avoid the finding that commercial development on Santa Catalina would be a "slow, costly process." Even more important was the conclusion that in fact most of Santa Catalina couldn't be developed. Moyses also believes that, in effect, the plan supported the Wrigleys' own vision for the island: Avalon Canyon and Two Harbors, and perhaps a few other isolated communities were the only island areas capable of sustaining development. This was based on the difficulty of maintaining fresh-water supplies and particularly on the island's terrain and geology.

It is also Moyses's opinion that the Wrigley family recognized the great value of the island's undeveloped open space and that the Pereira plan's conclusion that most of the island was, practically speaking, undevelopable led eventually to the concept of setting aside in perpetuity the natural environment of the interior. Moyses concludes that this reinforced a concept established early on in the Wrigley tenure: Santa Catalina was a very precious resource, and, while development was necessary to make it viable, the interior should remain basically untouched. Moyses believes this attitude of restricting development to Avalon ". . . just grew to keeping [the interior] as open space, and *that* eventually developed into the formation of the conservancy." He also suggests that part of the attraction to Santa Catalina's open space was the Wrigleys' preoccupation with the myth of the Old West: "I think they loved the western look of things . . . Even though it may look harsh and sparse to many, I think they liked that look" (Moyses 1993).

Doug Propst shares Moyses's view, explaining that the Wrigleys did a lot of "out-westing" on the island, including cookouts and horseback rides and overnight rides. Propst contends, however, that there was an additional factor influencing the Wrigleys' appreciation of Santa Catalina: awareness of the biological uniqueness of the island.

### Value of the Natural Environment

In the early 1960s, Robert Thorne, a member of the Claremont College faculty and taxonomist at the Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden, began visiting Santa Catalina with the idea of collecting specimens for an island flora, and Doug Propst was there to meet him. Propst remembered there had been previous efforts at botanizing the island, including a Wrigley-sponsored flora published in 1924-1925. The Thorne effort, however, was different and proved to be significant for the relationship between Thorne and Doug Propst. A synergy developed between the practical academic and the intellectually curious rancher that enhanced the work of both (Thorne 1990, pers. comm.; Propst 1993a). With his experience on the island, Propst was an excellent guide, and Thorne recip-

roated by sharing his knowledge. Propst began to accompany Thorne on his outings, photographing what they saw and writing down what he thought Thorne had identified. It appears Propst was also savvy enough to know how to use what he was learning. He provided a slide show on Santa Catalina flora for Mrs. Philip Wrigley, which resulted in an invitation to speak to her Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, garden club. Propst considers that these events helped inspire a new dimension in the Wrigleys' appreciation of Santa Catalina. He remembers that Bob Thorne spent time discussing the island's resources with the Wrigleys, and it is his opinion that these circumstances also had some bearing on the eventual decision to preserve the island and form the conservancy.

Moyse, however, isn't as convinced of the direct effect of Thorne's influence, and put more credence in what he called the Wrigleys' deep love of the land and their desire "to maintain things and hopefully to improve them." Moyse agrees, however, that Thorne may have helped the Wrigleys realize the biological significance of the Channel Islands as a whole and of Santa Catalina specifically.

### Improving the Range

A more abstract and less arbitrary factor in the prioritizing that led to the conservancy was Doug Propst's own efforts to restore Santa Catalina's natural environment. The college-educated son of a Colorado ranching family, Propst had the background and sensibilities to immediately grasp the challenge of the island's overgrazed range. Two yr after his arrival on Santa Catalina Island, the bulk of the Wrigley cattle was removed, leaving a few animals as the nucleus of a future herd, and Propst's immediate mandate was to restore the range for grazing. To aid him in this effort, Propst called on the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) of the Department of Agriculture, which during 1954-1955 had evaluated Santa Catalina's range and suggested removal of a large percentage of grazing animals, including cattle, goats, pigs, and bison. The SCS also provided Propst with a number of recommendations for reestablishing ground cover. Following those recommendations, and assisted by the Extension Service of the University of California at Davis, Propst and his Middle Ranch crew planted a variety of grasses, monitored their progress, and reported back. In a few more than 10 yr, Propst was reporting on the fine points of his crew's successful efforts at island reseeding (U.S. Soil Conservation Service 1954; Propst 1971).

With the cattle removed, Propst's focus shifted to the island's large herd of feral goats, estimated to total as many as 15,000 animals. Fortified by the findings of the Soil Conservation Service and Thorne's opinion of the effect of the goats on the island's endemic and native flora, Propst began an informal program to help decrease

the size of the herd. Unfortunately, this was in direct conflict with the interests of the Santa Catalina Island Company at that time. While Propst was attempting to determine the best way to reduce the large herd, Santa Catalina Island Company management was reviewing the possibility of vitalizing the recreational hunting program with nonnative game animals in an effort to replace revenue lost from cattle and declining tourism. Eventually, this program was abandoned, but the company remained skeptical about controlling or removing the goat population, which had by that time become established as a "natural" part of Santa Catalina's heritage. Propst persevered, however, and began building fences to restrict the free-ranging herbivores from important watersheds, including Middle Ranch. Ranch crews also implemented their own informal program of goat removal by shooting the goats and feral pigs wherever they could.

With reseeding and some minimal control of the goats, island vegetation began to recover. The most graphic testimony of this was provided by Doug Propst's photographs. Buoyed by his initial results, Propst began a campaign to convince company management that a more systematic program of goat control was required. However, in an era when the Santa Catalina Island Company was casting about for additional sources of revenue, Propst's advocating removal of the feral goats for the sake of Santa Catalina Island appears to have been tantamount to fighting city hall.

In the end, Propst resorted to what had worked previously: He assembled a photographic summary comparing areas of severe goat infestation with others from which the goats had been fenced out. The narrated set of 80 slides, "an armchair tour of Catalina," was sent to Philip Wrigley. According to Propst, the message was received loud and clear, and things "started turning around right at that point."

### Initial Conservancy Thinking

It is not immediately apparent who initiated the concept that the Wrigleys might surrender their ownership of Santa Catalina Island, but the concept of preservation began to gain momentum with the results of the Pereira plan, with the natural environment of the island beginning to show signs of regenerating, and with the budding realization of Santa Catalina's unique biology. The idea of a private conservancy was not proposed initially; the vision at first was to locate a conservation-type agency that might take over the island. "Once we did the planning to establish what was going to be open space," says Moyse, "we started the interview process."

One of the first agencies contacted was the National Park Service. According to Propst, a representative of the Park Service toured the island but did not express interest (Propst 1993a). Next in line was The Nature

Conservancy, which sent a variety of representatives to Santa Catalina on a number of occasions. Although there was mutual interest between both parties, Moyse says in the long run there were a number of difficulties, including the cost of maintaining the island. In the final analysis, the decision not to enter into an agreement with The Nature Conservancy centered on the fact that the organization would not accept the condition that the island would never be sold, either in part or total, to gain funds to maintain the property or purchase another holding (Moyse 1993).

Propst remembers that the idea of establishing a private conservancy received further impetus from the fact that, at the time of negotiations with The Nature Conservancy, the Wrigley family had received confirmation of nonprofit status for the Wrigley Memorial Garden in Avalon. Propst also believes that the conservancy concept was given some urgency because of Philip Wrigley's interest in putting his affairs in order and insuring the proper disposition of the island. Propst recalls, "I sat with Mr. and Mrs. Wrigley and listened to them talk about how they felt about Santa Catalina and how they loved riding here when they were young people and how they'd enjoyed it. They really wanted to see it stay pretty much as it is" (Propst 1993a, 1993b). (Philip Wrigley died in 1977, 5 yr after the Santa Catalina Island Conservancy's establishment.)

### Open-Space Easement

The Santa Catalina Island Conservancy was incorporated in 1972, as a private operating foundation, under section 509 (a) of the Internal Revenue Service code, and as an operating foundation under section 4942 (j) (3) of that code. Doug Propst was named its president and operating director, and he selected Rose Ellen Gardner, another former Santa Catalina Island Company employee, as his assistant. Before the conservancy could function, however, two things had to be established: the lessening of the island's property-tax burden, and the transfer of the land from Santa Catalina Island Company ownership to the conservancy. The tax situation was handled first.

As was generally the case, the land on Santa Catalina was taxed according to the value of its highest and best use, which the Los Angeles County tax assessor considered to be high-end real-estate development. Maintaining such a tax liability on land that was to remain open-space was an impossible proposition. Casting about for a practical solution, Moyse discovered the concept of an open-space easement, whereby a nonprofit entity could seek tax relief by opening its land to public use. A proposal was made to the Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation for a 50-yr easement on the conservancy's land, guaranteeing public access to 41,000 acres of Santa Catalina (Moyse 1993).

Aside from the loss of potential tax revenue this would represent, Moyse also remembers that the Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation was concerned about the feasibility of actually using the island for recreation, especially in regard to the activities associated with transporting people from disadvantaged neighborhoods or those with physical handicaps to and from the island. However, a lobbying effort was undertaken involving both Doug Propst and Santa Catalina Island Company employee Doug Bombard, and the easement was signed on 28 February 1974 (Santa Catalina Island Company 1974). Its expressed purpose is to "provide an opportunity for, and to encourage, access by the public, including without exclusion, civic, charitable, patriotic and religious groups and similar organizations to substantial portions of Santa Catalina Island for scenic, open-space and recreational purposes" and "to preserve portions of Santa Catalina Island for the protection of wildlife, plants and unique geological and archaeological sites" (Santa Catalina Island Company 1974). The 50-yr easement covers 41,000 of the conservancy's 42,135 a., which were to be "open to the general public, subject to reasonable restrictions concerning the needs of the land and necessary to the preservation of its unique qualities." Specifically, this meant there were to be no residential, commercial, or industrial structures, including hotel, inn, condominium, or rental apartments constructed in the easement area; no extraction of natural resources; and no timber cutting or harvesting of trees or natural growth.

Propst emphasizes the importance of the easement, explaining that the agreement decreased the tax burden to the conservancy by approximately two-thirds. Furthermore, in addition to providing tax relief, the easement also reenforced the conservancy's nonprofit status in that the land had already been made available for public use (Propst 1993a).

### Land Transfer

With these initial difficulties solved, the next step was the transfer of the land from the Santa Catalina Island Company to the Santa Catalina Island Conservancy. To accomplish this, members of the Wrigley and Offield families, including children and grandchildren and 2 of their private foundations, donated all of the Class A stock of the Santa Catalina Island Company to the newly formed conservancy. At the time of donation, the stock was valued at nearly \$16 million. This donation of stock was in turn redeemed on 14 February 1975 in exchange for 42,135 a. on Santa Catalina, certain improvements on the land and other assets "to be used in fulfilling the purpose of the conservancy" (Santa Catalina Island Conservancy 1975; Moyse 1993; Propst 1993a). The stock portfolio, which was part of the transaction, was designed to generate an income of approximately

\$144,000 per yr, this to be supplemented by leases and land-use fees that would bring the conservancy's total annual income to \$637,000. By 1978, the conservancy was reporting an operating budget of just over that: \$701,000 (Santa Catalina Island Conservancy 1979).

By the terms of this transaction, the conservancy owns 86% of Santa Catalina Island, exclusive of the 2 commercial rock quarries (at Avalon and at Empire Landing), Avalon, the community at Two Harbors and land adjacent, the Wrigley's private ranch in the interior of the island (El Rancho Escondido), and land adjacent to Emerald Bay on the west end. The exact delineation of the conservancy's acres on Santa Catalina is based on the Los Angeles County tax assessment of the island's various land parcels and generally follows the basic distinctions drawn in the 1966 Pereira plan.

Although its income was in effect guaranteed by the stock portfolio and income from land-use permits and leases, the new organization was still faced with the challenge of assembling resources and know-how. In order to comply with legislation that regulated exchange of services between the nonprofit Conservancy and for-profit Santa Catalina Island Company, Moyses engineered a spinoff of Santa Catalina Island Company operations into private businesses with whom the conservancy could contract for services, including road maintenance, security and the program of recreational leases (Gardner 1993; Moyses 1993; Propst 1993a, 1993b). Within a few years, however, the conservancy had matured to the point that it was able to establish its own operations to fulfill these functions, and all of the operations that were previously handled by the Santa Catalina Island Company in the interior of the island eventually came under the direct management of the conservancy.

Rose Ellen Gardner, who is now conservancy vice president, feels the first years of the conservancy went relatively smoothly because of good transition planning on the part of Santa Catalina Island Company management, the fact that she and Propst shared the same sensitivity to the conservancy's mandate of preserving and protecting the island, and that Propst had a vision for the organization based in part on his previous experiences in range management. The conservancy was initially governed by a board of directors consisting of Propst, Moyses, and former Santa Catalina Island Company vice president Malcolm Renton. Mr. and Mrs. Philip Wrigley were named lifetime benefactor members and later were joined by their son, William, who also assumed the presidency of the Santa Catalina Island Company in 1984. In 1979, the conservancy named its first outside director, Neil Kennedy, then second vice president and director of marketing at Union Bank. That same year Hollis Moyses resigned from the conservancy board to take a position with the William Wrigley, Jr., Company in Chicago, and Stephen Birch took his place. At the time, Birch was CEO

and CEX of California World Financial Corp and a long-time visitor to Santa Catalina as a flyer, boater, and member of the Catalina Island Yacht Club.

At the time of his election to the board, Neil Kennedy was a member of Los Caballeros, a horseman's group which sponsored an annual ride on Santa Catalina. Kennedy remembers that the first years of his involvement with the conservancy were dedicated to making sure that the nuts and bolts of running the island were secure (Kennedy 1993). This accomplished, it became evident that there was a need for specific long-term planning, an effort which Kennedy personally spearheaded. Under his guidance, the conservancy developed its first 5-yr plan. Work began in 1989, and the plan was approved by the conservancy's board 2 yr later. The mission statement adopted by the conservancy at that time reads:

To conserve the land it owns in perpetuity; to restore it to a natural state; to provide education and recreational uses of the land consistent with conservation, and to foster and develop research to promote understanding of the resources of Santa Catalina Island and Conservancy activities (Santa Catalina Island Conservancy 1990).

This verbiage, developed almost 15 yr after the conservancy's establishment and based on the experience of the intervening years, is remarkable for its similarity to the vision of the conservancy developed by the Wrigley family and its advisors in the original Articles of Incorporation:

To conserve and foster the proper use of natural resources, to promote the study of plant and animal communities and other areas of ecology, natural history, archaeology, and conservation; to advance education; and to disseminate knowledge as to nature preservation and conservation through making land of the conservancy available for recreation and education of the general public as well as for study by specialists . . ." (Santa Catalina Island Conservancy 1972).

After presiding over the conservancy's first 20 yr, Doug Propst retired as president of the Santa Catalina Island Conservancy in June, 1993. Propst's legacy for the next 20 yr is 2-fold: installation of a solid and secure administrative organization and establishment of a solid foundation on which to base long-term conservation and restoration of the natural environment of Santa Catalina Island.

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