

Cultural Resources

The cultural resources of Topanga State Park include archaeological sites of both the historic and pre-European periods, as well as historic buildings, structures, landscapes, and sites. These resources were researched, documented, and inventoried by California State Parks archaeologists and historians as part of a cultural resources inventory. It is vital for planning and management purposes to know what archaeological sites exist within the Park, where they exist, what condition they are in, and what threats they face. Threats to both the known and undocumented archaeological sites include erosion, fire, construction, unauthorized trails, illegal camping, and vandalism including graffiti and artifact collecting.

Archaeological and Ethnographic Overview

The creation accounts of the Chumash and Gabrielino/Tongva peoples of the region tell them that their ancestors were placed in this area by the gods, and they have been here since time began. Scientific evidence, such as radiocarbon dating, shows that people have been living in southern California for more than 9,000 years, with some evidence from the Channel Islands pushing the date back to at least 13,000 years. Evidence of early habitation in Topanga State Park is present at the Tank Site, which was given the number CA-LAN-1, indicating it was the first site within Los Angeles County to receive a number under the official state archaeological site numbering system. Archaeologists first documented and excavated this and other nearby sites in the late 1940s identifying an early, distinctive cultural division they called the Topanga Complex. The oldest components of this complex may date to more than 5,000 years ago.

It is not known for certain if these earliest people were the ancestors of any of the later cultures of the region. Topanga State Park is within a transition zone between the traditional territory of the Gabrielino/Tongva to the east, who speak a language that is part of the Uto-Aztecan linguistic group of the Great Basin and Southwest; and the Ventureño Chumash to the west, who speak a dialect of the Chumashan language, a distinctive language that appears unrelated to any other language in California. Within the transition zone between these two culture groups there was significant interaction, including marriage, trade, and political alliances. The name Topanga is from the name of the ethnographic village of Tupá'nga, which is in the style of other Tongva village names, however, Mission baptismal records identify people with Chumash names coming from the village during the Mission Period of California History.

Archaeological Resources

The first archaeological site recorded within what is today Topanga State Park was documented by Sophie Bayler in 1905. The earliest professional archaeological work within the Park began in the mid-1940s with the recordation and excavation of CA-LAN-1 by archaeologists from UCLA and UC Berkeley. Over the years there have been a number of other archaeological excavations and surveys within the Park that have resulted in the identification and recordation of 52 archaeological sites. These include 29 Native American sites such as villages, camps, grinding features, rock shelters, procurement areas, and work stations. Archaeological surveys of the Park have only examined about 1.5% of the total park acreage, indicating that there is a high probability that additional Native American sites exist within those areas of the Park that were not examined during the resources inventory.

Sacred sites and areas, which continue to hold significance to the Native Americans of the region, have also been identified within the Park.

Historic Archaeological Resources

The Park also contains at least 20 historic archaeological sites, dating from the 1800s through the mid 1900s. These include a lime kiln, trash dumps, mining excavations, cabin and building sites, bridges and trails, and assorted features and artifacts of the more recent past. Due to the limited nature of the resources inventory and other archaeological survey work that has occurred within the park, it is presumed that additional historic archaeological sites exist within unexamined areas of the park.