



A TOOL FOR TEACHING ABOUT CALIFORNIA'S
LANDSCAPES, 1760-1900

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Teaching the Geography of California to college juniors and seniors can be a frustrating experience, especially when students seem to have almost no awareness of what has gone into the making of California's present-day landscape. From television and movies, most students are aware that California is somehow different from other states; yet, they have a myopic view of California from overgeneralized textbooks and limited travel outside of their immediate region. Few college students have been exposed to the many and varied cultural landscapes of the past that together provide California with its uniqueness as a place. This limited experience tends to create a confined regional consciousness, with few students aware that they are active participants in a larger, more dynamic region that has its foundation in the past.

California's contemporary landscape does not reflect the continued occupance of a single culture, but instead is a composite landscape affected by conflict and eventual compromise of several contrasting systems of spatial organization and resource evaluation. In an ongoing attempt to familiarize my students with these cultures, their landscapes and the

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changes they imposed on the land, I have experimented with slides, handouts, readings, movies, and lectures. All have had moderate success, but the one that has been most successful is a diagram illustrating California's major landscapes and their relationship to each other. In hopes of assisting others who may have similar difficulties with their California classes, this paper presents the diagram along with a brief description of each of California's major cultural landscapes between 1760 and 1900, and a list of selected references.

*California's Major Cultural
Landscapes*

The first cultural imprint on California's landscape was made by Indians. Aboriginal occupance of California dated from 40,000 B.C., yet their imprint rested lightly on the land. They lacked the technical ability to significantly shape or alter their environment, yet had a population density four times that of any other group in North America. However, no one aboriginal group dominated the land. California was divided among twenty linguistic families encompassing 135 dialects; at most, a thousand could speak the same language. Agriculture was unknown and land was held by hunting, fishing, and gathering rights. The environment provided all that was needed to sustain the aboriginal way of life (Figure 1).

Spanish soldiers came next, hungry for wealth and anxious to add new lands to those already held by the Spanish crown. Land was easily taken from the Indians, but the soldiers' voracity for wealth was not satisfied. The priests who accompanied the soldiers were interested in wealth of a different kind and saw in the docile natives souls to be gathered for the church. Under guidance from priests, California became an ecclesiastical empire designed to convert the heathen Indian to the more civilized ways of Spanish life--to be a Catholic and a loyal subject of the Spanish Crown. By 1823, the church had established 21

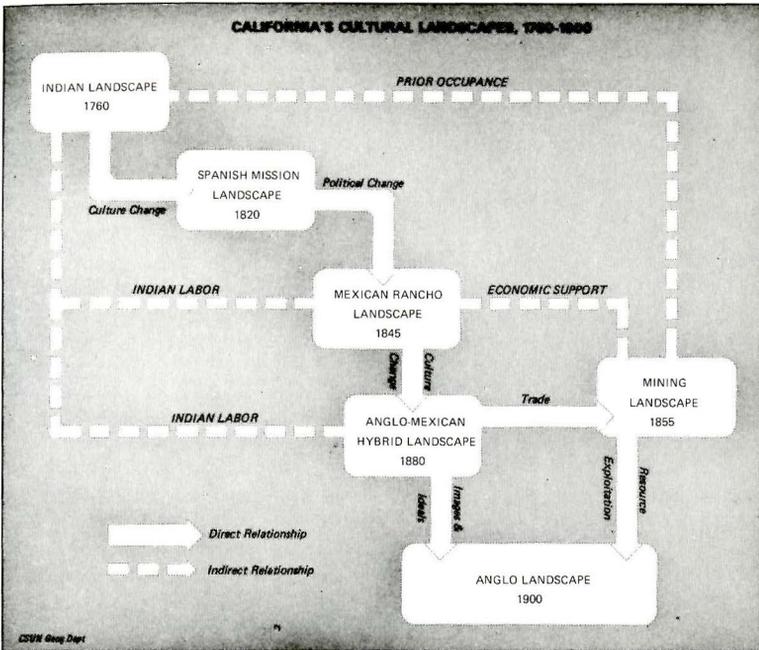


Figure 1. Schematic of California's cultural landscapes to 1900.

missions along the California coast and had gathered over 90,000 souls. In addition, the Government established three pueblos and four presidios, mainly as secondary institutions to assist the missions. Missions, however, dominated the spatial order, imparting a far different character to California's landscape than the Indian had previously. In effect, Spanish settlement imposed a rigid method of organizing space as prescribed in the Laws of the Indies. With the Spanish came the first formal, systematic attempt to see and organize space for a specific goal.

Mexico's independence from Spain was the beginning of a new order to the California landscape, stimulated more by political change than cultural change. The rigid settlement policies of the Spanish crown were removed in favor of a more

liberal use of land and resources; land tenure laws were changed, trade barriers were removed, and the missions were secularized, thereby opening up land for individual settlement. To encourage settlement of former mission lands, the Mexican government granted more than seven-hundred ranchos to private citizens, ranging in size from a few hundred acres to over 133,000 acres. Cattle became the primary economic base in response to the growing demand for hides and tallow in New England. The hide and tallow trade opened new avenues of change, particularly economic, but also brought the vanguard of Americans to California. Their numbers were soon to increase and start California on another series of landscape changes.

The Americans had a different way of life than the hispanic settlers, and initiated changes designed to bring the landscape into alignment with anglo settlement institutions. The number of anglos was relatively small after acquisition of California in 1846, but their number increased substantially with the discovery of gold. In the first four years of anglo occupancy the population grew from 15,000 to 100,000 and by 1860 had increased to 300,000. The gold rush accounted for a sizeable portion of the early migration, resulting in a new landscape in the interior, away from the established hispanic settlement along the coast. Soon, however disillusioned miners turned to other pursuits, mainly farming, but found to their dismay that much of the best agricultural land in California was held in large tracts by Mexican rancheros. After considerable legal maneuvering between ranchero and farmer, the large ranchos were finally broken up into smaller mid-western type farms. Along with small farms came new towns, railroads, and many more settlers, each adding a different element to the landscape. The changes initiated by newcomers were not accepted without difficulty; the anglos could not push aside the hispanic

landscape and begin anew but were forced to compromise, resulting in a hybrid landscape containing elements of both hispanic and anglo settlement traditions. By 1880 California had two distinct cultural landscapes, a hispanic-anglo landscape along the coast and an anglo landscape in the interior.

The last twenty years of the nineteenth century were no less tumultuous than the first thirty years of anglo occupance; bringing resources and space into a coordinated system was complicated by divergent interests. The difficulty lay in the unrealistic interpretation of resources. The search was for the ideal, a foundation upon which to build a western utopia. There were many starts, some successful, others less so. By 1900, the California landscape was a composite of contrasting and sometimes conflicting cultural and spatial systems, but representing the aspirations, failures, and expectations of a people about to enter the twentieth century.

Conclusion

California's landscape has undergone many changes during the past two centuries--changes that reflect a succession of culture groups each with its own ideas of how space and resources should be organized and used. The change in the shape and character of California's landscape between 1760 and 1900 can be described as a movement from a landscape without a set of formal settlement institutions to one in which space was organized by many and often conflicting institutions. Cultures interacting through time and space have given California a diversity of present-day regional landscapes. For students, learning to identify various remnants of past landscapes and speculating about process of changes and their impact on the present provides an awareness and understanding of California's unique landscape heritage and its importance in shaping the present.

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