

# Indigenous Voices of Santa Susana Field Laboratory: Environmental Storytelling and Remediation

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## Abstract

Most conversations surrounding environmentalism typically focus on the ecological and community impact, but rarely include the Indigenous perspective. The inclusion of Indigenous voices to the conversation regarding the SSFL cleanup represents an important step towards raising community awareness of environmental justice. By conducting interviews with individuals closely related to each perspective, a story map of the history of SSFL was created. Each perspective was imperative to the development of the conversation behind the history of SSFL, as the centralization of each topic came to highlight the ways in which they intersected with one another. Our understanding of modern environmentalism relies on our ability to understand the history of the land and to see how each perspective overlaps with each other. Environmental storytelling presents a unique relationship between environmentalism and culture, and can act as a guide for humanity as we come to integrate changes to the Holocene.

## Introduction

The Santa Susana Field Laboratory (SSFL) in the Simi Hills has a complex and conflicting environmental history. Serving as the home to many sacred sites for the Indigenous Chumash people, the landscape also holds the potential to connect the Santa Monica Mountains and the Los Padres National Forest, in aid of ecologically critical habitat linkage for the region's imperiled mountain lion population. Established as an engine-testing facility for Rocketdyne in the 1940's, its partial nuclear meltdown in 1959 has poisoned the environment and has caused a cleanup controversy, yet to be resolved. In addition to its contribution towards aerospace history, the area also holds deep cultural value and serves as a solstice site for different Indigenous Tribes. With the area committed as a permanent open space in 1996, plans to create a wildlife habitat overpass at Liberty Canyon have been made by the Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains. This wildlife corridor is a legacy of the site's space age era, as the site's status as an open space habitat was essential in proposing such a plan.

## Introduction (cont.)

**Environmental Humanities** is an emerging subject that has been expanding as we begin to see the ways in which our environment has affected us as people. It has become an effective way in articulating concerns relevant to medicine, animal rights, neurobiology, race and gender studies, urban planning, climate change, and digital technology (Nye 2013). As a mode of education, storytelling has been an important part in understanding the functionality of the Environmental Humanities. There is a communicative and transformative nature within storytelling that allows for people to play an active role in weaving alternatives for an equitable and sustainable future (O' Gorman, 2019). Environmental storytelling functions around environmental justice, place-based literacy, conservation, and campus and community partnership. It provides a framework for our environmental understandings and actions while also giving voice to marginalized communities affected by environmental degradation (O'Gorman, 2019). The goal of this project is to use storytelling to emphasize the interconnectedness of SSFL's complex history, while also educating and promoting environmental remediation to the community.



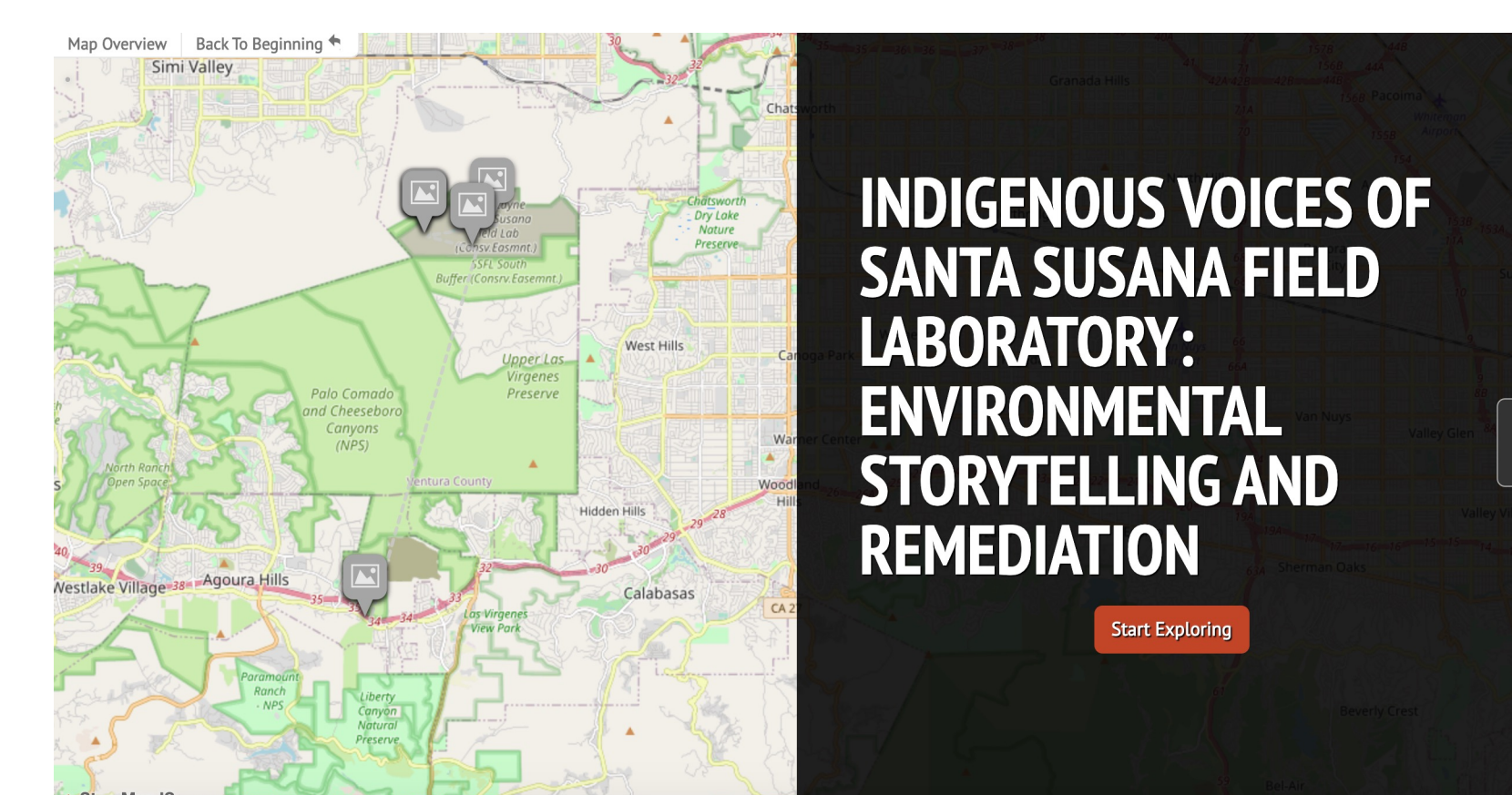
## Methods

### Interviews:

- Long-form interviews with Native stakeholders, anthropologists, conservationists, and environmentalists
- Interviews would last for about 60-90 minutes long
- Interviewees were gathered through a snowball sampling technique
- Key question themes consisted of...
  - Indigenous representation in conservation and cleanup
  - Relationship between environmental and cultural preservation

### Story map:

To exhibit how SSFL's diverse histories interacted and overlapped one another, a story map of the site was created. Using StoryMapJS, the interviews and stories were uploaded onto the web and housed on this platform. Acting as an interactive model for the site, the story map became a visual representation of the stories and interviews captured and how they connected within time and space.



## Findings

The story map houses video clips from the interviews that best illustrates how we can utilize storytelling as a tool to promote environmental remediation not just in the field lab, but at the wildlife corridor too. Additionally, these stories connect us to our environment and highlight the relationship we share.



## Discussion

As research of the Environmental Humanities continues to progress, it is important that we implement ways for less represented communities to include their voices. This project specifically focused on Indigenous voices and their cultural and environmental impact on the SSFL. It is imperative that we create more representation for Indigenous people within conversations surrounding plans of environmental remediation, as they are typically disregarded. In fact, as Indigenous environmentalist Kyle Powys Whyte observes, "there are thousands of topics that get created without the initial leadership or involvement of any Indigenous persons or groups"; however, the outcomes of any action from these topics most likely affect Indigenous populations (Whyte, 2017). However, there are critical roles for Indigenous people to play in the current debate over environmentalism. For example, Whyte states, "Archival information about Indigenous adaptation to change in the Holocene could help guide the rest of humanity." Indigenous storytelling is a part of the future of environmental remediation (Whyte, 2017). It allows for the Indigenous perspective to become integrated into the environmental conversation while avoiding the exploitation of their culture. Rather than a tool, Indigenous storytelling is an integration of their culture that provides them with more agency in environmental dialogues.

## References

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