All the WILD *and* LONELY PLACES

JOURNEYS *in a* DESERT LANDSCAPE

LAWRENCE HOGUE

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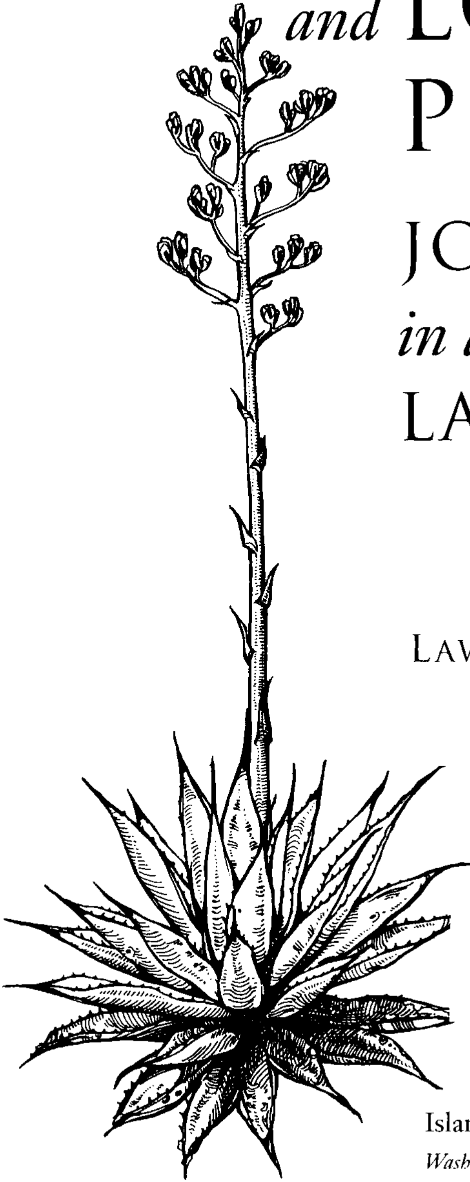

LAWRENCE HOGUE

Island Press / SHEARWATER BOOKS
Washington, D.C. • Covelo, California

A Shearwater Book
published by Island Press

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"Domelands: Reading the Desert" appeared in different form in *Ascent*, fall 1998.
"Epilogue: Eyes in the Dark" appeared in different form in *Audubon*, January 1997, as "Ghosts in the Hills."

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Hogue, Lawrence, 1961-
All the wild and lonely places : journeys in a desert landscape /
by Lawrence Hogue.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 1-55963-651-3 (acid-free paper)
1. Anza-Borrego Desert (Calif.)—Description and travel. 2. Anza-Borrego Desert State Park (Calif.)—Description and travel. 3. Anza-Borrego Desert (Calif.)—Environmental conditions. 4. Anza-Borrego Desert (Calif.)—History. 5. Landscape—California—Anza-Borrego Desert—History. 6. Natural history—California—Anza-Borrego Desert.
I. Title.
F868.S15 H68 2000
917.94'98—dc21 00-008181

Printed on recycled, acid-free paper
Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

All the WILD *and* LONELY PLACES

For Diane

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The love of wilderness is more than a hunger for
what is always beyond reach; it is also an expression
of loyalty to the earth, the earth which bore us and
sustains us, the only home we shall ever know, the only
paradise we ever need. . . . A civilization which destroys
what little remains of the wild, the spare, the original,
is cutting itself off from its origins and betraying the
principle of civilization itself.

EDWARD ABBEY, *Desert Solitaire*

All the wild and lonely places, the mountain springs
are called now. They were not lonely or wild places in
the past days—no. They were the homes of my people,
who lived contented and happy. Sometimes an Indian
goes back into the mountains to a spring of water.
There
he visits, alone, the home of his ancestors.

CHIEF FRANCISCO PATENCIO,
Stories and Legends of the Palm Springs Indians

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PART I

INTRODUCTORY

Chapter 1

THE VIEW FROM GARNET PEAK

IMAGINE the shape of the land here in California's southwestern corner. As you move inland from the coast, it rises gently in successive mesas and canyons for twenty miles until you reach the first foothills. The grade becomes steeper then as you travel through hills and valleys to the summits of the Laguna Mountains, part of the Peninsular Ranges, the long backbone running north to Mt. San Jacinto, towering above Palm Springs, and south to the tip of Baja California. To the east from that crest, the land falls away in one dramatic plunge to the Anza-Borrego Desert, five thousand feet below. The mountains create the aridity of the country to the east, blocking moisture from Pacific storms. Beyond them, there's nothing but desert—desert plains, desert sinks, desert peaks. On a clear day, peaks in Arizona float on the horizon, their bases obscured by the curve of the earth.

In a good year, three inches of rain fall beyond the mountains. Temperatures in summer often reach 115 degrees Fahrenheit; in winter, they sometimes dip below freezing. The wind howls much of the time. Everything out here, plant and animal, has had to adapt to these harsh circumstances. It's a land of dreams and nightmares, where the waking world meets the fantastic shapes and bent forms of imagination: spiny, many-armed chollas; agaves growing like clustered daggers; the tall, whiplike wands of ocotillos. It is a landscape laid bare, showing the effects of water everywhere, though water itself is seldom seen.

If you stand facing east on Garnet Peak in the Laguna Mountains, you

can see it all, the entire sixty- by thirty-mile expanse of Anza-Borrego Desert State Park and the country beyond. This is the western edge of the Southwest. Behind you, it's all California; to the east, the land has more to do, ecologically and culturally, with Arizona and the Colorado River country. Basin and range country begins here, too—isolated summits jutting from the Peninsular Ranges alternate with badland basins and dry sinks. Those peaks literally slid off the Peninsular crest. Crowned with juniper and pinyon pine, they look like ships sailing out into the desert sea. Here and there, springs well up to create lush oases. Deep canyons cut the mountain flanks, tracing courses across alluvial fans covered with agave and barrel cactus, through flats covered with creosote bush, and over contorted badlands—a landscape of mud hills that look like giant, multicolored layer cakes in cross section. The desert washes run eventually into the largest basin of them all, the Salton Trough.

None of the water that occasionally fills these washes finds its way to the ocean. All the land visible eastward from Garnet Peak—a great half-circle that extends down the entire eastern flank of the Peninsular Ranges, from the San Jacinto and Santa Rosa Mountains in the north through the San Ysidro, Volcan, and Laguna Mountains above the heart of Anza-Borrego to the In-Ko-Pah and Jacumba Mountains in the south, then across the vague, flat expanse toward the Gulf of California and back north on the other side of the basin through the Chocolate and Orocopia Mountains—all that land tilts into this long trough, a trench 225 feet below sea

View from Garnet Peak

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level containing the Imperial and Coachella Valleys and the pale blue waters of the Salton Sea. The effect is that of looking into a vast, oblong bowl with a blue center, scalloped around its edges with beaches of white sand.

The entire region between the Peninsular Ranges and the Colorado River is known as the Colorado Desert, itself a subsection of the Sonoran Desert, which extends into Arizona and northern Mexico. The Anza-Borrego Desert is, then, a land of edges: the western edge of the Colorado Desert, on the western edge of the Sonoran Desert; edged by the burgeoning population of coastal southern California to the west and the reclaimed desert and towns of the Imperial Valley to the east. Most important, it's a desert at the verge of the mountains. In that meeting of alpine and desert habitats, an astonishing diversity of plants and animals emerges. This is the country encompassed by Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, a 600,000-acre expanse of some of the most varied terrain and habitat in the United States.

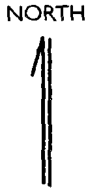
The place has a hold on me that is hard to describe. Its vastness draws me with a force I don't quite understand. The expanse of rock, sand, and sky seems timeless; the bizarre shapes of desert plants seem prehistoric, even prehuman. Compared with the rest of southern California, a region where landscapes are transformed with the rapidity of a sea breeze shifting to become a hot, dry Santa Ana, Anza-Borrego seems immune to change. It's a country so sere and rugged that it's easy to imagine no one has ever set foot there—a wilderness waiting to be explored.

ON MY first visit there, in 1987, Anza-Borrego's wilderness promised an escape from human problems—all those ills associated with the crowded city, even a comfortable one such as San Diego. In the desert, I hoped to find pure nature, in its canyons the keys to mysteries, on its peaks perhaps even transcendence. So I unconsciously cropped my view, just as photographers do to avoid the annoying telephone wire or building they don't want to intrude on the scene they are constructing for their viewers.

In a sense, though, the place was already framed for me by the boundaries of the state park. Inside was the sanctioned playground. Outside, the boundaries suggested, I was more likely to run into someone I didn't want to meet: an off-roader, a target shooter, a psycho with a car full of guns, or

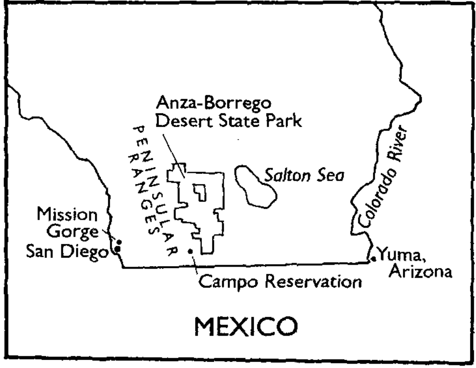
Horse Canyon
SANTA ROSA MOUNTAINS
Salton Sea
Coyote Creek
SAN YSIDRO MOUNTAINS
Borrego Palm Canyon
Borrego Springs
North Fork
17 Palms
Arroyo Salado
San Felipe Wash
San Felipe Creek

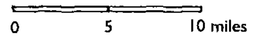
NORTH



Box Canyon
Whale Peak
Ghost Mountain
FISH CREEK MOUNTAINS
Elephant Knees Butte (Carrizo Badlands)
Oriflamme Canyon
Red Rock Canyon
Vallecito (Valley)
Garnet Peak
Carrizo Creek
JACUMBA MOUNTAINS
COYOTE MOUNTAINS
Domelands
Indian Hill
Dos Cabezas
Table Mountain

Inset of Southern California





Anza-Borrego Desert State Park

maybe just the desert rats who I thought were crazy to live out on the flats where the wind never stops. Inside the park boundaries, tucked up against the protecting wall of the mountains, it all seemed safe—just a few rattlesnakes and tarantulas, mountain lions and coyotes to avoid.

Within the park, I had to keep cropping the view to see the place as pure nature. Even its hyphenated name suggested a confluence of the human and the natural: *Anza* refers to an early Spanish explorer, *borrego* to the bighorn sheep that are the park's most widely known denizens. Even though the evidence of human occupation was obvious, I kept it stored carefully in one corner of my mind. Indians had dwelt here for thousands of years before Europeans came. Footpaths, rock art, pieces of pottery, even remnants of ancient dwellings dot the landscape; the changes these first inhabitants made to the landscape itself were at first less apparent. To the Indians, this was home; today, we call much of it a wilderness.

Following the first peoples to dwell on the land, the Spanish, after a few tentative explorations, colonized the region two centuries ago. They were followed in the nineteenth century by American mountain men, pioneers, and forty-niners. Many of these successive waves of immigrants passed through the badlands and the valley directly below Garnet Peak, where old wheel ruts can still be seen. More recently, ranchers ran cattle in the desert, fattening them on the spring wildflower bloom. Early in the twentieth century, a twisting, impossible rail line was built through Carrizo Gorge, down near the border. Although the state park was created in the 1930s, preservation was put on hold for World War II, when the navy used the desert as a bombing range. Now, half a million visitors each year come to see the sunrise paint the rocks red, to smell the flowers in April, and to try to find a moment of silence.

Anza-Borrego is a romantic landscape, a place for photographers to snap pictures of sunsets, a place to get lost in silent slot canyons. This is the side of the desert that drew me back every fall for ten years. But the desert is also a place where people intrude. Initially, I viewed the pottery shards and rock art, the line shacks and broken water troughs as part of that romance of the past, but it was harder to ignore the dirt roads snaking across the park and the cars and trucks that used them.

I use those roads, too, driving to favorite hiking spots. I plan elaborate expeditions to get as far from the roads as possible. But even this isn't

enough to escape the marks left by humans. Hiking ten miles into the backcountry, I see a Peninsular bighorn sheep. Chances are that animal has been radio-collared, weighed, and tested, all in an attempt to keep this subspecies from going extinct. (There is no chance I'll see a desert pronghorn, which disappeared locally back in the 1940s.) Or I hike up what seemed to be a pristine desert canyon and find a pretty green shrub with reddish bark and a spray of pink flowers. It is a tamarisk, which doesn't belong there; the tamarisk is an invading species, another threat to local diversity that our species seems to bring everywhere it goes. If I don't find a tamarisk, it could be that a restoration crew has removed it—grooming the wilderness.

But the image that I keep coming back to is that of the Salton Sea, the most telling scene in the panorama visible from Garnet Peak. From there, it looks like a natural lake filling the Salton Trough. But that view is deceptive: the lake is actually the result of a poorly engineered 1904 irrigation project intended to bring the water of the Colorado River to the Imperial Valley. The Salton Sea is thus in part a human-made lake, but it simulates a natural body of water, the ancient Lake Cahuilla, which filled the basin as recently as 500 years ago. Today, it is an important stop on the Pacific flyway for hundreds of thousands of migratory geese, pelicans, and other shorebirds. Nearly every year, thousands, sometimes hundreds of thousands, of those birds die from mysterious causes associated with the lake's rising salinity and toxicity.

The Salton Sea owes its continued existence to runoff from Imperial and Coachella Valley fields; its fate, and that of the fish and birds that depend on it, is in our hands. Some people want to "save" the Salton Sea, and others want to "let nature take its course." But the lake is such a blend of the human and the natural that "nature's course" is far from clear.

This book tells the story of the Anza-Borrego Desert region, the people who have lived there, the different ways these people have treated the desert, and the plans for its future. It also tells the story of how my view of Anza-Borrego has changed, from that of a wilderness to something more like home. Along the way, I've had to question all my thoughts and beliefs about nature and wilderness. Humans have always played a role in nature. We're too deeply involved to simply leave it alone. Yet like many others who are distressed by the overmanipulation and outright destruc-

tion going on everywhere around us, I find something deeply attractive in the nonhuman, the prehuman. How, then, to chart a course between these two extremes—absolute human domination and absolute human absence—to find an honorable role for humans in nature?

Chapter 2

DOS CABEZAS: INITIATION

On my first visit to the Anza-Borrego Desert, no one had to tell me that it was a wilderness. That much seemed obvious at first sight—a glimpse of dry, tan hills in the distance as our car swooped around the curves of Interstate 8 on its plunge down the eastern scarp of the Jacumba Mountains. Beyond those distant hills was nothing but clear, luminous space, lit by the sun as it peeked through gaps in a receding band of clouds. Much was promised in that single glimpse, cut off by a bend of boulder-strewn canyon wall.

It was 1987, and my wife, Diane, and I were on our way to the first outing of the Sierra Club's Basic Mountaineering Course. Diane had backpacked for years with the Girl Scouts, but except for a few nights of car-camping, I was a novice. This first trip would introduce us to the basics of low-impact camping and to the desert environment.

As we emerged onto the desert floor near the little town of Ocotillo, the hills we had seen from above grew into mountains, rising from the plains in striated reds, tans, browns, and whites. We turned north and then west onto a jeep trail and moved back toward the high mountains, regaining a thousand feet of the elevation we had just lost. The road crossed a *bajada*, a broad gravel-and-sand skirt created by the combined flood debris of many alluvial fans flowing together. Tall sprays of ocotillos and the twisted shapes of chollas lined the route as if greeting us.

It's hard to recapture how new the desert seemed to us. We didn't even know the name of the valley we were driving through or the names of the

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