

# Ventura

Los Angeles Times

VC/CC+ WEDNESDAY, JULY 9, 1997

# COUNTY



Photos by CARLOS CHAVEZ / Los Angeles Times

Gary Davis, left, chief scientist for Channel Islands National Park, and Sarah Tamblin of Marine Conservation Network tally a fish.

# The Undersea World of the Channel Islands

■ **Environment:** Jean-Michel Cousteau joins a group exploring the regional waters and taking a census of aquatic species.

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SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

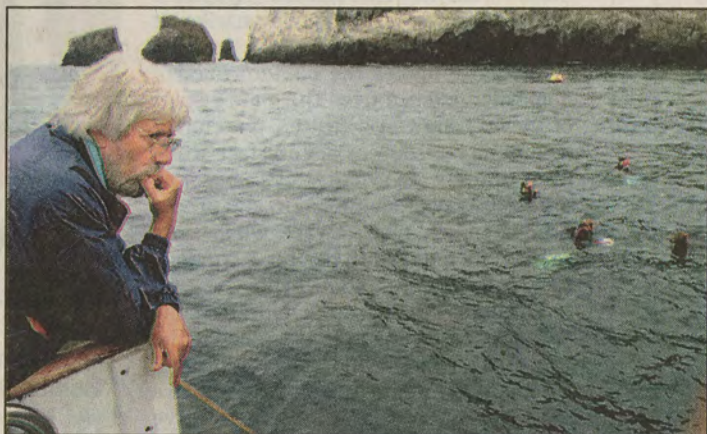
**A**NACAPA ISLAND—Forty feet beneath the foamy surf that batters the basalt cliffs of this wind-swept island, Jean-Michel Cousteau was encouraged by a symphony of life amid the barnacled rocks.

Schools of iridescent blacksmiths darted about the milky blue water. Fat, pumpkin-orange garibaldi's popped out of dark grottoes and long, muscular calico bass cruised slowly beneath the canopy of undulating kelp. Such scenes told the bearded Frenchman that the Channel Islands' underwater ecosystem is doing fine.

"It's in a lot better shape than it was years ago," said Cousteau, who dedicated the dive to his late father, undersea pioneer Jacques Cousteau. "But now the real work of protecting what's there is just beginning."

The 59-year-old environmental advocate and Santa Barbara-based filmmaker flew from Paris, where he attended his father's funeral, to join about 50 divers probing the watery depths off West Anacapa Island on Monday during the fifth annual Great American Fish Count.

Spawned in 1992 by Gary Davis, chief scientist for Channel Islands National Park, the two-week fish count aims to build a



Jean-Michel Cousteau, son of the famed advocate of the world's oceans, contemplates a cove before diving in.

network of data on fish populations while boosting public awareness about the fragility of underwater habitats.

Funded by a \$75,000 grant from the American Oceans Campaign, the Munson Foundation and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the event began July 1 and will continue until July 14.

Although past counts recruited fewer than 200 divers to work on

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CARLOS CHAVEZ / Los Angeles Times

Sarah Tamblyn floats in a forest of kelp while scanning for sea life during the Great American Fish Count. The divers tallied 630 fish Tuesday.

## MARINE: Undersea World of Channel Islands

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a census of the Channel Islands and Monterey Bay marine preserves, this year's event attracted almost 1,000 divers, who tallied fish in half of the nation's 12 marine sanctuaries, including those in Florida, Texas and Georgia.

"It's starting to go somewhere, and that's what we always wanted," Davis said. "The more people we get out to do this, the more success we're going to have in protecting these environments."

Blanketed by congressional protection in 1980, the 1,658-square-mile Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary supports a rich array of plant and animal life living symbiotically in the silent depths.

In addition to the wispy, green sea grasses and kelp that shelter wide-bodied opaleyes and flaming

yellow and red kelp fish, the underwater sanctuary is a haven for 28 species of whale and dolphin, 60 varieties of shark and more than 120 kinds of coastal fish.

Ed Cassano, who manages the underwater preserve for the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, said the islands are an ichthyological treasure chest because they rest in an area of convergence between the warm southern and cool northern waters.

"This is one of the most unique places on the planet," he said. "There are very few other places where you're going to find the kind and number of aquatic species we have here."

The importance of the count was not lost to volunteers such as Diane Resnick.

Covered in thick, insulating neoprene, the 36-year-old La Habra chiropractic intern took her plastic writing slate and descended into Landing Cove off the leeward side of the island to count the colorful denizens of the deep.

There she tallied swarms of senoritas, menacing rock wrasses, pairs of dancing opaleyes and the occasional brass-colored rubberlip. "It's thrilling to be able to do this," she said. "It's an amazing experience and I just hope the idea catches on."

Although the data collected during the event are important to scientists, organizers said it's experiences like Resnick's that are the most valuable.

Both Cousteau and Davis said their goal is for all volunteers to return home with a deep apprecia-

tion for and bond with the undersea environment. They feel that such bonds are the only long-term guarantee of the welfare of aquatic habitats.

"Most people don't know what's going on and how valuable the environments are," Davis said. "So getting them connected is the most important thing."

Amid cheers and applause from the bleary-eyed volunteers, organizers announced the final tally for the day: 630 fish of 33 different species.

"I don't mean to sound cliched, but people protect what they love," Cousteau said. "But before that can happen it requires an understanding, and people here today are beginning to realize how important this resource is."