

Our Ocean Backyard — *Santa Cruz Sentinel* columns by Gary Griggs, Distinguished Professor of Earth and Planetary Sciences, UC Santa Cruz.

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The Lost Island of Abalonia

California has always had more than our share of inventive, creative, sometimes bizarre and bigger than life characters that have played important roles in giving the state the reputation we have today. Hollywood and Silicon Valley are just two examples where we are recognized as global centers. For those of us in the ocean world, we believe that Monterey Bay is a world center for marine research and education as well, with our twenty plus ocean research and educational institutions, government agency marine laboratories, and visitor centers.

There is another story, however, that involves some of the crazy adventurers that California is known for. Two weeks ago we explored Cortes Bank and Bishop Rock— a hundred miles off the coast of San Diego - as a magnet for big wave surfers and the site where the USS *Enterprise* almost ended up in a watery grave.

This story unfolded in the mid-60s and is described at some depth in the book about Cortes Bank, *Ghost Wave*, by author Chris Dixon. The grand plan was to scuttle a surplus World War II Navy freighter - the SS *Jalisco* – on top of Cortes Bank, add some free garbage from Los Angeles and a few barges full of rocks and create an independent island nation. Because of the rich marine life on this offshore pinnacle, the goal was to exploit and can the abundant abalone clinging to the rocks below.

The pile of stuff on top of the bank was going to be called “Lemuria” (after a fabled lost continent in the Indian Ocean), but newspapers and other media upon hearing of the scheme created their own more memorable name, “Abalonia”. The eclectic crew hatching this plan believed that there was nothing to prevent them from creating their own island nation.

It was an odd collection of characters that included Joe Kirkwood, Jr., the best known of the lot, who was a professional golfer and a handsome B movie star who played the boxer Joe Palooka in a series of movies and a TV series. There was also a savings and loan president, an aquatic “expert”, and two abalone canners.

The *Jalisco* was found in the mothball fleet in Suisun Bay, and the grandiose and far-fetched plans for the old ship included a runway for planes, a refueling base for ships, and an abalone canning factory. Because of some concern that the U.S. government might kill the entire project, the group decided to push forward and get the *Jalisco* to Cortes Bank as soon as possible before any intervention.

The team noticed a large storm off the coast of Japan on weather reports, but in their compulsive optimism and enthusiasm for Abalonia, they didn't give it much concern and headed out to the bank to meet the *Jalisco* coming down from San Francisco. When the ship arrived, the seas were unusually calm... for a short while. The swell from the distant but major storm soon began to arrive, however, and this massive seamount, rising virtually to the sea surface began pushing those swells upward increasing their height.

While there had been plans on how they were going to anchor the 7,000 ton ship on the bank, one of the anchors and much of the critical anchor chain had been sold for scrap to raise more money. It quickly became clear that they had little control over the *Jalisco* and the swells, now 20 feet in height, were raising the ship up and then quickly dropping it. Five of the team had gotten aboard the ship with the goal of anchoring her in place, which was no longer possible. In fact, surviving soon became a challenge.

On one of the ship's rapid drops, it landed directly on Bishop Rock, which put a large hole in the hull. At this point things began to unravel quickly. The *Jalisco* was taking on water rapidly and large waves were now breaking over the deck, threatening the lives of the five men. They all ended up in the ocean, some washed overboard and some jumped; but all miraculously survived with some injuries and were picked up by the tug boat that had towed the ship from Suisun Bay.

While it took a few months for the *Jalisco* to break apart and sink below the waves, it ultimately disappeared, producing a great spot for divers, but a potential hazard for surfers.

Abalonia never came to pass, although there was a U.S. Coast Guard investigation and the federal government subsequently claimed ownership of Cortes Bank to discourage any similar schemes in the future. The entrepreneurs never really spoke to each other much after the ill-fated incident and went their separate ways. For a more complete book length story of the adventures on Cortes Bank, pick up Chris Dixon's *Ghost Wave*.

