

A Fragile Treasure

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The spring is not impressive.

It's a depression in the ground about the size of a large salad bowl. The muddy water in the bottom is anything but appetizing, unless you happen to be a desert bee. A crowd of them swarm around the damp impression.

Just last week, says Ann Murdy, with the Palm Springs chapter of the Sierra Club, there was a larger puddle of water here, surrounded by tall grass and overhung by a tree. It may have been even more prolific in ancient times, judging from the petroglyphs that dot the rock faces overhanging this isolated canyon southwest of Landers.

The dry wash running through the canyon must have held water at least during part of the year. Now, it is loose sand, still populated by spring wildflowers such as desert dandelion, purple calico and phacelia and prince's plume.

None of these seem to have inspired the American Indians that spent time here. The designs of the petroglyphs on the nearby rocks include snakelike lines, radiating suns and grid-like patterns. Not a single one looks like it could be a flower.

Nor are there any that look like high-tension utility towers.

There were no power poles when the Indians lived here, and a group of conservationists wants to keep it that way.

This hike through a narrow piece of San Bernardino County's past has been put together by the California Desert Coalition to highlight the damage a proposed electrical transmission corridor might cause.

Green Path North, a project of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, would cut through a low spot in a nearby ridge and cross the canyon on its way from Coachella to Hesperia. Conservationists worry about the impact the construction and maintenance of such a project might have on this desert area.

This site is of particular interest, says Ann's husband, Al, because it is one of the few where such rock art is found.

"There are not many petroglyph sites," he says. "They are rare out here. Mostly you find pictographs."

The difference is that pictographs are painted designs, while petroglyphs were made by tapping one rock with another -- hammer-and-chisel style -- to remove the colored

patina on the surface of a rock face one small point at a time. The resulting design is actually a series of light-colored dots.

What their purpose was is just about anyone's guess. Speculation says some were trail markers while others may have served religious or shamanic purposes. As yet, no petroglyph Rosetta stone has been found so we don't really know.

What we do know is that they are one of the few clues we have to the ancient cultures that populated Southern California.

A stone foundation along one edge of the canyon looks like it might have been constructed by early miners in the region. A Bureau of Land Management sign requests that visitors not disturb the area and help preserve the past.

Ruth Reiman, spokeswoman for the California Desert Coalition, says she worries that politicians and the Los Angeles utility might not heed that advice.

"Anybody that comes out here and looks at this would say, 'Why here?' " she said.

One thing seems clear: Whoever comes here, whether an individual hiker or an industrial heavyweight, needs to tread very carefully.

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