**Pam Ferris-Olson** (00:00): Today on the Woman Mind the Water Artivist Series, I am speaking with Violet Sage Walker. Violet is the Chairwoman of the Northern Chumash Tribal Council and nominator of the proposed Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary. Violet carries on the legacy of her late father who had a vision to protect 156 miles of California coastline.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (00:25): The Women Mind The Water podcast series engages artists in conversation about their work and explores their connection with the ocean. Through their stories, Women Mind the Water hopes to inspire and encourage action to protect the ocean and her creatures.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (00:41): I am honored to welcome Violet Sage Walker to the Women Mind the Water Artivist Series Podcast. Both Violet's heritage and her position as Chairwoman of the Northern Chumash Tribal Council have imbued her with the responsibility for the natural resources of her ancestral home. Violet says the ocean acts as her compass. Following her father's lead, Violet has been working to have a section of the central California coast designated as the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary. It would be the 17th national marine sanctuary and the first indigenous led sanctuary. It would serve as a natural bridge between the Channel Islands, the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuaries.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (01:29): Welcome, Violet. I am most honored that you accepted my invitation to be on the Women Mind the Water podcast.

**Violet Sage Walker** (01:37): Well, thank you Pam. I'm really happy to be here.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (01:40): Oh, so am I. While I'd like to focus on the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary, I do want to recognize that this is only one aspect of your life and your work as the Chairman of the Northern Chumash Tribal Council. Among many passions and activities, you are an accomplished horsewoman, scuba diver, as well as steward of natural resources, Chumash culture and history.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (02:09): Violet, I expect that many of my listeners are unfamiliar with the stretch of California coast you are now trying to protect. Maybe you could begin by describing the area you call home. Then, maybe you would tell us something about the Chumash people. I read an article that described them as maritime people.

**Violet Sage Walker** (02:30): Sure, Pam. I expect most of the people would be familiar with this area if you told them Morro Bay or Pismo Beach. I think people around the world love those two places and everybody knows Morro Bay for the Rock, the Morro Rock feature there, and it's one of the nine volcanoes. The Chumash name for Morro Rock is [foreign language 00:02:55] and it means "the one that stands in the sacred place." And it was a very sacred spiritual gathering place for the Chumash people and for indigenous people all around the world who used to travel and journey to Morro Rock to pray and offer ceremony.

**Violet Sage Walker** (03:15): So the actual location of the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary would begin at the ending of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, so they would be together. They would join together and to create a stretch of California coastline protected all the way from the north, the greater Farrallons all the way down to the Channel Islands. And so this is something that has been a vision for almost 40 years and almost three generations of Chumash people. So unfortunately, my dad isn't here to see the designation go forward, but he put in decades of work into protecting this coastline.

**Violet Sage Walker** (03:53): The Chumash people actually range from Malibu all the way to Big Sir, inland to Bakersfield and then down into the Central Valley. So we have a really big territory. And the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary encompasses nearly all of it in equal size, but on the ocean side.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (04:14): Okay. So I heard you say "Chumash", so I will apologize to having said Chumash.

**Violet Sage Walker** (04:24): I wasn't going to correct you. A lot of people say it different ways. I say "Chumash", but a lot of people will pronounce the H more, but I don't know that there's... that it's that off. So you're pretty close.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (04:39): All right. Well, thank you. Was your dad an avid mariner?

**Violet Sage Walker** (04:43): My dad grew up at the ocean, hunting. He was what we call first generation out of the mountains. He loved to be out on the water and he loved to eat fish, and so he grew up on the coastline. And when we talk about first generation, he grew up with no running water, electricity, or vehicles. So they actually grew most of their food and fished and hunted for most of their food. And so even though he was a very contemporary person, he was born into a very traditional, probably the last of our people living off the land here in Avila Beach.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (05:27): What are some of your memories of being by the sea with your father?

**Violet Sage Walker** (05:31): I'd say the earliest memory that I have of my dad, he used to, when I was a little kid, we used to do the grunion runs. And trying to figure out the grunion runs always impressed me how they come on the third setting sun of the full moon on the beach facing north on... There's like 50 million things that you have to align perfectly for the grunion runs and I was always impressed by that as a kid. And so we would go out in the middle of the night with a bunch of people at the beach and collect grunions and then eat them right there, like barbecue them and they're delicious. So that was an interesting memory. I know that not a lot of kids get to do that nowadays because of the population of grunions is very endangered in California.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (06:20): So did your father have any special stories that he liked to share with you about the sea?

**Violet Sage Walker** (06:25): I think every story of our people eventually comes around to the ocean and the sea. The ocean off of our coast here is the center of our culture. So all of our stories about trading, traveling, about money, our money was our shells, shell beads, the Olivella shells, the little round, circular spiral shells were considered money beads and wealth. And so the sea was a way of us displaying our wealth and as a tribal people. And still to this day, you'll see at gatherings, you'll see a lot of abalone and shells on our regalia.

**Violet Sage Walker** (07:08): And so every one of our stories talks about the food that we ate and the ceremonies that we performed, and then our brothers and sisters and our animals that we are responsible for care-taking for, everywhere from the little plankton all the way to the big huge whales off of our coast. We have in an intertwined interconnectivity to all of the animals here. So it would be hard to find a story that didn't include all those aspects in it in some type of moral lesson about our responsibilities as caretakers too.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** ([07:47](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=wi7-1tUqWHxBlafdbYPVbZhojEjy_c9473ENbTVCfKBS-qEq-Zf-W0H_ra8Lb63j1cSMBv4vgIL9hBju7Bh0QtB-AfA&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=467.85)): So what was the impetus for your father to nominate the area for a National Marine Sanctuary? And maybe you could start by explaining what a Marine Sanctuary is.

**Violet Sage Walker** (08:00): Sure. The National Marine Sanctuaries, there's 16 in the system. National Marine Sanctuaries are the water-based counterparts to a national park system. And so they're the very underfunded counterparts to state parks and federal parks. Basically, it's an area of heightened significance, and the easiest way to explain it simply is to think about someplace like Yosemite or Yellowstone. That's an area that we consider of heightened value intrinsically and otherwise. And the same with the Marine Sanctuary. The designation protects areas that are special and essential to critical habitat and biodiversity.

**Violet Sage Walker** (08:41): The reason why my father initially got involved in nominating the National Marine Sanctuary was because of the threat of seismic testing off of the coast of California. And that happened about between eight and 10 years ago. There was a big coastal commission hearing in Southern California that was very well attended with people opposing seismic testing because of the damage it does to all the marine life.

**Violet Sage Walker** (09:09): And from that event and from that time, my dad formed a coalition with other groups like Surfrider, Sierra Club, Eco SLO and Coast Alliance, and different organizations that had opposed the seismic testing. And from that group, we were told that the NOAA Office of National Marine Sanctuaries was opening up the nomination period for new National Marine Sanctuaries for the first time in 20 years. So we thought that the National Marine Sanctuaries was the best way to permanently protect our coastline. And right about the same time, the administration allowed the offshore leases. There's about 35 offshore leases off of our coast here from Morro Bay down to Vandenberg that are offshore oil leases. So those also became available. So the danger and the urgency was there to make this nomination go forward with the federal protection.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (10:18): So if it was designated a National Marine Sanctuary, would that prevent use of underwater sounds for expiration of oil?

**Violet Sage Walker** (10:32): It would actually prevent all offshore oil and seismic testing. There has historically never been any type of resource extraction within the National Marine Sanctuary system. So that can be a wide range of things including mineral mining. So it protects the marine environment in the holistic approach, so it would definitely prevent any future oil leases from being developed or any type of future natural gas or seismic testing exploration in the marine sanctuaries.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (11:06): How far out would the sanctuary go?

**Violet Sage Walker** (11:09): 15 to say 20, 25 miles out. So we're talking federal waters depending upon where the boundaries is drawn.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (11:17): So you're a scuba diver and... See, now you can hear my dog. I imagine you've explored the waters in the proposed areas. Can you take us on a dive under the water and describe what someone would see?

**Violet Sage Walker** (11:31): Sure. Depending upon the day, you might see nothing because sometimes the visibility off our coast is zero. It's very cold. It can be very challenging to get off of our coast depending upon what area you live in. So we have a lot of rocky shorelines. So prepare yourself. You're going to be diving off of the beach and potentially off of boats. But the visibility off of our coast, depending upon what time of year, when the winds come up, it can be nothing. So you want to find a really nice sheltered cove like Avila Beach or Shell Beach that has nice kelp forest and that has protection from the winds coming off shore. And I like to dive in the kelp forest. That's where I see the most fish. The kelp forest and on the coast here are very healthy and beautiful. That's where we have our protected southern sea otters.

**Violet Sage Walker** (12:32): So the kelp forests are the land version of like a Sequoia National Forest. They're the most vibrant forms of living ecosystems with every kind of animal you can think of, from sharks to whales to sea otters, all the way down to the little fish and rock fish, eel. You get a lot of lobster off the coast of California so lobster diving is really popular. And that is one thing I wanted to mention is that commercial and recreational diving opportunities inside the marine sanctuaries have improved every single year that the marine sanctuaries have been in effect.

**Violet Sage Walker** (13:15): So we're looking at the celebration this year, 50 years of National Marine Sanctuaries, and the celebration is going to be in the middle of September. And so specifically, the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary has been designated for 30 years. So the fishing, the measurable data that we get out of the marine sanctuary shows that the quality of fish, the quantity of fish, and the amount of fish and price per dollar has gone up every year that the marine sanctuaries have been in effect. So that's one thing that people have a lot of questions about is whether or not they'll still be able to fish. And a lot of scuba divers are also recreational fishermen. So it's really important to let people know that diving and recreational sports activities are all compatible with National Marine Sanctuaries.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (14:09): So your father started this process about a decade ago. So what is the status of the proposal?

**Violet Sage Walker** (14:17): The proposal is in the designation phase, which means right now NOAA is going to be writing a management plan and we are hoping that this will be the first management plan that will have and include tribal co-management. As being the tribe nominating the National Marine Sanctuaries, we're also asking NOAA to allow us to co-manage the National Marine Sanctuary. So we are waiting to see what that management plan would look like, and we should see that within the next four to six months. And then at that time, the public, we're going to be asking the public to make comments on that, whether we like it, whether we want to change it, whether we want to improve it, whether we want to start again. It could be a comment about anything.

**Violet Sage Walker** (15:03): So at that time, we're going to see what our initial reactions are to the management plan. And then if the management plan is great and most people support it, then we'll go into the designation will end. The National Marine Sanctuary will be nominated, and at that point then we will hopefully implement the tribal co-management plan that we came up with.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (15:25): So is there a way that listers can help to bring the process to a successful conclusion?

**Violet Sage Walker** (15:31): The best thing for right now for us to have is support through our social media and through our email list. And we are going to be asking people to make those comments in four to six months on the proposed management plan. And so right now, we'd like to just build our database of supporters. That way, when we do call on people to submit comments and submit documents directly into the NOAA's Federal Register Program, that we will give them the information and the resources they need to be able to write those comments and to be able to navigate uploading them to the Federal Register.

**Violet Sage Walker** (16:07): So our website is Chumashsanctuary.org, and you can also email info Chumashsanctuary.org. And at that time, we're going to need as much of our supporters as we can all around the world.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (16:22): So how would the management by the Chumash people differ maybe from the way other marine sanctuaries have been run through NOAA?

**Violet Sage Walker** (16:36): Typically, native indigenous groups are put onto advisory sections of any type of committee and we're asked to advise but not to participate in the green economy and blue economy. And we're not actually doing the work of managing and running day-to-day operations of say, state parks or federal parks or any of our marine protected areas or National Marine Sanctuaries. So part of building our capacity is involving Chumash people in the day-to-day operations of management of their lands and the ancestral homelands and also building resiliency into marginalized groups and groups that have historically not had the access. And so a lot of times indigenous people around the world are asked to solve problems and address problems like climate change or forest fires and using traditional indigenous knowledge, oftentimes their ideas are incorporated into these huge plans and rightfully so, but the people themselves are left behind.

**Violet Sage Walker** (17:49): And so we'd like to see that dynamic change to where the people are given the ability to work and have job creations and be able to have adequate compensation for their time and energy and resources that they contribute. So land management is something that indigenous peoples have always done and it's time for indigenous peoples to be able to be recognized and also be able to be compensated and to be able to have jobs and create jobs doing the things that they're experts in doing already.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (18:25): Well, the Chumash people have been stewards of this area for a very long time. And having lived in that area for 10 years, I really miss being there. So I live on the Atlantic coast in Maine. We have cold waters too, not quite as rough as the Pacific, but we don't have the same kelp that you do. You have those, that lovely bulk kelp that grows so fast and grows so thick and as you said, is a nursery for so many species. And...

**Violet Sage Walker** (19:08): It's not just a nursery, but the kelp is the biggest carbon sequestering thing on Earth. And so when we talk about every other breath you take is from the ocean. And the reason why our nomination is so critical and essential is because the kelp and the ocean, and the ocean here specifically have reached capacity with ocean acidification, which means that they cannot absorb any more carbon dioxide from the air. And the ocean is becoming more acidified, which affects our food sources like any type of shelled fish, any type of scallops or abalone or any type of shelled hard fish, which has a [inaudible 00:19:55] of a shell.

**Violet Sage Walker** (19:55): So when we think about how the ocean is so huge and it's so important, but these kelp forests are here on the coast. They're, like you said, there's not that many of them in the world. And these are massive, massive carbon filtration systems underneath the water. And their value and their benefits to keeping our climate cool and to keeping the world cool is just undervalued completely. And I wish that we could have an equal amount of funding going into marine science and marine research as we do into state parks because people can go to state park and they can play and have fun and they love it and they want to protect it, but it's harder to get access to these marine resources, but they're equally as important. So not only are the kelp amazing to see, but they're keeping us alive too and creating-

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (20:52): Very well said on all those points. And I'm a kayaker so I don't get to see what's underwater. I have to take for granted, except that you have that amazing Monterey Bay Aquarium where you can actually walk into one of the areas and you can see the kelp beds.

**Violet Sage Walker** (21:14): Yeah.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (21:15): And it is really is, it's like being in the Sequoia National Forest. They are large and there's so much light going, filtering through and all the fish and you just, you're overwhelmed by the beauty, and...

**Violet Sage Walker** (21:35): That's why I got into scuba diving was the Monterey Aquarium.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (21:40): Really?

**Violet Sage Walker** (21:40): So if you think about, I told my story, I wrote a story for Oceanographic Magazine that was published an issue, I think it was 24 or 34. It was published last month. And it talks about how I got into scuba diving and the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary and the Monterey Bay Aquarium were the first exposures I had really to science and research and technology and underwater. I thought I was going to be the next Jacques Cousteau. And my mom was really, really loved Jacques Cousteau and biology. And so I started diving at 12, and I started diving just shortly after visiting the aquarium and sitting right in front of that kelp forest you're talking about. They have the little benches there in front where you can just sit there and watch the fish and watch the kelp and watch the sea otters, and I was fascinated by that.

**Violet Sage Walker** (22:34): And so if I could say anything, it's that how much money we put into educating children about the ocean. It just is an enormous return on our investments. The more access people have to those places like the aquarium and scuba diving and going to the beach and kayaking, the more likely we are to create the new Jacques Cousteau.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (22:59): So I'd like to ask you what things listers can do to help protect marine resources?

**Violet Sage Walker** (23:06): I think we need to stop thinking small because a lot of times people think, "I'm doing everything I can do. I'm trying to use biodegradable soap or..." You do what you can do when you're shopping to be able to support a healthy ocean, but also we need to take big, bold actions. And honestly, we really need to go to electrified vehicles. We need to get this pollution under control. We need to get, there's about 70,000 shipping containers on the ocean that are just as bad as traffic in LA and every major city. So people don't see that how much pollution is going into the ocean via shipping traffic, dumping trash into the ocean, dumping raw sewage into the ocean. We need to do more than just change our home shopping habits.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (23:57): Right.

**Violet Sage Walker** (23:57): And so we need to have those conversations. Do we really need Amazon delivery overnight from China? Because stuff like that, it's a huge polluting activity.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (24:10): You're exactly right, but I'm going to add in here, "Hey folks, don't put your kitty litter down the drain because the-"

**Violet Sage Walker** (24:19): Yeah, because you got to save the sea otters.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (24:20): Yes. Right.

**Violet Sage Walker** (24:22): But it's not just that. When that came out, I was a kid. I was little when that happened and when they found out that the bacteria in kitty litter people have been flushing down the drains was killing the sea otters, I was little. And people instantly stopped doing it. And the campaign, the information, the connection, like, "Oh my god, I don't want to kill the sea otters." But it happened the same thing with straws when you saw that one picture of the sea turtle with the straw stuck through its nose and now people are like, "Oh, I don't ever want to use a straw again because there's millions and millions of straws going into the ocean."

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (24:56): Except Violet, you live in a little bubble of California, it's not quite the same everywhere else.

**Violet Sage Walker** (25:03): I know. Trust me, I know.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (25:08): All right. Well, I want to thank you for being on the Women Mind the Water podcast. I'm most grateful to you for lending such an important voice to the conversation on connection to the ocean and actions to protect it. I, for one, am most grateful for the passion and dedication of your father and to you for the enduring stewardship of the natural resources along the California coast. I'd like to remind listeners that I have been speaking with **Violet Sage Walker** for the Women Mind the Water podcast series. This series can be viewed on Womenmindthewater.com. An audio only version of this podcast is available on the Women Mind the Water website, on iTunes and other sites.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (25:52): Women Mind The Water is grateful to Jane Rice for the use of her song, Women of Water. All rights for the Women Mind the Water name and logo belong to Pam Ferris-Olson. This is Pam Ferris-Olson.