ISSUE #2

Environment & Geography Newsletter

Fall 2025



A Note from the Chair

On behalf of the faculty and staff, I am delighted to welcome you to the new academic year. Whether you are just beginning your college journey, transferring from another institution, or continuing in your studies, you are now part of a dynamic community of learners, teachers, and researchers dedicated to exploring ideas, asking meaningful questions, and working toward solutions.

This semester will be the first semester that Environmental Studies and Geography will be together in the same unit – The Department of Environment and Geography. Our department is built on curiosity, collaboration, and critical thinking. As you begin your courses, you will encounter not just new concepts and skills, but also new ways of engaging with the world and with one another. We encourage you to take risks in your learning, ask bold questions, and connect your classroom experiences to the broader world.

You will find many opportunities both here in the department and in the university—whether through fieldwork, research projects, internships, student organizations, or campus events—to deepen your knowledge and apply it in real and impactful ways. I encourage you to get to know your professors, seek out mentors, and build relationships with your peers; these connections will enrich your academic experience and stay with you long after graduation.

The faculty and staff in our department are committed to supporting your success. Our doors are open to you, and we welcome your ideas, perspectives, and contributions. Please do not hesitate to reach out if you have questions, need guidance, or simply want to talk through your interests and goals.

This semester is the beginning of an exciting journey. I am confident that you will bring your unique strengths to our community, and I look forward to seeing you grow, challenge yourself, and make a difference.

Welcome to the Department of Environment and Geography

Gabriel Valle

Gabriel Valle
Department Chair of
Environment & Geography

In this newsletter you can expect:

- Celebrating Students
- Faculty Profile
- Featured Alumni
- What I did last summer
- Department News
- Calendar of Events

Celebrating Students



Jovanny Silvestre Cruz

Hometown: Escondido, CA

Interest in the Field:
What drew me to environmental studies was realizing how many environmental changes are caused by human activity. Seeing CSUSM work hard to limit pollution and working at the San Diego Zoo Safari Park has shown me that if we want to see real change, we need to start by educating ourselves and understanding how much our society impacts the environment.

Future Careers:
I hope to continue working at the San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance and eventually do community outreach to promote ways of better protecting animals. Many animals are directly impacted by human activity, and I believe that through learning about them, people can better understand what is happening to our environment. Environmental changes cause major damage to animal ecosystems, and I want to help raise awareness about this connection.



Olivia Miller

Hometown: Carlsbad, CA

Interest in the field:
Growing up in a global biodiversity hotspot, I've always appreciated the access to so many different biomes (mountains, deserts, beaches, the ocean, etc.) all within a short drive. This sparked my interest in plant ecology, zoology, and the interactions within native plant and animal communities.

Future careers:
I hope to work in a field that combines scientific research and conservation, whether that be in ecological restoration or wildlife conservation. I'd love to contribute to protecting biodiversity and supporting sustainable human-environment relationships.



Celebrating Students



Dallin Von Strahl

Hometown: Oceanside

Interest in the field:
I've always been fascinated by nature and how everything is connected. I really enjoy learning about the environment and ecosystems, from the molecular level to entire biomes, and seeing how people and ecosystems interact. I'd consider myself an outdoors person because of how much I love activities like hiking, surfing, scuba diving and traveling.

Future careers:
I hope to work in the environmental field, preferably something hands on. I could see myself pursuing a career in marine conservation or coastal restoration and think it would be amazing to work with groups like the National Park Service, the Smithsonian Institution, or National Geographic.



Gabriela Gomez

Hometown: Escondido

Interest in the field:
My passion for environmental studies stems from making mud pies in my backyard as a child to now; realizing how important the same soil is for our coexistence with all living and nonliving things. My focus is to enrich my local community with the hands-on work I can do to impact our planet.

Future Career:
Currently I am partnering with the US Forest Service monitoring Invasive species at Cleveland National Forest and a local nonprofit organization using regenerative agriculture to empower sustainable food systems. With this, I hope to work locally in San Diego with a public agency that aligns with my passion for conservation and sustainability.



Faculty Profile



Elizabeth Ridder

What are your favorite classes to teach and why?

I have favorite things about all of the classes I teach, so I have a hard time picking one. The class I've been teaching the longest is GEOG 110, Introduction to Physical Geography. I love teaching this class because students can easily relate many of the concepts to familiar landscapes or experiences and explore them in San Diego County. I also love this class because we can discuss many misconceptions about geography and science. I promise there is much more to geography than memorizing place names and labeling maps.

Tell us what you do when you're not doing research or grading papers?

I enjoy running, hiking, reading, yardwork, and spending time with family, friends, and my dog. I started running again in August 2024 and have since completed three 10k races and four half marathons. I'm working toward improving my race time in an upcoming half marathon in October. I also enjoy yoga and weight training and started both again over the summer. I'm working on establishing an orchard and adding more native plants to my yard.

Tell us a little bit about your current research?

I am fortunate to work alongside colleagues trained in archaeology, paleobotany, zooarchaeology, climate science, and geology. Our work examines human-environmental relationships, approximately 3500-4500 years ago, across the eastern and northern Mediterranean Basin. We are currently focused on how communities adjusted their agricultural practices in response to changing environmental and climate conditions. We are pursuing several lines of evidence, such as identifying seeds, charcoal, and animal bones from archaeological excavation and sampling them for laboratory analysis of their oxygen, carbon, and nitrogen isotope compositions; modeling of past climates; and landscape reconstructions.

Featured Alumni

Richard Parks



A bit about myself

I'm a graduate of Cal State San Marcos, where I earned my degree in Environmental Studies with a minor in Geography. Growing up in Southern California gave me an early appreciation for its diverse landscapes, and my work in the oil and gas industry later shaped my path toward environmental compliance and monitoring. Today, I'm excited to use my skills to help protect the ecosystems and communities that make California unique.

Why did you major in ENVS?

I have always been intrigued by California's unique landscapes—deserts, mountains, and beaches all within close proximity. My time in the Army sparked my interest in geographical mapping and environmental monitoring. Later, working in the oil and gas industry deepened my desire to pursue ENVS, especially when it came to environmental compliance and protection.

How has ENVS influenced your current career choices?

The technical skills I learned through the ENVS program have helped me understand environmental jobs that revolve around compliance. It has allowed me to combine my past experience in environmental monitoring and research skills with my interest in protecting natural resources. Because of this, I've been able to focus on roles that directly support conservation and responsible land use.

What was the best part (or best thing you remember) from majoring in ENVS at CSUSM?

The best part was having professors who truly cared about their students' success and made learning engaging. I also really valued collaborating with classmates on projects, where everyone brought different strengths and perspectives. Those connections made the program both supportive and motivating, and they're some of my best memories from CSUSM.

What is your favorite thing you do at your current job?

The best part of my current role as an Environmental Scientist at Caltrans is investigating, researching, and ensuring that all projects remain in compliance. California is heavily dependent on its roadways, highways, and bridges, and with changing climate conditions and constant growth, it's critical to protect the state's unique ecosystems and environments. I enjoy knowing that my work helps ensure these vital projects move forward while minimizing environmental impacts.

What I did last summer

Growing Together: Reflections from the Sustainable Food Project Garden



This summer, we [Presley, Shahin, & Zoe] had the opportunity to care for CSUSM's Sustainable Food Project (SFP) garden, a quarter-acre space that serves as both a classroom and a source of fresh produce for the Cougar Pantry. While we expected familiar tasks like watering, weeding, and harvesting, the experience surprised us with how much independence and responsibility it offered. Instead of simply following instructions, we learned to notice plant needs, troubleshoot problems, and take initiative. The garden became a place where we built confidence, not just as students, but as caretakers of a living system.

One of the most meaningful lessons was realizing how much a small, committed group can accomplish. This summer, only three of us kept the garden thriving, and yet we achieved more than some larger classes in past semesters. That consistency, showing up in the heat, even when it meant working alone, taught us resilience. It also reminded us that community work doesn't always require everyone to be present at the same time; it can also be built through shared goals and steady contribution.

The garden also challenged common stereotypes. Gardening isn't just for environmental studies majors, nor is it "too hard" or "too messy." With the right tools, preparation, and attitude, anyone can grow food, even if it is in containers on a balcony. While some may shy away from dirt or insects, we found joy in getting our hands in the soil. Gardening became not only practical, but restorative, something that brought calm, focus, and a deeper connection to nature.

Beyond personal growth, one of the highlights was being able to enjoy fresh produce from the garden ourselves. Harvesting and eating food we had planted gave the experience a sense of realism, it wasn't just theory or classroom practice, but a direct reminder of how rewarding and tangible growing your own food can be.

Ultimately, this internship left us with practical skills, renewed confidence, and a sense of belonging to something larger. Gardening taught us patience, problem-solving, and food sovereignty, but it also gave us something harder to measure: a reminder that tending to the land is also tending to the community.

With Gratitude
Shahin, Presley, & Zoe





Department News

The Department of Environment & Geography at CSUSM would like to thank the students, faculty, staff, alumni, and supporters who contributed content and suggestions for this year's publication. We plan to continue to provide you with the latest program news and updates throughout the academic year. We express a special appreciation to our community collaborators for helping provide hands-on experiences for ENVS and GEOG students. Our goal has always been to provide students with the best environmental education for the region's future environmental leaders.



Coffee Hour

This year the Department Environment and Geography will host a coffee hour to provide a space for collaboration and creativity between students and faculty.

On the third Tuesday of every month, ENVS and GEOG faculty we'll available in SBSB 1110 (Map room). Come join us for coffee, snacks, and conversation.

This is an opportunity for you to talk with faculty about projects, volunteer/internship opportunities, or to discuss grad school.

Climate to Action

Climate to Action is an initiative of the Climate Action and Sustainability Center at CSUSM. The podcast is dedicated to climate action, Indigenous knowledge, and climate justice.

We transform climate anxiety into action and problem-solving, inform our region about the climate crisis, explore solutions, and highlight opportunities to become climate activists.



Upcoming Campus Events

Fall 2025

- Sept. 16, 2025 - SBSB 1108 U-hour: Caitlin Hansen, Talking Trash, Careers in Geography & Environmental Studies Speaker Series
- Sept 17, 2025 - Draft Republic 6:30-9pm: Enviro Happy Hour
- Oct 2, 2025 - Innovation Hub 5:30-7:30: San Diego Climate Week Career Panel, All students are welcome and food will be provided.
- Oct 13-17, 2025 - CHABSS Career Week: A week long series of events, speakers, panels, career and grad school prep, and networking opportunities.
- Oct 15, 2025 - SBSB 1108 U-hour: Careers in Geography & Environmental Studies Speaker Series, Speaker TBA
- Oct 15, 2025 - Draft Republic 6:30-9pm: Enviro Happy Hour
- Oct 28, 2025 - USU 6 – 8pm: SD Coastkeeper, Valley to Coast Speaker Series, CSUSM Arts & Lectures
- Nov 18, 2025 - SBSB 1108 U-hour: Yelena Zelmenov, Careers in Geography & Environmental Studies Speaker Series
- Nov 19, 2025, USU 5 – 8pm: Cigarette Surfboard: An Environmental Surf Documentary Film Screening, CSUSM Arts & Lectures
- December 2, 2025 - ACD 102: Alhelí Calderón Villarreal, The Tijuana River and the Environmental Structural Violence Among the Deported Population That Inhabit It

Spring 2026

- February 3, 2026 - ACD 102: Shannon Switzer Swanson, Destruction and Care in the Coral Triangle -- Sharing Research on So-Called “Destructive” Fishing Practices in Indonesia and Why Fishers Use Them
- April 7, 2026 - ACD 102: Elinne Becket, Analyzing the Mission Bay, CA Water Microbiome Across Space and Time to Investigate Urban Impacts on Wetland Ecosystems