The UC Natural Reserve System provides a library of ecosystems throughout California. Reserves offer outdoor laboratories to field scientists, classrooms without walls for students, and nature’s inspiration to all.

Founded in 1965 to provide a network of wildland sites available for scientific study, the NRS has grown to include more than 40 locations encompassing more than 756,000 acres across the state.

The NRS is the world’s largest university-operated system of natural reserves; no other network of field sites can match its size, scope, and ecological diversity.
UC Santa Cruz Reserves

Año Nuevo Island Reserve

In winter, the beaches of Año Nuevo Island teem with battling, birthing northern elephant seals. In spring and summer, the clifftops come alive with breeding cormorants, screeching gulls, and majestic brown pelicans. Located on a marine terrace separated from the mainland by a narrow channel, the island also holds the ruins of a historic lightstation. For over 40 years, the reserve has hosted groundbreaking studies on marine mammal behavior. Año Nuevo Island is available for scientific study through an agreement with California State Parks.

Younger Lagoon Reserve

A rare Central Coast wetland, Younger Lagoon Reserve encompasses fresh and saltwater marshes, pickleweed flats, and a pocket beach featuring native dune vegetation. Tidepools harboring crabs and fish are located just offshore, while the federally endangered tidwater goby thrives in low-oxygen lagoon waters. Upland terraces, once farm fields, are being restored to coastal prairie.

Fort Ord Natural Reserve

Decades as a military base preserved the maritime chaparral of Fort Ord Natural Reserve from development. The dense vegetation includes ceanothus and manzanita stunted by sandy, nutrient-poor soils. Legless lizards burrow through the loose substrate in search of insects to eat, while woodrats build nest mounds beneath oaks dripping with lichen. Endangered species protected here include sand gilia and Smith’s blue butterfly.

Landels-Hill Big Creek Reserve

The Santa Lucia Mountains plunge into the Pacific Ocean in the heart of scenic Big Sur. From ridgetops clad in rare Santa Lucia fir and coast redwood, Landels-Hill Big Creek Reserve descends through oak woodlands and coastal grasslands. Steelhead trout ply clear canyon streams. Offshore, sea otters take refuge in the kelp beds of Big Creek State Marine Reserve.