

# Reclaimed homelands of Northern California tribes fulfill a prophecy of renewal

AUGUST 14, 2020



*The Esselen Tribe of Monterey County has reclaimed part of its ancestral lands in Big Sur. Photo via Doug Steakley / Western Rivers Conservancy*

***Sacred peaks overlooking the Pacific, salmon streams and lush alpine meadows are returning to the Native people; it's about time.***

## By Jane Braxton Little, Special to CalMatters

In California's backwoods, far from the clamors for social justice in America's streets, longstanding cultural unrest is bringing change to the landscape. Native Americans are quietly repossessing their ancestral lands.

Sacred peaks overlooking the Pacific, boulder-strewn salmon streams and lush alpine meadows are returning to the people who have always claimed them. In the last year six different tribal groups have negotiated six separate transactions transferring a combined total of 56,453 acres of mostly private land. All are committed to conserving the natural resources that sustained their ancestors and, they believe, will heal their children and grandchildren.

"This is a time to restore balance – to our people and to Mother Earth," said Tom Little Bear Nason, chairman of the Esselen Tribe of Monterey County.

Last month the Esselen regained ownership of 1,199 acres of scenic coastland 25 miles south of Monterey.

Coming four centuries after being displaced by Spanish missionaries, then endless waves of European and American settlers, it's about time for Native Americans and the environment. With development converting grasslands to asphalt and [climate change claiming 150 species every day](#), the Native American promise to conserve these lands offers hope.

The deals struck by Nason and other tribal leaders give them unfettered title to a combined area nearly twice the size of San Francisco. That ownership changes everything, said Ben Cunningham, chairman of the Maidu Summit Consortium. Since acquiring 2,961 acres in Humbug Valley and around Lake Almanor, the Mountain Maidu have a renewed sense of purpose – “something to work with besides promises,” he said.

The transfers will also change the land itself.

The Yurok Tribe bought a 47,000-acre swath of redwoods and Douglas firs from Green Diamond Resource, a timber company. Logging, road construction and grazing have eroded the lower reaches of Blue Creek, a Klamath River tributary critical to threatened coho and fall-run Chinook salmon. The Yurok plan to create a salmon sanctuary on approximately 15,000 acres. Elsewhere they will shift from heavy industrial logging to managing a restoration forest that allows trees to get older before harvesting them.

“These are spiritual lands,” said Amy Cordalis, general counsel for the Yurok Tribe. “We plan to protect them over the next 100 years and forever.”

That goal, shared by each of the new tribal landowners, complements policies in a state that values natural resources and has made slowing climate change a top priority.

The Yurok used California’s [greenhouse gas reduction program](#) to leverage some of the funding for their purchase. The Maidu, Pit River and Potter Valley tribes acquired their lands through PG&E’s 2003 bankruptcy settlement, which required the utility to donate 140,000

acres to conservation in exchange for the state's bailout. The Wiyot Tribe earned the respect of the Eureka City Council – and outright title to their 200-acre island – by cleaning up the contamination left by a century of grazing and shipbuilding.

It's not surprising that this surge of land repatriations is occurring in California. Gov. Gavin Newsom's [apology](#) to Native Americans and creation of a Truth and Healing Council followed [action](#) by former Gov. Jerry Brown, establishing a tribal adviser within the governor's office to strengthen communication and collaboration between state government and Native American tribes.

In December, the California Public Utilities Commission adopted a new [policy](#) that prioritizes land transfers to tribes by giving them first right of refusal to decommissioned utility company lands. And the Pacific Forest and Watershed Lands [Stewardship Council](#), tasked with recommending new owners for PG&E's bankruptcy transfers, encouraged Native American groups to apply.

California has created an atmosphere conducive to Native American land ownership dedicated to conservation, said Beth Rose Middleton, Native American Studies professor at UC Davis. "There's an openness to the process. People are starting to really think critically about lands and waters they took for granted and how best to conserve them," she said.

In striking their purchase deals, the tribes have used tools that include innovative partnerships with state agencies and conservation groups. [Western Rivers Conservancy](#), dedicated to preserving critical habitat, was essential to both the Yurok and Esselen acquisitions. Its vision for protecting streams aligned with the tribes' goal of

conserving sacred grounds to conduct their ceremonies and continue their traditions.

The land recently transferred to tribal ownership is a fraction of the billions of acres taken away from Native Americans in broken treaties, false promises and outright theft. But it's a renewal fulfilling a prophecy that envisions tribes separated from their homelands reuniting, Nason said.

"This is the beginning for us, a new way to be on this land and on Earth again," Nason said.

By conserving the land itself, these Native American transactions hold promise for all of us.

*Jane Braxton Little, based in the northern Sierra Nevada, is an independent journalist covering science and natural resource issues for publications that include the Atlantic, Audubon, Discover, National Geographic and Scientific American, [jblittle@dyerpress.com](mailto:jblittle@dyerpress.com).*

*Jane has also written about how the pandemic led to the [closing of a 153-year-old newspaper](#) in California.*