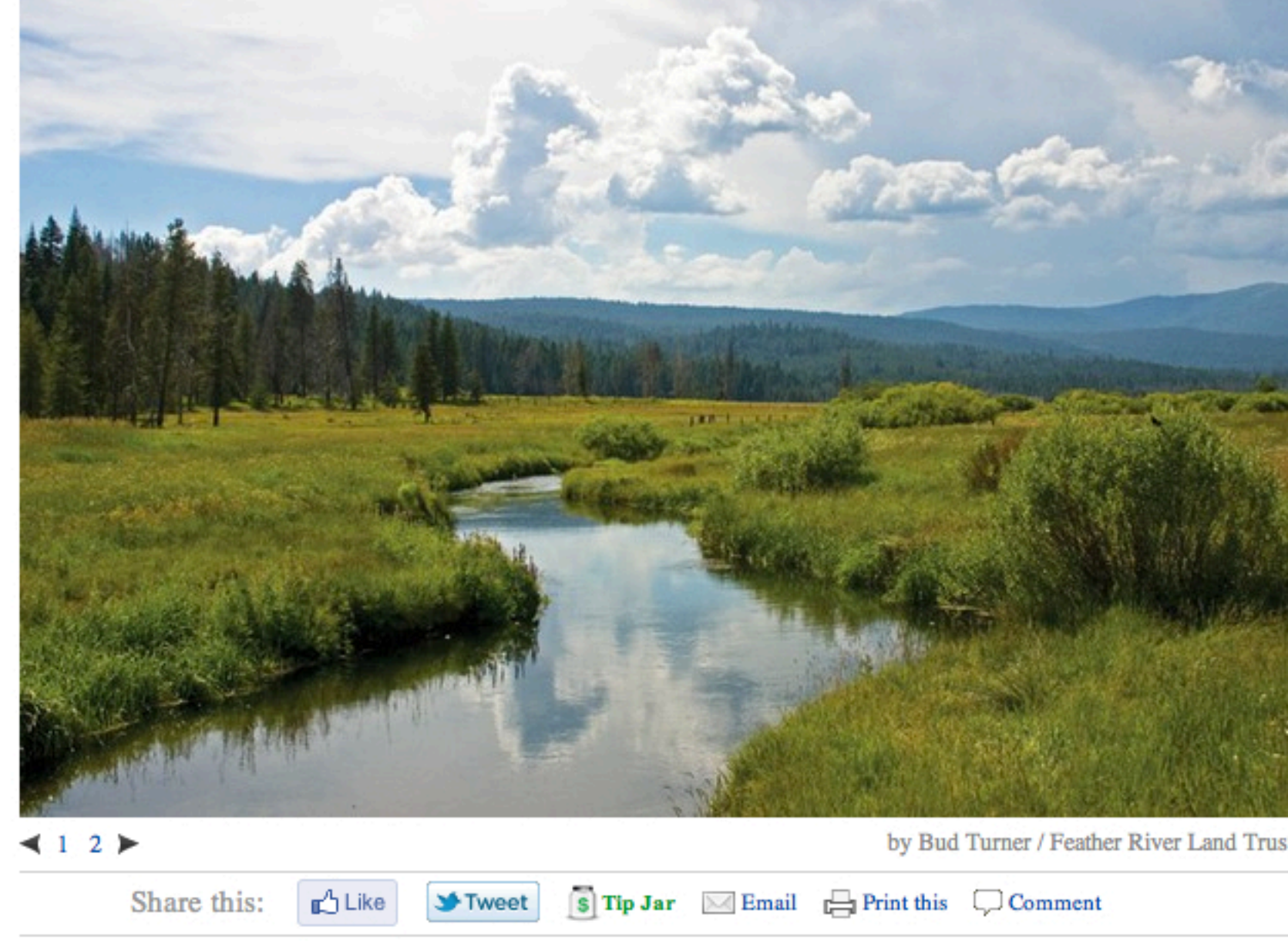


California tribe competes with the state to restore its homeland



◀ 1 2 ▶ by Bud Turner / Feather River Land Trust

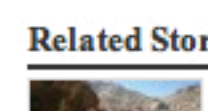
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NEWS - From the September 04, 2011 issue
By Jane Braxton Little

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Everywhere she looks in Humbug Valley, Beverly Benner Ogle sees the past: On the banks of Yellow Creek, her Maidu Indian ancestors still dance in spring celebration. In the tall timothy grass, her grandmother, a girl again, plays with the children of white settlers. On a grassy knoll near towering pines, her mother plays violin at the dance hall.

Now, for the first time in her 70 years, Ogle can also see a future for the Mountain Maidu Indians, here at the headwaters of California's Feather River. More than 150 years after they lost their land to settlers, the tribe may be poised to get some of it back.

Humbug Valley currently belongs to Pacific Gas and Electric Company. It's one of nearly 1,000 parcels that have been designated for new ownership following the utility giant's 2001 bankruptcy. The Maidu Summit, a coalition of nine Maidu grassroots organizations, has applied for this chunk of ancestral land. "If we get this valley back, our people will bring it to the way it was and carry on our traditions," says Ogle, the Summit's vice chairwoman.

However righteous their claim may be, the future of Humbug Valley does not rest upon atoning for past wrongs. The new owner must demonstrate the ability to manage the 2,300-acre valley and conserve its forests, grasslands and trout-filled streams "in perpetuity for public purposes," according to the bankruptcy agreement. The Pacific Forest and Watershed Lands Stewardship Council, a nonprofit group created in 2003 through the bankruptcy settlement process, will assign ownership, giving careful consideration to financial and management capacity. Ric Notini, director of the Council's land stewardship program, says that it expects to decide late this year.

Meanwhile, the California Department of Fish and Game has filed a competing application that would make Humbug Valley the 111th wildlife area managed by the agency, which has a \$539 million annual budget.

The Mountain Maidu are a federally unrecognized tribe of around 2,000 people living south of Lassen National Park in the Feather River watershed. They have very little money and virtually no recent experience managing large tracts of land. But their determination to demonstrate the value of their traditional ecological knowledge has won them widespread support among local environmentalists, statewide fishing groups -- even county and national forest officials.

California Indian tribes were collectively guaranteed over 800,000 acres of land in state-sanctioned treaties that were either broken, lost or never ratified. If the Maidu win Humbug Valley, it will be the first time ancestral lands have been returned to an unrecognized California tribe. That would set an important precedent for other non-recognized tribes, encouraging them to pursue claims to lands with cultural and sacred sites, says Lorena Gorbet, who represents the United Maidu Nation on the Maidu Summit. "These are social justice issues over a cultural disruption that's still going on today."



Beverly Benner Ogle.

Photo: Jane Braxton Little

Surrounded by granite peaks up to 7,000 feet high, Humbug Valley is notched into the northern end of the long sloping spine of the Sierra Nevada, 120 miles northeast of Sacramento. Carbonated springs gurgle into a meadow so wet that it forms a rare fen bog. Elk no longer wander down from the forested ridges, but endangered willow flycatchers flit along the creek, and otters slide down its banks.

The mountains above Humbug and the neighboring valleys capture water that flows through the taps of 20 million Californians. A century ago, that water caught the eye of power company owners, who used it to build a hydroelectric empire that now supplies more than 4 million PG&E customers. Today, the places the Maidus called Big Meadows and Mountain Meadows lie underneath Lake Almanor and Walker Lake. Humbug, though, was never flooded. Instead, PG&E leased the meadow to cattle ranchers for grazing, opened a public campground along Yellow Creek, and stocked the stream with non-native German brown trout.

Whoever ends up owning Humbug Valley, or any of the other PG&E parcels, will have to comply with the terms of a conservation easement, to be donated by the utility company to a third party. The bankruptcy settlement requires that all the parcels -- a total of 140,000 acres valued at \$300 million and located between Bakersfield and the Oregon border -- be open to the public. New development is prohibited, but some grazing and commercial logging will be allowed.

Ogle and other members of the Maidu Summit hope to host educational programs and ceremonial gatherings in the valley. The current campground would become a public camping area for youth, elderly and disabled groups, with a roundhouse serving as a classroom and meeting area. A native plants garden and trail would demonstrate foods and medicinal plants important to the Maidu way of life.

The Maidu plan to use land-management techniques they've practiced for millennia: digging edible bulbs and roots to encourage more growth; pruning willows to improve their value for basket weaving; and using controlled burns to recycle nutrients and reduce fuel loading. "We have a great longing to reconnect with the land and steward it as our ancestors did," says Farrell Cunningham, Maidu Summit chairman. "We haven't had an opportunity to do that in a very long time."

A pilot project approved by Congress in 1998 allowed the Maidu to demonstrate traditional management techniques on 2,100 acres of national forest land. Although little has been accomplished due to poor communication and on-the-ground disagreements with the Forest Service, the work recently resumed.

The tribe's Humbug plan, now before the Stewardship Council, strives to honor each ecosystem component for itself while recognizing the interdependence of the whole. Unfortunately, it's weak on specifics. It calls for a long-term analysis of the ecological effects of traditional management, draws on scientists from a variety of agencies and institutions, and mandates collection of baseline data before each project begins. But the Maidus are vague about how they will reintroduce species such as elk and beaver. And while they are committed to eliminating German brown trout, it's not clear how they will replace them with rainbow trout and other fish species native to the valley. Removing the feisty browns could also annoy anglers. If it's approved, the Maidu proposal would be subject to the full public review required by state law, like any other project that affects important natural resources.

Conservation groups are determined to see that the area's environmental values are protected. Humbug hosts several rare plants, including long-leaved starworts, as well as breeding populations of willow flycatchers and threatened sandhill cranes. Although the lack of detail in the Maidu proposal worries some, environmentalists have generally been supportive.

The California Fish and Game Department's proposal is more conventional. The state has managed fish habitat in Yellow Creek for decades and would continue to emphasize its trophy brown trout fishery, says William Somer, a senior state fisheries biologist. Past grazing has seriously eroded the meadow along the creek; officials plan to restore it using heavy equipment to recreate historic stream channels. They are also considering reintroducing cattle grazing, a practice PG&E discontinued in 2001.

Since the valley would be a designated wildlife area, the department would thin the forest to promote deer foraging. Some of the larger trees would be logged to reduce fuels and help pay for management activities, Somer says.

The differences between the Maidu and Fish and Game Department proposals are very clear, says the Stewardship Council's Notini -- particularly when it comes to finances. The agency has budgeted \$97,000 a year to manage Humbug Valley, with an additional \$92,500 for a one-time scientific inventory of the flora and fauna. The Maidus propose to use trained volunteers to manage the entire valley on a foundation grant of \$36,000 a year, approximately what PG&E now spends.

But both proposals are compelling, says Heidi Krolick, the Stewardship Council's regional land-conservation manager. Despite its commitment to fiscal responsibility, the Council is open to innovative approaches and supports using volunteers and involving the community, she says.

Krolick has urged the two groups to cooperate. If the Fish and Game Department's management plan is selected, state officials say they will offer the Maidu consortium 101 acres to own and manage as it chooses. "We would hope we could work closely with them," Somer says.

Ogle has a counterproposal: "We give them 101 acres of creek, and we keep the rest." For Ogle, owning Humbug Valley represents a kind of homecoming. The benefits are as tangible as preserving gravesites and traditional grinding stones, as elusive as wind soothing through old-growth trees. "I want people to remember this land was ours once," she says. "And we want it back."