

The InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness

Ten Tribes Reclaiming, Stewarding, and Restoring Ancestral Lands

BY HAWK ROSALES

The 4,000-acre (1,619 ha) InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness is located along the “Lost Coast” of northern California, an area that holds great cultural and spiritual significance for the indigenous Tribal Peoples of this region.



Hawk Rosales.

Located 200 miles (323 km) north of San Francisco, this portion of the Sinkyone land is the longest stretch of permanently protected coastal wilderness in the lower 48 states of the United States. It is the westernmost part of the vast Sinkyone Indian Aboriginal Territory that

includes the Wild and Scenic Eel River, the stunning and mountainous Lost Coast, and the vestiges of a 3,000-year-old temperate rain forest.

History of Designation

For thousands of years, the indigenous people of this land employed a complex and sophisticated system of cultural stewardship that significantly influenced the biological diversity and abundance of the Sinkyone temperate rainforest. The land management methods employed by the Sinkyone and other neighboring Tribes of California’s North Coast included rotational burning of understory plants to ensure the health and productivity of important species; selective thinning and harvesting of seaweeds, basket-making materials, medicines, and a host of other plants; breaching of berms at river mouths to enable salmon migration (see figure 1); the transplanting of desirable plant species; and countless other practices that were conducted hand-in-hand with prayers and ceremonies for

eons throughout this land. The success of their cultural management was informed by close observations of the seasons and other natural phenomena; the understanding that one must never take more than one needed; a unique set of original instructions that had been given spiritually to the people; and a vast body of unsurpassed wisdom and knowledge gained by thousands of years of living daily with respect upon Mother Earth.

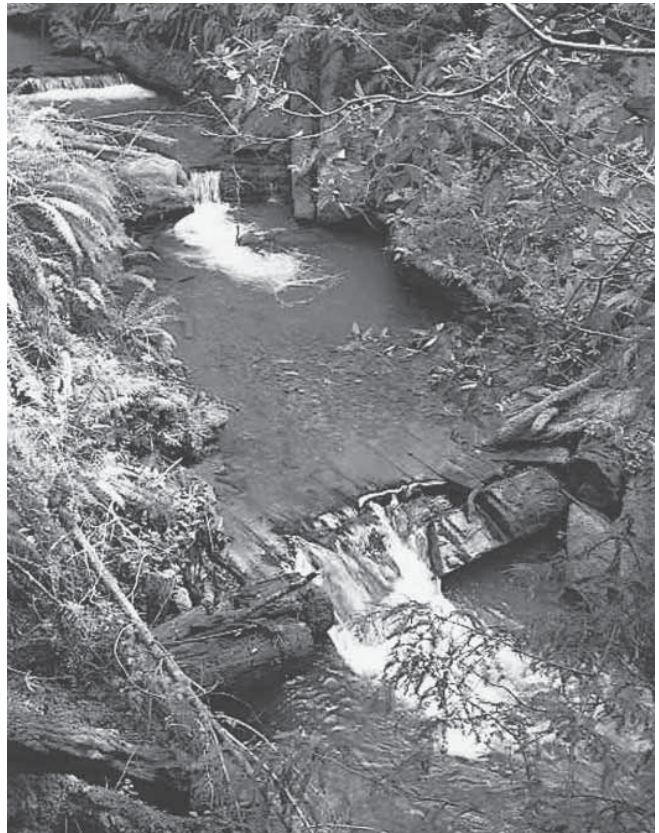


Figure 1—InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness, Wolf Creek salmonid jump pools. Photo by Joe Scriven; © InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council.

The Sinkyone people established and inhabited permanent villages and seasonal encampments throughout their territory. Although autonomous, the many Sinkyone groups inhabiting these villages and encampments shared distinctive cultural and social characteristics that distinguished them from neighboring Indian peoples. These shared characteristics included an Athabaskan language unique to the Sinkyone, a common system of spiritual beliefs and practices, distinctive styles for their art forms and architecture, and commonly understood territorial boundaries within which members of the Sinkyone bands socialized, gathered and hunted food sources, and conducted trade. They utilized the prairies and meadows, the river valleys, the redwood forests, and the coastal areas throughout the year to gather traditional foods (see figure 2). This varied land was the place in which they lived and practiced their traditional ways for untold generations.

In the mid-1850s, however, the Sinkyone people were suddenly and violently confronted with invading multitudes of Euro-American settlers who considered themselves entitled to indigenous peoples' lands and resources. Within 15 years, most of the Sinkyone people were annihilated through a combination of massacres, slavery, forced relocations, starvation, land theft, introduced diseases, rape, impoverishment, and other atrocities. The state and federal governments paid white citizens for the scalps of Sinkyone men, women, and children, and many Indian toddlers and young people were sold as slaves to wealthy families throughout California. The U.S. Army removed Sinkyone survivors to concentration camps, called reservations, which were established throughout the region. In the ensuing years, Sinkyone people married other peoples of local Tribal affiliations and



Figure 2— Looking south from Needle Rock to Bear Harbor. Photo by © Hawk Rosales.

eventually became enrolled members at several Tribes located throughout the region.

In the face of this profound suffering and loss, the descendants of the original Sinkyone people retained their ancient connections to Sinkyone and, throughout the generations, have continued to travel seasonally to their ancestral lands to harvest traditional food and medicine plants and to offer their prayers.

Redwood Ecosystem

With the genocide of the Sinkyone people came the ecocide of the ancient forests of Kaha-tcho (redwood tree), considered by local Tribes as especially sacred. The people used various parts of the redwood in the manufacture of their houses, clothing, baskets, fish traps, canoes, and a host of other items. Carved parts of the canoe corresponded to various parts of the human body, such as the heart and lungs. The Sinkyone people considered their canoes to be alive, and they often spoke to them. A traditional religious leader of the Chilula people, whose territory is located to the north-east of the Sinkyone, expressed the

spiritual beliefs of Native peoples of the redwood region when she explained the importance of this great tree:

The redwood trees are sacred. They are a special gift and reminder from the Great Creator to the human beings. The Great Creator made everything, including trees of all kinds, but he wanted to leave a special gift for his children. So he took a little medicine from each tree, he said a prayer and sang a powerful song, and then he mixed it all with the blood of our people. Then he created this special redwood tree from this medicine. He left it on Earth as a demonstration of his love for his children. The redwood trees have a lot of power: they are the tallest, live the longest, and are the most beautiful trees in the world. Destroy these trees and you destroy the Creator's love. And if you destroy that which the Creator loves so much, you will eventually destroy mankind. (National Park Service 1994, unpaginated)

Commercial harvest of the old growth redwoods of the region began as early as the 1850s, but large portions of

Four separate conservation easements protect the land's cultural and ecological values in perpetuity.

the ancient forest remained intact until the late 1940s when an “improved” style of bulldozer dramatically changed logging methods and the rate of extraction. With the advent of this new equipment, steep slopes that had been previously inaccessible were now open to unrestrained clear-cut harvesting. The ensuing pillage destroyed most of the original redwood ecosystem and set in motion a severe decline in the health and productivity of native salmonid fisheries.

Beginning in the mid-1800s, a long succession of commercial timber interests held title to a vast acreage of redwood forestland within the Sinkyone territory and neighboring aboriginal Tribal lands. These interests grew wealthy from their exploitation of the sacred redwood trees, while the Tribal communities who had occupied these lands for millennia suffered economic impoverishment as well as oppression

from societal racism and unjust governmental policies. In order to survive, many Tribal members were forced to work for the timber companies, felling the ancient and sacred redwood trees that had sheltered and provided for their prosperity for countless generations. During the 100-year heyday of North Coast timber operations, many in white society viewed the juxtaposition of timber industry profits and Native impoverishment through the lens of the Manifest Destiny doctrine that supported this dreadful disparity. Today, we refer to it as genocide and environmental racism.

Because redwoods regenerate both by seed and stump sprout, and grow rapidly, many areas of the North Coast redwood rain forest have been subjected to clear-cutting three or more times. Less than 4% of the region's original old growth redwoods are still standing. Fortunately, organizations

such as California State Parks, Redwood National Park, Save the Redwoods League, and others have helped preserve scattered residual stands of ancient redwoods, thus ensuring at least some legacy for future generations of humans.

Environmental Movement

During the 1960s and 1970s another kind of settler began arriving in the North Coast. People who had become disillusioned by the consumerism, aggression, and hypocrisy of American society sought refuge and peace in remote locations within the forests of the North Coast. They soon were confronted by horrific clear-cut logging operations within their viewsheds and watersheds as the timber companies expanded into previously unentered areas of old growth. The new settlers quickly organized by inspecting and documenting damage, researching environmental laws, and protesting at locations where old trees were being cut or were scheduled for cutting. They chained themselves to redwoods, blockaded logging sites, were arrested, and reached out to other potential North Coast allies. Efforts were made to contact local Tribal representatives and an important dialogue began between the leaders of the indigenous community and the environmental movement.

Soon, Tribal members were joining nonnative activists and protesters at various sites on Sinkyone land threatened by logging. A lawsuit was brought by the Environmental Protection Information Center, the International Indian Treaty Council, and other plaintiffs against landowner Georgia-Pacific Corporation (G-P), California Department of Forestry, and the State Board of Forestry. The lawsuit alleged serious violations of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). A key element of the lawsuit was the timber company's blatant



Figure 3—Looking north from the Sinkyone Wilderness State Park into the King Range National Conservation Area. Photo by © Hawk Rosales.

violation of state requirements to protect documented cultural resources, which the company was caught in the act of destroying. The case also highlighted the fact that state forest regulatory and policy-making agencies were turning a blind eye to the timber company's violations. The case, known as *Environmental Protection Information Center, Inc. (EPIC) v. Johnson*, was won by the plaintiffs in July 1985 when the State Appellate Court ruled that G-P and the state had violated four important elements of CEQA in that they had failed to: (a) adequately consult with Native Americans; (b) protect Native American cultural resources; (c) provide adequate public notice regarding the timber harvest plan; and (d) consider cumulative impacts. As a result of this ruling, the State Board of Forestry revamped timber harvest rules for the entire state of California.

InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council

The lawsuit opened the door for the eventual return of nearly 4,000 acres (1,619 ha) of aboriginal Sinkyone land to local tribal control and stewardship. In 1986, a Native peoples' cultural land conservation organization, known as the InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council (ISWC), was formed in response to G-P's planned divestiture of 7,100 acres (2,875 ha) of its coastal Sinkyone holdings. The council was founded by and for the benefit of local Tribes retaining cultural and ancestral ties to the Sinkyone region. It was established with the specific purpose of acquiring and permanently protecting 4,000 acres (1,619 ha) of G-P land from further commercial harvesting, and reestablishing and revitalizing traditional cultural uses for local tribal members.

The ISWC is unique in that it is a cultural land trust established by, and for the benefit of, so many Tribes. Seven



Figure 4—Bear Harbor and the mouth of Wolf Creek. Photo by © Hawk Rosales.

Tribes originally formed the ISWC. Over the ensuing years, the number of member Tribes has grown from seven to ten, all of which are sovereign nations recognized by the U.S. federal government. Member Tribes have joined the ISWC through certified tribal resolutions that identify the delegate (and alternate) who represent their Tribe on the ISWC board of directors. Continued consensus on common cultural goals, and the dynamic of contributing to and benefiting from this intertribal effort, are important factors that have enabled the Tribes to achieve their original purpose in founding the ISWC.

InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness

Two weeks after the ISWC received its nonprofit status, Trust for Public Land (TPL) acquired the 4,000 acres (1,619 ha) with the intent of eventually transferring it to a local conservation-oriented organization. After receiving a loan for the purchase from the California State Coastal Conservancy, TPL placed the conservancy under contract to develop a disposition plan for the property.

During the 10 years following TPL's acquisition of the land, the

ISWC worked hard to raise funds for purchase of the 4,000 acres (1,619 ha), and the support necessary to convince the state and TPL that the land should be transferred back to Indian hands. As part of this effort the ISWC developed educational tools and initiatives; built a multifaceted fundraising program; designed and implemented fisheries restoration projects, forestry inventories, and cultural-educational programs on the 4,000 acres (1,619 ha) and the adjacent Sinkyone State Park; collaborated with universities; developed an intertribal restoration workforce; created a documentary film (J. Rosales 1994) that screened at the Sundance Film Festival and 10 other film festivals; and garnered an international support that ultimately enabled the ISWC to acquire the land.

The ISWC purchased the 4,000 acres (1,619 ha) in August 1997, thereby legally returning local Indian peoples' presence to the land and protecting it in perpetuity from future threats of development, industrial extraction, and fragmentation. The ISWC holds title to the InterTribal Sinkyone land and is solely responsible for its management. The ISWC's primary focus is to protect



Figure 5—Dancer, Sinkyone Cultural Gathering event, August 2008. Photo by © Hawk Rosales.

and revitalize this critical part of Sinkyone through the reintroduction of tribal members' cultural-ecological stewardship and traditional land uses. Four separate conservation easements protect the land's cultural and ecological values in perpetuity. The ISWC is believed to be the first tribal entity in the United States to have entered into a conservation easement with private land trusts.

The ISWC's tenacity demonstrates that adhering to tribal mandates and the determination to reclaim ancestral lands can eventually pay off. Ten years' worth of on-the-ground experience gained from wilderness land management and restoration, as well as important cultural, educational, and recreational project work, was all gained prior to the ISWC's purchase of the Sinkyone property. This proactive approach helped strategically position the ISWC to acquire and conserve this important area of ancestral land.

Since its acquisition of the 4,000 acres (1,619 ha), the ISWC has continued its focus on salmonid fisheries restoration, watershed rehabilitation, planning for backcountry hiking trails and campsites, protection of cultural resources, cultural-educational outreach, and involving tribal members in

the healing and stewardship of the land. It has forged important alliances with environmental and conservation organizations and has been recognized for its unique partnership with the North Coast Redwoods District of California State Parks (see figure 3), a collaboration that enables the ISWC to conduct restoration projects, stewardship work, and cultural activities on the 7,250-acre (2,935 ha) Sinkyone Wilderness State Park (California State Parks 2009), with which the ISWC shares a common 12-mile (19.4 km) boundary.

The ISWC's land includes the upper reaches of seven coastal watersheds, the lower half of which are all located on the adjacent Sinkyone Wilderness State Park (see figure 4). An important collaborative effort between the ISWC and California State Parks has been the rehabilitation of large portions of several of these watersheds. This recently completed multiyear project entailed the removal of abandoned logging roads, landings, and stream crossings in order to stabilize slopes that had been severely altered by past logging activities. Tribal members worked as cultural monitors and heavy equipment operators during the project, which utilized bulldozers and excavators to reform roaded hillsides and reconstruct the original gradients of stream channels. This project has dramatically reduced sediment in streams, and improved stream water quality and habitat of native fish species.

Reestablishing Traditional Relationships

Although the people and the land have suffered tremendous losses from genocide and ecocide, both the Tribes and the ecosystem are resilient and can recover. Both have been here for countless generations and are able to adapt and to heal. The Indian people believe that the Earth recalls how the ancestors once

walked and lived here in a sacred manner. Memories of the people's traditional songs, prayers, dances, and ceremonies are forever embedded in the Earth (see figure 5). As these ways are brought back to Sinkyone, the healing of the land and the people is being realized.

Hard work and determination are key ingredients to developing and nurturing a successful intertribal land trust. In sharing the story of our experience in reestablishing Tribal control over ancestral Sinkyone land, our ISWC hopes to encourage other indigenous communities around the world to undertake similar efforts so that they also can regain the stewardship and management of culturally important areas of their ancestral homelands.

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