



The InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council in Northern California protects ancient redwood stands and rainforests. From left, the members are: top row, Mariah Rosales, Crista Ray; middle row, Buffie Schmidt, Mary Norris, Debra Ramirez; front, seated, Priscilla Hunter, Michelle Downey, Mona Oandasan.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KILIII YÜYAN

# On the importance of protecting land sacred to Native communities

To honor ancestors and save old-growth trees, the Sinkyone Intertribal Council has become the steward of thousands of acres in California.

BY DAVID BRINDLEY, INTERIM EDITOR IN CHIEF



PUBLISHED JUNE 14, 2022 • 3 MIN READ

“The trees are precious to us,” says Priscilla Hunter. “We believe our ancestors’ spirits are there.”

Hunter is a member of the Coyote Valley Band of Pomo Indians in Northern California. She’s also a founder and chairwoman of the InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council (and the person holding the staff in the photo above).

In 1997 the council acquired 3,844 acres of the Sinkyone wilderness, about 200 miles north of San Francisco along California’s Lost Coast. It’s “lost” because scenic Highway 1 avoids it, cutting inland to dodge the rugged coastal terrain. One could also say it’s lost because less than 2 percent of the original old-growth redwoods there survived logging decades ago. Now the 10 tribes that formed the consortium are working to protect and preserve their sacred land. I asked Hunter how they are accomplishing that.

“We’re just letting it heal. It takes a long time to heal an area that has been cut and cut,” she told me. “People are saying: ‘What are you guys doing with it?’ Letting it heal. ‘How are you guys managing it?’ Letting it heal.”

Their efforts have gained attention.



Last December the Save the Redwoods League, an established nonprofit group in the area, gave the council 523 more acres of California coastal forest. Designated as Tc'ih-Léh-Dûñ—meaning “fish run place” in the Sinkyone language—the land includes nearly 200 acres of old-growth redwoods.

“We were really pleased to have a place that still has some of the ancient trees,” Hunter says. “It’s going to save some trees. So the critters will have a place to be safe—the fish and birds and all that.”

The Sinkyone council is just one example of how Indigenous peoples, in communities across the United States and Canada, are taking control of their land, laws, and destiny.

This month’s cover story, “We Are Here,” explores how Native nations are reclaiming their sovereignty and rebuilding their cultures.

Thank you for reading *National Geographic*. 

This story appears in the July 2022 issue of *National Geographic* magazine.

 SHARE TWEET EMAIL