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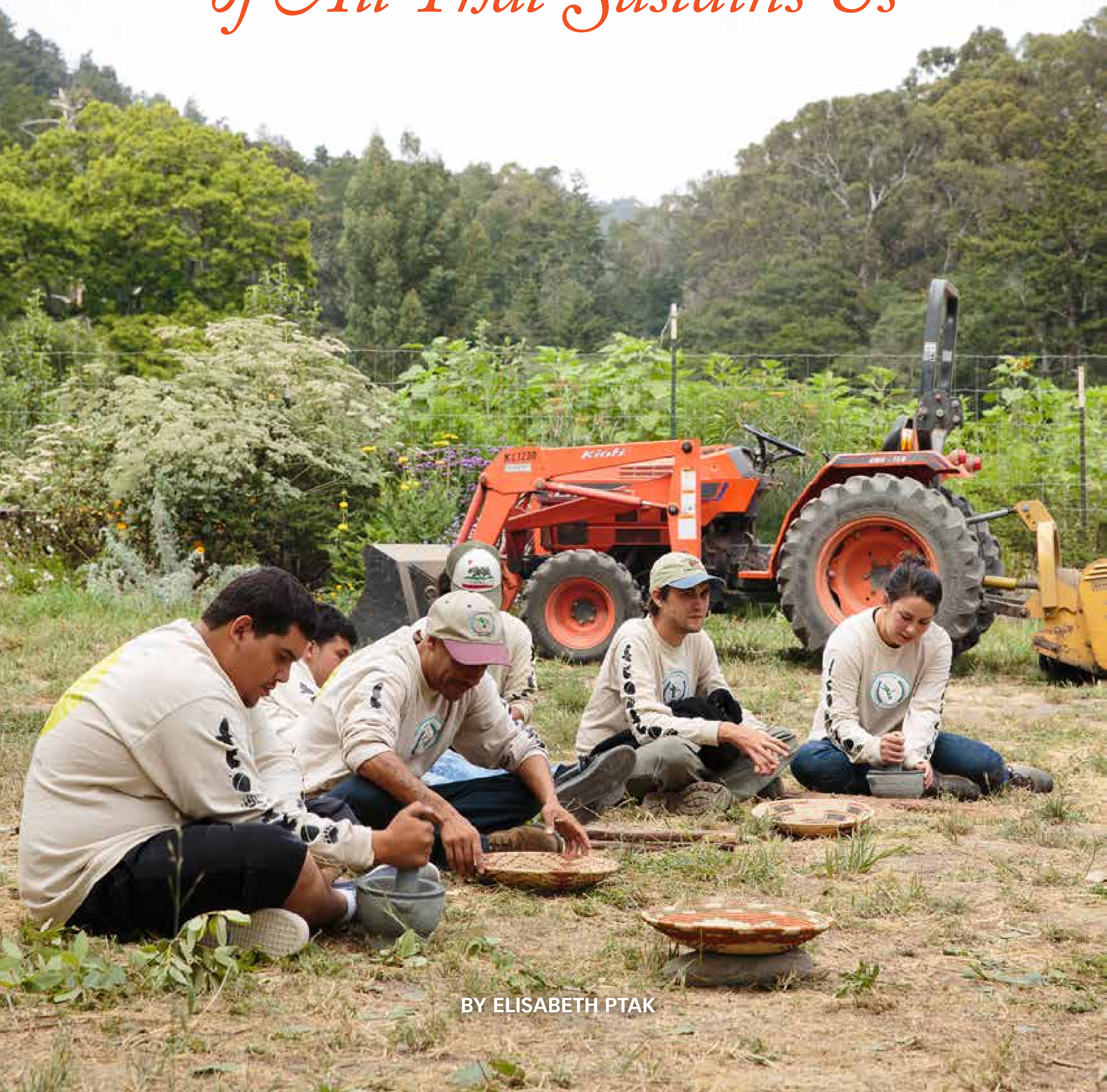
THE SOURCE *of All That Sustains Us*



BY ELISABETH PTAK

Young people of the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band learn how to process California brome into pinole, a food their ancestors ate. The Amah Mutsun Land Trust is working to restore coastal prairies that provide this seed.

HARRY WHO PHOTOGRAPHY

Stories of Native Americans collaborating with each other and with land trusts

> *In the settler mind, land was property, real estate, capital or natural resources. But to our people, it was everything: identity, the connection to our ancestors, the home of our nonhuman kinfolk, our pharmacy, our library, the source of all that sustained us.*
>
> — *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer, Potawatomi

The author and wilderness advocate Wallace Stegner called national parks "The best idea we ever had. Absolutely American. Absolutely democratic. They reflect us at our best rather than at our worst."

Who could disagree?

"In their early years, a number of national parks evicted Native people," says Hawk Rosales, executive director of California's InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council. "There's a long history of cultural and social injustice within the conservation movement."

Now a nascent effort in the land trust community is achieving meaningful collaborations informed by the ancient and remarkably effective Native American land management practices that are based on the relationship between people and the natural world. At the same time, tribal groups are creating their own land trusts to protect traditional lifeways on ancestral lands located outside reservation boundaries.

Land Trust for the Little Tennessee/Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians

Tsigeyu?i ga:dohi – love of the land

One of those collaborations began serendipitously in 1999 in North Carolina's Upper Little Tennessee River Basin, in the heart of the southern Blue Ridge Mountains where the accredited Land Trust for the Little Tennessee (LTLT) is based. It starts with the story of a little girl on a drive to Bryson City. "My mother would tell me to look at the Kituwah Mound as we passed it," says Joyce Dugan, former chief of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI). "At the time I knew it had significance, but not why."

In her first year as chief in 1996, Dugan was approached by the owners of the mound to ask if the tribe wanted to buy it. "They felt that the mound belonged back with us."

As Dugan researched the mound, she discovered it is considered "the mother town of Cherokees." She says, "Many of our oral histories say that all Cherokees came from that place."

Dugan went before the Tribal Council of 12 who needed to approve the purchase. "My knees were shaking. Here I am asking

> "The Code of Federal Regulations (CFR 25 Part 151) explains governing the acquisition of land by the United States in trust status for individual Indians and tribes. It can be a very long, very expensive and sometimes controversial process. By establishing a land conservancy, tribes can protect culturally significant, ethnobotanical or traditional use lands through ownership, cultural easements or conservation easements. A tribal land conservancy is also a way for several federally recognized tribes to own land jointly." **—Lisa Haws, Kumeyaay-Digueño Land Conservancy**

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What is a cultural conservation easement?

[C]ultural conservation easements place greater emphasis on the stewardship and use of a property in order to perpetuate cultural practices and enhance culturally important plant and animal species. These easements affirm certain land uses, such as tending and harvesting culturally important plants…As they grow in popularity, cultural conservation easements may serve to push conservation easements to become more attentive to cultural land uses and cultural preservation.

—From *Trust in the Land*, by Beth Rose Middleton, The University of Arizona Press (2011)

LITTLE TRAVERSE CONSERVANCY

Little Traverse Conservancy helps the Odawa Natural Resources Department with the Getting Kids Outdoors Emmet County project. The kickoff event is held at a local farm that has been protected, in part, with a conservation easement.

them to buy some land, and here they are with needs that are unsurpassed, such as housing and roads. After many years of poverty, the casino that we opened in 1995 was finally allowing us to address those needs."

But the purchase was approved unanimously.

"After we bought the land it created a kind of renaissance in our tribe of preservation and protection," says Dugan. "Our people love it, that it's ours. They used to drive by it like me but now they can visit it." An archeologist estimates that there are more than 1,000 remains on the property.

"To me, as an American Indian, conservation includes preservation of culture. It's not just about saving the natural resources but about saving the human resource also," says Dugan. She says the Land Trust for the Little Tennessee gets that.

"The things that are important to the Cherokees are also important to our land trust," says Executive Director Sharon Taylor. "Many significant cultural sites are close to major water bodies and on prime farm soil." One of those sites is Cowee Mound, which had been the political, economic and social center of the tribe until it was seized 190 years ago. The land trust worked with the landowners, whose family had owned the property since 1838.

Juanita Wilson, deputy administrative officer for the tribe at the time of this project, helped broker a collaboration between the Tribal Council and the land trust. She says the effort wasn't an easy one—"You have to know how to stroke the feathers"—but it resulted in the purchase and transfer of the mound to EBCI in 2007. A conservation easement held by the state of North Carolina allows only traditional agricultural and educational uses. Other collaborative projects followed.

"The land trust moved slowly to gain our trust," says Dugan, who serves on LTLT's board. "Most important, they have not only shown respect for the land but for those who live on it."

SHARON TAYLOR

Standing on Cowee Mound, Cherokee elder, council member and language specialist Marie Junaluska speaks to participants in the Right Path Program for Eastern Band of Cherokee adults. The program's goal is to produce "generations of strong Cherokee leaders grounded in tribal culture and values."

Little Traverse Conservancy/ Little Traverse Bands of Odawa Indians

Aaki gee Zah gay e go –
love of the land

Though not yet in widespread use, a new type of protection mechanism—a cultural conservation easement—is being considered by some groups as a way to safeguard historic geographic areas and sacred sites.

Frank Ettawageshik, executive director of the United Tribes of Michigan and former tribal chairman of the Little Traverse Bands of Odawa Indians, has been working to develop cultural

conservation easement models with Tom Bailey, executive director of Little Traverse Conservancy. "In some sense, cultural conservation is implicit in preserving nature, and so it is inextricably tied with natural history," says Bailey. "Natural history includes human history, and human history includes the history of Native people."

The sentiment is echoed by Ettawageshik, who also serves on the land trust's board of directors. "For Native people, land preservation is our mission. We view ourselves as part of the environment, not masters of the environment. In that respect, anything that helps protect the natural landscape falls within our Native philosophy. We want to honor and respect Mother Earth. Any way we can work with others who have that as part of their mission is a good thing."

Working together is key because conflicts can arise if traditional uses like ceremonies, fishing rights or seed collection and disbursement are outlawed when a property is conserved. "How do we preserve land and not make criminals out of our grandmothers collecting medicinal plants? How do we recognize that relationship to the land?" asks Ettawageshik.

InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council/ Consortium of 10 federally recognized tribes in northern California

"For Native peoples, the relationship with the natural world is the core of our existence, the foundation of who we are and why we exist," says Hawk Rosales, executive director of the InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council. He believes respect for this profound and multilayered bond is essential for the future work of non-Native land conservation organizations, too. "It's remarkable that the conservation movement, as well-intentioned as it is, has—by and large—not sought to partner meaningfully with the tribes in order to understand and apply principles that are central to ancient tribal relationships with nature."

Rosales encourages non-Native land trusts to build meaningful relationships with Native peoples through authentic and respectful efforts toward collaboration based on mutual understanding and the need to protect both traditional lifeways and conservation values. He notes that, "Traditional knowledge is usually very guarded due to the history of indigenous peoples and places having been colonized and devastated. I hope that ultimately we will get there, but it will require a lot of sincere respect, dedication, learning and hard work."

The consortium of 10 federally recognized tribes in northern California has been very successful in its own efforts with various partners to protect marine areas, redwood forests and salmon streams in the ancestral Sinkyone tribal territory. It established the 3,845-acre InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Area, the first of its kind in America.

Kumeyaay-Digueño Land Conservancy/ Kumeyaay Bands

éMut Mohey – love of the land

Each of the nine Kumeyaay Bands that are members of the Kumeyaay-Digueño Land Conservancy (KDLC) are recognized by the Secretary of the Interior as individual tribal governments with jurisdiction over their nine separate Indian reservations. Together, they straddle coastal San Diego County and northern Baja California, spanning 75 miles north and south of the international border and from the Pacific Ocean to western Imperial County.

"Native tribes see conservation as one holistic unit," says Lisa Haws, assistant executive director of KDLC. "They view it on a landscape scale, not piecemeal." So when urban growth threatened traditional sacred lands outside the reservations, the tribes formed a nonprofit conservancy to be able to act quickly to preserve endangered locations. KDLC currently owns and manages four properties, including the 42-acre Sacred Mountain Ranch at the base of Mount Kuuchamaa on the Mexican border. Kuuchamaa means "exalted high place" and has been considered sacred since before recorded history. It figures in the tribe's creation story as the source of teachings about personal discipline and religious harmony, and it's also considered an important healing site. KDLC hopes to return the ranch to a natural state, healing the land, as well as people.

LISA HAWS

This 80-year-old Kumeyaay elder has dedicated her retirement from the Marine Corps to training Kumeyaay young adults to protect cultural resources.

In the 1950s a communication site was built on the top of the mountain, followed by additional communication equipment placed by the Border Patrol, Drug Enforcement Administration, the FBI and others. "Maybe someday, when technology has advanced, the equipment can be removed and the mountain restored," says Haws. "Until then, KDLC has developed a relationship with Homeland

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ANIA RZEPKO PHOTOGRAPHY, SYCUAN BAND OF THE KUMEYAAY NATION

Paddling in a traditional reed boat called a hakuayowo on Halasii `eHa Topit (Willow Lake in Kumeyaay) on the Sycuan Indian Reservation in California

Security, providing access to Sacred Mountain Ranch to carry out their border protection programs."

Amah Mutsun Land Trust/ Amah Mutsun Tribal Band

muySin-mi pire – love of the land

"Creator put us here to take care of Mother Earth and all living things," says Amah Mutsun Tribal Chairman Valentin Lopez, recounting a portion of the central California tribe's creation story. "For thousands of years, our ancestors worked hard to fulfill that responsibility." They developed prayers and ceremonies to satisfy the spiritual requirements of their obligation, and they very actively managed the land through burning, pruning, sowing, seed-scattering and more.

The trauma that began when the band lost its traditional homelands—first to the Spanish Missions, then to Mexican land grantees and finally to the U.S. government—is long-lasting. "Without the connection to the land, we are no longer able to keep the balance in our life and world," says Lopez. Drug addiction, alcoholism, mental illness and suicide plague today's tribal members.

"For us to restore our balance, to get well again, we have to fulfill our obligation to Creator. That's why we created our land trust." Lopez serves as president of the board, which is a mix of tribal members and non-Natives. It receives organizational expertise and support from the accredited Sempervirens Fund and has partnered with UC Santa Cruz, UC Berkeley and Stanford to share traditional stewardship teachings while gaining scientific and botanical knowledge (see page 12).

The Amah Mutsun is not a federally recognized tribe; it receives no assistance from state or federal governments. "The land trust is designed to help bring us back to traditional tribal territory," says Lopez. But ownership is not the tribe's main goal. "In our tradition, our ancestors didn't look at it as owning the land. The obligation is to stewardship. If acquisition is the best way to protect those lands, we will do that, but it's not a top priority."

Maidu Summit Consortium/ Mountain Maidu

hybýktini mym k'ódom – love of the land

The Maidu Summit Consortium (MSC) isn't a land trust, says founder and Executive Director Kenneth Holbrook. "It's a social and environmental justice–minded nonprofit organization doing advocacy

work for protection of our sacred cultural resources—but we'll be looking more and more like a land trust as time goes by."

That's because one of its main goals is reacquiring ancestral lands and managing them according to traditional Maidu ecological practices. As a largely unrecognized tribe federally, that hasn't always been easy. In addition, understandable resentments related to sovereign rights, dignity and respect kept the tribe from actively seeking direct participation. Holbrook says that as a nonprofit adjunct to the tribe, MSC will be able to maintain those ethical standards and ways of dealing with the world while representing the concerns in a different way.

The nonprofit has representatives from all nine Maidu member organizations, and provides an opportunity to be effective outside the tribal government setting. "We're learning new ways of governing programs and projects, like being mission-oriented instead of being caught up in historic trauma issues, which are an exposed wound. The nonprofit is a source of strength for the tribe."

The group's major turning point came in 2013 when a 2,325-acre Sierra Nevada mountain meadow in the Humbug Valley was turned over to the consortium by Pacific Gas and Electric in a bankruptcy agreement. Holbrook sees it as an important step in healing and community development. "Without land, without a sense of ownership, we'll never be able to revitalize our community," says Holbrook. "We must own our future."

An Alliance of Eastern Tribes

Nuwâmônumumum ahkee –
we love the land

Ramona Peters, artist, educator and Mashpee Wampanoag Elder, makes coiled pots in the style of Eastern Woodland Native American pot builders. Beautifully incised with traditional symbols, the pots are delicate, yet utilitarian containers, made for cooking and storage.

She also founded the Native Land Conservancy, a Native-run land trust, in 2013 with a consortium of representatives from several tribes. Challenged by the high cost of buying land in their traditional homelands in eastern Massachusetts, the intertribal conservancy hopes to receive donations of land rather than purchase them. In June they got their first gift—a Barnstable, Massachusetts, woodlot. "It's very small," Peters says, "but the white pines are of major cultural significance to us."

"I think people are very receptive to the idea of returning land to Native people. We're trying to make it easy for potential donors to approach us. Some had the inclination, but no means to do it," says the potter. "We are now that container."

An Alliance of Western Tribes

Kurt Russo, executive director of California's Native American Land Conservancy (NALC) was instrumental in bringing together six Native-run conservation groups, including several of those profiled here, to pool resources, share information and promote public awareness of traditional knowledge and stewardship practices. In addition to NALC, the founding members also include Amah Mutsun Land Trust, InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council, Kumeyaay-Digueño Land Conservancy, Maidu Summit Consortium and the Native Conservancy.

"Each organization is unique, yet they have a lot of commonalities," explains Lisa Haws of Kumeyaay-Digueño Land Conservancy. "Being part of the larger consortium brings economies of scale and the opportunity to learn how each group is addressing its own conservation work. We support each other's goals and missions. Learning about the success of others helps each of us."

Collaborations between Native tribes and non-Native land conservation organizations can offer both opportunities and obstacles as the groups try to balance land conservation and cultural conservation goals and priorities. Perhaps the dilemma, and the hope, are best summed up by Joyce Dugan of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians:

"We have an election this year. I'm hopeful the next chief will continue the tradition of looking at opportunities to purchase and save tribal ancestral land. It's important for everyone, but especially for our people because it says our history is important. That was never taught in the past. When that information is not available to our students, it tells them we're not valuable. But we can never lose sight of that—*people are important, as well as the land.*"

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What makes a collaboration work?

- Patience and Listening. Don't come with all the answers. Get to know one another and establish trust.
- Sincerity and Respect. Collaboration should be based on mutual understanding and the desire to protect both traditional lifeways and conservation values.
- Education. Learn about tools, such as cultural conservation easements.