

NORTHERN EXPOSURE

CALIFORNIA FORUM

Sierra stewards listen to the trees, and a California tribe regains an ancestral land



Southwest of Lake Almanor, Yellow Creek winds through Humbug Valley, now owned and managed by the Maidu Summit Consortium to conserve traditional Native American natural resources. Bud Turner Feather River Land Trust

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June 20, 2018 04:31 AM

Updated June 20, 2018 04:31 AM

In 2004 Lorena Gorbet stood and delivered a simple message: “We want our land back.”

Since then Gorbet, a Maidu Indian, has repeated her request at least twice a year to a council tasked with recommending new owners for 140,000 acres of Pacific Gas & Electric Co. land, designated for conservation under a 2003 bankruptcy agreement. Some of it once belonged to the Maidu.

Last month it was the council that delivered: [Five years after an initial recommendation](#), it named Gorbet and other members of the Maidu Summit Consortium owners of Humbug Valley, a 2,325-acre grassy meadow laced by Yellow Creek and rimmed by the granite peaks of the northern Sierra Nevada. The Maidu call this remnant of their homeland Tasmam Koyom.

The unanimous recommendation by the Pacific Forest and Watershed Lands Stewardship Council marks the first time ancestral lands in California have been returned to a Native American tribe not recognized by the federal government. It also marks the launch of a land management plan that combines burning, pruning and other time-honored Maidu practices with the latest scientific technology.

For the Maidu, ownership of Humbug Valley culminates a process that has united nine diverse Maidu groups often historically at odds.

“At first it was just getting everybody to work together,” Gorbet told me. They were driven by the potential of owning the land of their ancestors as well as a vision of managing it to heal and nourish the places they had lost: restoring angelica to meadows; returning oak savannahs to hillsides; even bringing back the snapping turtles and salmon that frequent their songs and stories. They believed restoring the land would restore their culture and their people.

To achieve any of this they had to produce a management plan, baseline surveys, deeds – bureaucratic documents as alien to them as the concept of retaining natural fire on the landscape was, until very recently, to the mostly Anglo agency officials on the council. Meeting the demands of the Stewardship Council was sometimes tedious, and it involved working with groups with whom the Maidu had once had “not necessarily an equitable role,” said Ken Holbrook, Maidu Summit director.

What emerged is a plan for Humbug Valley and lands around Lake Almanor that total 3,000 acres. Along with cultural and visitor centers, they are designing a Maidu Cultural Park, modeled after national parks, with a system of trails featuring traditional ecological management.

The experience that has united and strengthened the Mountain Maidu has been a learning process for members of the Stewardship Council, too. When Gorbet first spoke up asking for land, many envisioned a casino in the relatively pristine Humbug Valley. When she and others mentioned listening to the trees to determine best management practices, some scoffed.

But when Gorbet asked the council to include a member representing Native Americans, they agreed. And when she showed up again and again with the same request, they pursued it. Conveying ownership of Humbug Valley to the Maidu Summit Consortium is one of the largest transactions approved by the Stewardship Council. By the time they finalized it, council members were referring to the valley as “Tasmam Koyom.”

What started as a land ownership issue for the Stewardship Council took on the subtle tones of social justice. At that initial meeting in 2004, Gorbet told the council returning Tasmam Koyam to the Maidu was an opportunity “to right some past wrong.” Council members insisted their task was simply a matter of finding an owner who could best manage the land for conservation. They were leaning toward the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

But when they gave the valley to the Maidu Summit, Stewardship Council Executive Director Heidi Krolick noted that more than land was being returned. “Thank you for the honor of letting us be a part of this recovery. We will continue to rally from the sidelines,” she said.

The Maidus’ formal partners in managing Tasmam Koyam are Feather River Land Trust and the Fish and Wildlife Department, once its rival for ownership. They will jointly hold the conservation easement that limits development on the land, and most certainly precludes casinos.

The return of Humbug Valley to the Mountain Maidu took too long and represents too little. Still, using patience and quiet persistence, these Native Americans have accomplished what confrontation has so often failed to achieve.

Their challenge now is to demonstrate that traditional land management techniques can restore natural resources at a landscape scale. Ours is to learn from this grand endeavor.

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