In light of the racial reckoning that is taking place in America and coming on the heels of the revelations about John Muir, I thought it was time to visit the role of land conservancy.

For the second time in five years, conservationists have helped two tribes in California regain some land. On the surface that sounds great – Native people getting their ancestral lands back. With all due respect, let’s look at how this played out in Sonoma County when then tribal Chairman Reno Franklin joined with the County of Sonoma and The Trust for Public Land.

The 688-acre parcel was described as being “gifted” back to the Kashia Tribe, but in actuality, it was sold by the Richardson family, who accepted an offer of $6 million dollars; $500,000 came from the tribe.

This is a beautiful piece of the California coast with scenic Highway One meandering in front of it. Unlike most tribal land, there are no markers or signs that declare it Kashia land. Looking into the details of the land exchange document of June 2015 by the Coastal Conservancy entitled “Richardson Kashia Acquisition and California Coastal Trail Extension – Project No. 15-011-01”, you will find that there are so many restrictions put on the land by the conservationists that the tribe can do little more than assign pathways.
The project summary clearly spells out that the land can’t be used for economic development or for housing, something many Kashia residents would like, especially because it looks out over the pacific, and is part of their ancestral lands.

To the north and south, white people have large developments with private access to fields and common areas. There is no chance for the Kashia to do this. There can be no development, no lodging to help with economic development but there will be walking trails and local native plants will bear signage attributing them with Kashia names and uses. Some Kashia citizens say, “We just wave at it as we drive by.”

A similar land return just occurred in Monterey. This time the Esselen Tribe is the recipient of land also imbued with many restrictions. The Los Angeles Times reported, “A $4.5 million land deal, brokered by Portland-based environmental group Western Rivers Conservancy, will return a 1,199-acre parcel of wilderness along the Little Sur River to the tribe in the name of conservation and cultural resilience. The transfer will mark the first land returned to the Esselen since they were displaced centuries ago.”

The Esselen Tribe is not a federally recognized tribe, however, their non-profit organization will hold the land in fee for the tribal members and they will have to follow a management program to keep the land. The tribe announced that they will build altars and a community house. They also expressed their hope to rebury their ancestors.

If these organizations can raise the number of funds they’ve demonstrated the need for so far, I think it’s time to help Native communities invest in lands that will benefit future generations and not be small tokens of Indian islands with little hope for economic development.

It’s time to let Native people decide what they want to do with their traditional lands, especially in a state where genocide was the official policy of the United States government.

In theory, conservationists helping Indians get land back seems like a good idea. But to this Indian, it looks like another form of colonization. In fairness, the Kashia in Sonoma County will be granted access to a section of the coast for the tradition of gathering seaweed. That’s mighty White of those folks.

The paternalistic attitudes imbued in these land agreements keep tribes’ hands tied behind their backs without offering any equity by treating Tribes as Sovereign Nations.

While ceremonies and other cultural practices are vital to tribes and Native communities, so is the ability of a tribe to take care of their people. Health care, education, housing and jobs are all a part of being a sovereign nation. Partnerships and alliances are needed.

Why not begin a new era that includes the leadership of tribal members on these boards?

How about respecting and supporting the rights of sovereign nations to decide what is best for their future?
In the “land of the free and home of the brave,” it’s the least conservationists can do.

This essay does not reflect the view of Indian Country Today; voices in our opinion section represent a variety of reader points of view. If you would like to contribute an essay to Indian Country Today, email the opinion editor, Vincent Schilling at opinion@indiancountrytoday.com.

Source: https://indiancountrytoday.com/opinion/let-native-people-decide-regarding-their-traditional-lands?fbclid=IwAR0_133QrTCuIZpHFCjHPEuYf6NnhJnAySJGRykjE44CgiXIsOUmq3NHGu
Farmer Returns 700 Acres of California Coast to Native American Tribe

By Good News Network - Oct 27, 2015

A California landowner is returning his family farm to a neighboring Native American tribe that was forced inland, away from their breathtaking coastline, 150 years ago.

The small, water-poor reservation that became home for the Kashia Band of Pomo Indians has become 18-times larger, and for the first time in more than a century, will reach to the Pacific coast where they and their ancestors once hunted, fished, and roamed free.

Bill Richardson’s family bought the 688-acre property in 1925, which features dense redwood forest, towering coastal bluffs and waterfalls along the Pacific Coast Highway.

After five years of fundraising by the Sonoma County government, The Trust for Public Land, private foundations and groups, the newly established Kashia Coastal Reserve restored ownership of the land to the tribe, after Bill agreed it was time the land was returned to its original inhabitants.

Sonoma County contributed two million dollars for the project, while another six million was raised by the coalition of groups seeking to buy the property for the Kashia. In exchange, the California Coastal Trail will extend north for one mile across their land, giving the public access to a cliff walk overlooking this dramatic stretch of coastline.

The Tribe will manage the land as protected open space, and a demonstration forest for educating and engaging the public about the history and practices of native people in the area.

The Pomo Indians will get to start using the land immediately, the same coastline where their ancestors harvested and lived off of
the plentiful abalone.

Richardson will get to live out his days on the mile-long stretch of property—and be buried on a hillside when he passes on.

After 250 years, the Esselen Tribe of Monterey County is returning home.

A $4.5-million land deal, brokered by Portland-based environmental group Western Rivers Conservancy, will return a 1,199-acre parcel of wilderness along the Little Sur River to the tribe in the name of conservation and cultural resilience.
The transfer will mark the first land returned to the Esselen since they were displaced centuries ago.

In 1770, Spanish colonists gathered up the Esselen, whom they considered “neophytes and heathens,” said Tribal Chairman Tom Little Bear Nason, and forced them to convert to Catholicism.

“This is the center of our universe,” Nason said of the land. “We are so incredibly empowered to return to the actual birthplace of our people.”

Although the parcel represents only a small fraction of the tribe’s original ancestral territory, Nason said it will be a refuge after years of alienation.

“Elders always foretold that we would reconnect to our ancestral homeland,” he said. “So basically, a prophecy has been fulfilled.”

The property faces Pico Blanco, a stately, mossy mountain in the Santa Lucia range considered an essential part of the tribe’s origin story. But with old-growth trees, rolling hills of wildflowers and a deep river canyon, the land transfer is as much about conservation as it is about environmental justice.

“Our motivation is rivers and the critters that depend on them,” said Sue Doroff, president and co-founder of Western Rivers Conservancy. “To combine these conservation and recreation accomplishments with repatriating the land to the tribe — it’s ideal.”

The parcel was purchased with a grant provided by the California Natural Resources Agency. The previous owner was a Swedish family who initially went under contract with another buyer, Doroff said. When the Soberanes fire swept through the area in 2016, the buyer was scared off and Western Rivers Conservancy was able to move in.

“If the property was purchased by a private party, it would certainly be developed,” Doroff said, noting that would have been a “real loss” because the property links U.S. Forest Service land on the coast to the main body of Los Padres National Forest.

With one of the last viable streams for summer steelhead on the Central California coast, the land is also part of the Big Sur stronghold for the threatened fish. And since its ancient redwoods — some of the southernmost in the world — could serve as a nursery for redwood seeds, it may prove crucial for climate change adaptation.
“This property rings all the bells for fish, for wildlife,” Doroff said. “And the fact that the Esselen will be the land managers and long-term stewards of this property, and its owners, is just a bonus, and super exciting.”

When Western Rivers Conservancy first went under contract on the property in 2015, the original plan was to transfer it to the Forest Service. But locals objected, citing concerns about increased traffic, tourism and fire danger.

That’s when the group decided to partner with the Esselen, who agreed to manage the land with both the community and conservation in mind. Nason said the tribe plans to build altars, a ceremonial dance house and a bear dance lodge. They also hope to rebury ancestors whose burial sites were disturbed by development.

Because the Esselen are not a federally recognized tribe, the property will be held by the tribe’s 501(c)(3) organization, Doroff said. The tribal members will own it in fee, which means it is legally theirs, although they are obligated to follow a management plan to ensure its longevity.

That the transfer happened in the midst of a pandemic is significant, Doroff added, in that it is a reminder that these kinds of issues can’t fall by the wayside.

“We all have to pay attention to the things that we love and the places that we care about,” she said. “This work must go on, because if it doesn’t, these opportunities will be lost forever.”