CALIFORNIA RIVERS THROUGH NATIVE EYES

By Theresa Lorejo-Simsiman

Whether navigating the gnar on a big expedition or splashing around familiar rapids at the local haunt, paddlers naturally fall into a ritual of giving for the mutual benefit of the group. Every paddler will bring a different level of experience to share, some will volunteer to carry the spare paddle or first aid kit, and they will all make sure to stock the take-out cooler with favorite beverages. When boats finally hit the whitewater, loose relationships on shore transform into a river team. Everyone watches out for each other, soaks in the wonders of their surroundings, and bands together to make sure every paddler enjoys the adventure on the river they love.

This kind of reciprocity is the touchstone of the stewardship work we do here at American Whitewater. We never paddle solo when we enter a process to negotiate new hydropower licenses, defend river access, or speak out against detrimental dam proposals. We actively seek collaboration with individuals and groups mutually sharing our time, expertise, and resources for the protection of the watersheds we hold dear. Often these key partners include Native Communities who bring to the table the traditional knowledge of the lands and waters they have stewarded for time immemorial.

Yet what do paddlers really know about the Native Communities stewarding many of the lands and watersheds we recreate on a regular basis? American Whitewater would venture to guess not much. In fact, to date there is scant Native information to be found in our National Whitewater Inventory of over 5,500 rivers. So, in the spirit of reciprocity, American Whitewater is offering our river database as a platform to share the Indigenous narratives of the rivers we enjoy. Specifically, in California, we have partnered with Redbud Resource Group to research, interview and chronicle stories of Native Communities. Redbud is a Native-led 501c3 non-profit focused on improving education and public health outcomes for Native communities. Redbud's programs increase the public's knowledge of local Native existence, and prepare organizations to support Tribal sovereignty through the development of respectful and reciprocal relationships. Their work includes organizational training, curriculum development, and public health research. In this issue we start with the North Fork Feather River from the Rock Creek Reach down through the Poe, homeland of the Konkow Valley Tribe of Maidu.

TRIBAL SPOTLIGHT
KONKOW VALLEY BAND OF MAIDU INDIANS

By Taylor Pennewell, Redbud Resource Group as told by Matthew (Gramps) Williford Sr., Konkow Valley Band of Maidu

LOCATION

The Konkow Valley Band of Maidu Indians are a California State Native American Community tribe whose traditional territory loosely ranges from Belden, California in what is now Plumas County, down to Table Mountain in Butte County. Since time immemorial, community members lived and thrived in much of the areas lining highway 70 in the Plumas National Forest. Territorial boundaries are shared with Tyme Maidu, Mechoopda Maidu, and Mountain Maidu communities. As original stewards of the land and waterways, tribal leadership works tirelessly to protect, restore, and advocate for the cultural resources of the region.

HISTORY & SETTLEMENT

California's diverse tribal communities do not always agree with one another. Even so, most Natives agree that history books rarely get Native history, culture, or existence right. For example, Konkow Maidu tribal communities are often described as docile, simple, unintelligent, and dirty in historical and anthropological records. Even so, the Konkow Valley Band of Maidu Indians know that their people have always been politically and economically complex.

Community maps kept by local tribal members show dozens of villages, such as Kojomk'awi and Kimsewa, as well as special locations for harvesting tobacco, soap root, redbud, and more. Along the North Fork Feather River, maps show the locations of once flourishing fishing camps, such as Tail Motion of a Spawning Salmon fishing camp and Wonomi Camp Knee Print. Clearly, these communities have an intimate and timeless connection to the land and water that has been preserved despite colonization through maps, stories, and oral histories.

While community members continue to enjoy these traditional natural resources, access has become increasingly difficult as development along the river increases. Natural resources that were once regularly used for baskets, regalia, food, medicine, and tools, are impacted by regional development and engineering of the waterways.

Doctor Charlie Gramps
PHOTO PROVIDED BY MATTHEW (GRAMPS) WILLIFORD SR.

SETTLER VIOLENCE

The Konkow Maidu way of life was deeply impacted by California's Gold Rush, which started in 1849. The discovery of gold and influx of foreign settlers caused many Konkow communities to go into hiding. Due to their location in the valley and along the North Fork Feather River, the Konkow Valley community was visible, and vulnerable, to settler violence.

One example of this violence is the Nome Cult Walk of 1863. Following a violent skirmish between a few Native people and settlers, the US Calvarymen rounded up most of the Konkow community at Yankee Hill and surrounding region. Konkow families, along with Nomlaki, Wintu, and other Native groups, were forcibly marched across the state to what is now Round Valley Rancheria in Mendocino County. Referred to as the Nome Cult Walk or Maidu Trail of Tears, many survivors continued to live in Mendocino and Butte Counties and passed down this history through their families.

Many community members died along the way due to starvation, dehydration, and violence. Tribal members note that doctors, tribal leaders, and respected teachers were targeted first by settlers. By removing cultural leaders and knowledge bearers from the community, the strength of the community was compromised quickly and dramatically.

Vice Chair Matthew Williford Sr giving presentation and singing at Earth Day 2021 Konkow Rancheria. PHOTO PROVIDED BY MATTHEW (GRAMPS) WILLIFORD SR.

Despite state-sanctioned violence, the Konkow Valley community found ways to advocate for itself. Prior to the Nome Cult Walk, Molayo, the tribe's headman, met with settler leader John Bidwell and put his mark on a treaty that was intended to provide the Konkow land, sovereignty, and basic protection from violence. This treaty was a part of a series of treaties that were signed across the state of California, which were designed after similar treaties signed by plains indians tribes in the east and southwest.

Soon after the treaty was signed at Bidwell Ranch, California economic and political leaders had a change of heart. Concerned that providing Natives with large reservations would jeopardize economic development, the U.S. Senate chose not to ratify these treaties. The decision left many Native communities landless, houseless, without citizenship, and with zero protection from violence. These treaties are now known as California's 18 Unratified Treaties.

Since the Konkow Valley community's unratified treaty, they have remained without Federal Recognition. This means that the community does not receive aid, protection, or land from the federal government, despite having survived genocide and the destruction of their territory at settler hands.

While the Gold Rush ushered in an era of violence and ecological destruction, modern water engineering projects have continued to bring about challenges to the community. The hydroelectric development of the Feather River began with the construction of the Big Bend Dam and Las Plumas Powerhouse in 1908. The last project, Oroville Dam, completed in 1968, along with the Belden Dam, Canyon Dam, Poe Dam and others, have brought about unique culture and ecological struggles. For example, only the Big Bend Dam had a fish ladder to allow salmon access to the upper watershed.

Recently, the power towers built in the 1920's have been named as a potential cause of the 2018 Camp Fire, which charred much of the ancestral land of the Konkow Valley Band of California Indians.

Additionally, dam construction has led to irregular water levels in both the North Fork Feather River and Lake Oroville. Tribal cultural monitors note that fluctuating water levels cause erosion of the riverbanks and shorelines, which can result in sensitive cultural items, and even ancestral remains, floating to the water's surface.

Items that have been put to rest through ceremony and traditional cultural practices are being disturbed and deeply mistreated as a result of this engineering.

Tribal Council: Wallace Clark, Tracy Gramps, Matthew (Gramps) Williford Sr, and Jessica Lopez. PHOTO PROVIDED BY MATTHEW (GRAMPS) WILLIFORD SR.

IMPROVING VISIBILITY

The Konkow Valley Band of Maidu Indians continue to fight for their federal recognition to this day. To receive the protections that federal recognition affords, the tribe must document their cultural practices for as long back as it can remember, proving its ancestral relationship with their own land. While the tribe has experienced forced removal, family separation, mass violence and assimilation, it must now put the pieces of their collective cultural puzzle back together, to protect future generations.

Tribal leaders are working hard to develop trusting relationships with private landowners whose property sits on Konkow Valley territory. Offering cultural monitoring services, Tribal monitors are invited to survey private land for signs of Konkow presence. Culturally significant items like arrowheads, beads, tools, as well as village sites, ceremonial grounds, food preparation sites, and more, are identified and documented. With this tribal documentation, the Konkow Valley Band of Maidu Indians improves their chances of one day gaining their federal recognition. In return, private landowners gain a more accurate understanding of the history of the land they now occupy, and can avoid any major cultural missteps. In addition, Native cultural monitors have location specific perspectives on how to steward their territory that can provide invaluable insight into the needs of the plant and animal communities in the ecosystem.

While being a guest on their own land is less than ideal, building partnerships with the surrounding community is an essential part of improving the tribe's visibility, influence, and ability to interact with the land they have called home since time immemorial.

The electrical towers at Pulga,cited as one of the causes of the 2018 Camp Fire. PHOTO PROVIDED BY MATTHEW (GRAMPS) WILLIFORD SR.

CALL TO ACTION

HOW YOU CAN SUPPORT TRIBES ON THE SOUTHERN NORTH FORK FEATHER RIVER:

As tribes like the Konkow Valley Band of Maidu Indians revitalize their land and cultural lifeways, it is important that the non Native community observe respect, reciprocity, and support of Native peoples. Together, Native and non Native communities can practice norms that protect our ecosystems, encourage cultural revitalization, and bring collective healing for the violence inflicted onto Native peoples.

- Treat all plant, animal, and inanimate natural resources as cultural resources that must be protected. Consider the role that your actions have on the ecosystem balance and access of cultural resources.
- Consult tribes and follow through with feedback when designing programs and building infrastructure. Do not construct infrastructure on top of, or at, significant cultural sites.
- Take responsibility for the hydroelectric damming projects already in place. Advocate for the removal of projects that cause destruction to the ecosystem and to Native culture, or enforce maintenance of existing projects to avoid accidents
- Uplift local Native communities and support the fight for federal recognition when applicable.

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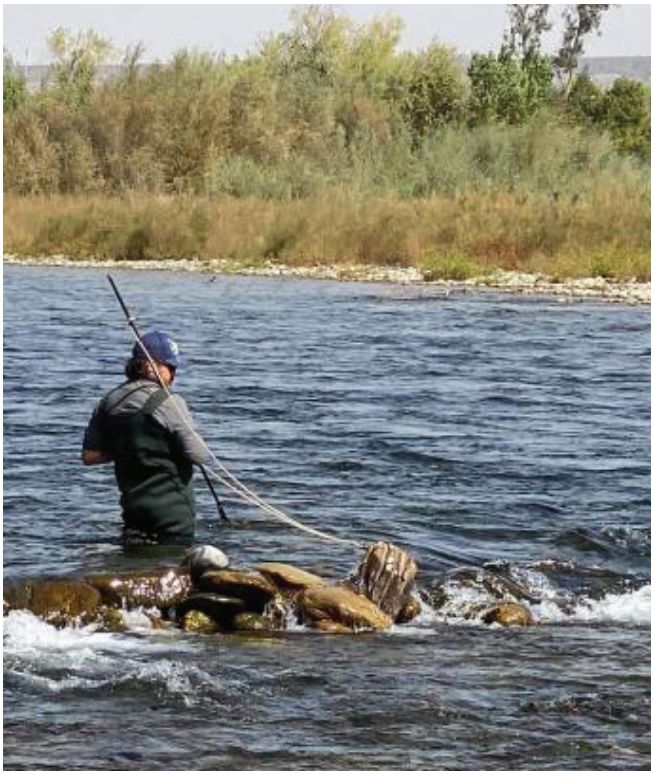

J. Clark Jr. Annual Spear Fishing in Feather River
PHOTO PROVIDED BY MATTHEW (GRAMPS) WILLIFORD SR.

VOCAB SPOTLIGHT

LIST OF TERMS

NATIVE: Referring to a person or thing whose ancestral roots are in a specific place. This term does not refer to specific tribal groups to which a person might belong. When possible, many Native people prefer to be called by their specific tribal name.

INDIGENOUS: Referring to something that originates from a specific place. For something to be Indigenous, it usually means that it has not migrated from its original homeland. Many Indigenous people throughout the world have been forced to migrate from their Indigenous homelands, however due to political, economic, and climate related conflict. These people remain Indigenous to their original homeland.

TREATY: A formal, legally binding agreement that has been ratified, or approved by the US Senate. Between 1778-1871, the United States signed 368 treaties with Native tribes across the continent, and many more that were never ratified. Native community leaders were often forced or coerced into signing these treaties, and the U.S. government broke many of them.

SOVEREIGNTY: The right to self-government. Native tribes have exercised sovereignty over their territories and communities since time immemorial. Tribal sovereignty was recognized by the U.S. government through the treaty signing process, however many tribes did not sign treaties with the U.S.

FEDERAL RECOGNITION: Tribes that entered into treaties with the U.S. government usually have Federal recognition, and therefore are recognized as independent, sovereign nations. The President of the U.S. may also grant Federal recognition through executive order. Tribes with Federal recognition can set laws and regulations that apply to their land, however, tribes are still subject to certain oversights by the U.S. federal government. Many Native tribes do not have federal recognition, but may have state recognition, or no recognition at all.

RANCHERIA/RESERVATION: An area of land owned by Native tribes, that is a part of the tribe's political and legal jurisdiction. In California, rancherias are usually very small parcels of land.

TRADITIONAL ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE:
A body of cultural, spiritual, and scientific knowledge that explores the relationships between living beings and the environment, operating from the understanding that all things are connected. Traditional Ecological Knowledge is passed down generationally through communities and families, and is inseparable from the cultural worldview of specific tribal communities.

TRIBAL COUNCIL: Tribal councils are usually the primary legislative and governing body within a tribal nation. Tribes have different methods for selecting council members, and distribute power to their tribal citizens according to their own needs and values.

HOW TO SHOW RESPECT & RECIPROCITY ON NATIVE LAND

All elements of the natural world, including humans, are related to one another. We are one large community. One responsibility we have as humans is to support the health of our entire community in order to maintain a biodiverse and balanced ecosystem that sustains us all. To show respect and reciprocity to the communities in which you recreate, consider:

1. Picking up your trash and waste before leaving an outdoor recreation space.

2. Learning about the importance of the indigenous plants and animals in the place where you are recreating. Indigenous plants and animals are not only important to the balance of ecosystems, they are also culturally significant to Native populations, who may rely on them for cultural items, medicines, spiritual practices, or practical purposes.

3. Leaving archeological items untouched and unharmed. You may choose to call a local tribal office to notify them about a discovered item, so that it can be returned or cared for by the tribe itself.

4. Researching the ecological and cultural impact of hydroelectric dams and water engineering projects on the ecosystems and local Native peoples of the place in which you are recreating.

5. Avoiding overfishing, overhunting, or over gathering of any plant or animal species. Take just what you need.

6. Consulting tribes when designing programs and building infrastructure related to outdoor recreation. Do not construct infrastructure on top of, or at, significant cultural sites.

7. Supporting tribes in the place you are recreating financially and politically.

8. Insisting the US government uphold its treaty agreements to tribal nations, which often include access to land, and education and health care support.

9. Inviting Native communities to share their experiences, needs, and perspectives, in spaces where Native voices are not usually included.

10. Educating others about the existence of Native communities in the place in which you are recreating!