

AMLT Newsletter – Fall 2016



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A MESSAGE FROM CHAIRMAN VALENTIN LOPEZ

Dear Friends,

Our Amah Mutsun Land Trust (AMLT) is happy to introduce our first Executive Director, EkOngKar Singh Khalsa. Mr. Khalsa, “EK,” comes to us from the Mystic River Watershed Association (MyRWA), an environmental nonprofit based near Boston. While developing a professional organization at MyRWA, EK worked vigorously to restore strong herring migrations; ensure clean water for swimming and boating; preserve habitat for critical species; reduce discharges of pollutants into waterways; remove invasive plants; develop active volunteer engagement; and provide environmental education programs for the public. These accomplishments are directly in line with the goals we have for our AMLT.

During our first interview, we immediately recognized that EK understands the social justice issues facing our AMLT and has the experience we need to build organizational capacity. It is for these reasons that we are proud to introduce EK as the new and first Executive Director of the AMLT.

PBS is currently developing a four-part series titled *America Rediscovered*. This series explores the world created by the first peoples of the Americas. The goal of this series is to show Native American cultures at the intersection of indigenous knowledge and cutting edge scholarship and science. Our Amah Mutsun Tribal Band was chosen as one of the tribes that will appear in this series. On October 10th, PBS filmed the AMLT’s participation in a controlled burn in the San Vicente Redwoods.



Prescribed burn at San Vicente redwoods. Photo courtesy Sempervirens Fund.

To the Amah Mutsun, fire is a gift given to us by Creator. In addition to using fire for light, cooking, and warmth, our ancestors used fire for ceremony and as a way to manage landscapes. Since 2009, our Tribe has collaborated in research projects with UC Berkeley, UC Santa Cruz, California State Parks and others. The Amah Mutsun participated in Pinnacles National Park’s first cultural burn in 2011 to manage deergrass (*Muhlenbergia rigens*), an important native plant used in basketry. One of the main study topic of this research collaboration has been to see how fire was used by our ancestors to manage landscapes. It is our Tribe’s traditional use of fire and our research collaboration that attracted PBS to feature the Amah Mutsun in this series. PBS anticipates that this series will air in October 2017.

In Santa Clara County there are two land development proposals that our Tribe is opposing. The first project involves a proposal to extract 320 acres of sand and gravel over 30 years. This project is at Juristac, now known as Sargent Ranch. Juristac translates to “Place of the Big Head” and is the home of our Spiritual Leader, Kuksui. Juristac was the location of many of our sacred ceremonies. Juristac is also the location of four known village sites; a river and many springs; an abundance of wildlife; and for thousands of years and hundreds of generations, many of our ancestors were buried at this location. In 1862 there was a smallpox epidemic, and over 300 of our ancestors were buried at this location.



Creek flowing in Coyote Valley. [Photo](#) courtesy [Don DeBold](#), CC by 2.0.

The second development project is at Coyote Valley, the open space area between San Jose and Morgan Hill. This development project calls for the building of a multiple-acre warehouse that will bring unbelievable truck traffic, noise and pollution to Coyote Valley. This project will also open up the door for additional development. Coyote Valley helps clean the air and water for San Jose, provides habitat for many wildlife species, and is an important east-west corridor for wildlife. On occasion, elk can be seen in the hills east of Coyote Valley, and we believe that in the not-too-distant future these elk will cross over in the Santa Cruz Mountains. We have learned from our ancestors that all wildlife are our relatives and we have a responsibility to love and protect them. Only when the importance of our relationships with wildlife is recognized will Mother Earth begin to heal. We ask for your support by [calling or writing to the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors](#) asking them to recognize the sacred and culturally important lands of the Amah Mutsun and to deny both these proposals.

While reading this newsletter you will see that we have two public events coming up, a “Meet our Executive Director” event at Pie Ranch on November 5th(register [here](#)); and a discussion on December 8th at UC Berkeley regarding the archaeological study that was recently conducted north of Santa Cruz. The Santa Cruz research site dates back approximately 7,000 years. We believe the results of this study will help our efforts to understand how our ancestors managed landscapes and successfully lived in a sustainable way for thousands of years. We hope you’ll join us.

On a separate note, our Amah Mutsun Tribe wants to voice our support for the efforts of the Standing Rock Tribe to protect water and sacred sites. We hope you will join us in our support.

Finally, we'd like to ask the readers of this newsletter to consider [making an end-of-year donation to our AMLT](#). We believe our work is providing an important understanding of how the lands of our traditional tribal territory should be stewarded. We hope you agree and show your support by making a donation today.

Ho!

WHY I HAVE JOINED THE AMAH MUTSUN LAND TRUST

By EkOngKar Singh Khalsa



Photo courtesy “EK” EkOngKar Singh Khalsa.

As the first Executive Director of the Amah Mutsun Land Trust, I am honored to have this opportunity to work with the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band as its members renew their stewardship of Tribal lands. The Amah Mutsun Land Trust was founded to fulfill a sacred covenant and to restore balance to the relationship between humans and nature. The Trust intends to help us move forward to a time when, in the words of M. Kat Anderson, “conservation and stewardship are everyday practices.”

The lands that the Amah Mutsun have tended for thousands of years are now owned by others and yet, the Tribe and Land Trust are finding ways to move ahead. They have worked steadily to establish strong working relationships with contemporary land managers and have developed effective partnerships with the National Park Service, California Department of Parks and Recreation, Bureau of Land Management, Sempervirens Fund and many other public and private landowners. With support from the University of California at Berkeley and Santa Cruz, the Native Stewardship Corps has already begun significant restoration projects, utilizing traditional methods to care for coastal meadows, inland watersheds, and mountain forests.

It is my hope to significantly expand the good work of the Native Stewards and to help demonstrate the Tribe’s traditional methods at many more locations throughout the region.

For me, the Amah Mutsun and the story of their long and successful relationship to the land provide reassurance that human intervention in the natural environment can produce benefit not only for the human community but for plants, animals and the land as well. The Amah Mutsun demonstrate in this effort qualities I very much admire. They are grateful the Creator has given them (and all of us) such a remarkable landscape to enjoy. They feel fortunate their ancestors provided effective tools for them to use. More importantly, at the end of 200 years of cruel and painful treatment at the hands of uninvited guests, the Tribe now wants only to faithfully pursue its careful work on behalf of all living things. This remarkable, openhearted response to a very difficult history is inspiring to me.

For more than forty years, I have worked to build the capacity of many small organizations and helped them expand both their scope of work and impact. Through that time, whether working to establish an intentional spiritual community or bringing a forlorn, forgotten urban river back to life, I have observed that small groups of dedicated optimists can change the world for the better. The Amah Mutsun Land Trust is indeed one of these dedicated groups.

The Land Trust, with its partners, has set forth compelling and far-reaching goals that will change our perspective and perhaps the way we live. Achieving these goals will help Amah Mutsun Tribal members and their partners create a healthier relationship to the natural world of which we are an essential and integral part.

I look forward to working with everyone involved, to fulfill the request of the Tribe's elders, that the loving stewardship their ancestors undertook is begun in earnest once again.

PRESCRIBED FIRE AT SAN VICENTE REDWOODS

By EkOngKar Singh Khalsa, AMLT Executive Director



Photo courtesy Sempervirens Fund

On October 10th, members of the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band, Tribal Council Chair Val Lopez, and AMLT staff joined the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Cal Fire) for a prescribed fire on a 10-acre parcel in the San Vicente Redwoods. San Vicente Redwoods is an 8,532-acre preserve owned and managed by the Sempervirens Fund and Peninsula Open Space Trust (POST). Sempervirens Executive Director Sara Barth welcomed everyone to the property and underlined how important the day's work was to efforts to restore controlled fire as a safe and effective tool to manage forested lands.

More than 30 firefighters, including volunteers from the local Bonny Doon Fire and Rescue, arrived on-site to ensure that work went smoothly and safely. More than one dozen trucks, tanker trucks and many lines of hose were deployed.



Native Steward Paul Lopez starts the ceremonial fire at San Vicente Redwoods using traditional methods. Photo courtesy Sempervirens Fund.

In keeping with the Amah Mutsun tradition, Amah Mutsun Native Stewards started fire using an elderberry and huckleberry fire drill they brought to the site. The Stewards had traveled a great distance that day to join everyone from their work on a fire crew in the Klamath National Forest.

Val Lopez and Native Stewards Abran Lopez, Nathan Vasquez, and Paul Lopez performed a fire ceremony while Cal Fire teams respectfully observed this sacred moment. As Val sang and prayed, the quiet attention everyone brought to this ceremony was remarkable, rarely undertaken to light a fire of this size in the Santa Cruz Mountains in the past 200 hundred years.

To begin the controlled burn, Amah Mutsun Tribal members and Val took turns with Cal Fire personnel to light lines of fire through a five-acre patch on the west side of Empire Grade Road. The inmate fire crews from the nearby Ben Lomond Conservation Camp watched carefully from along the fire break they had prepared on the site's perimeter earlier in the day.

The weather was perfect for the burn – not too much moisture and not too little, and the wind cooperated to lift the increasingly thick smoke straight into the sky above the forest.

The burn area had been carefully prepared and nearly of all the understory had been removed. The thick underbrush and enormous amount of fuel in the forest immediately adjacent to the selected site made clear why it was necessary to remove the understory before the blaze could be set. The contrast between these two areas as worked progressed illustrated why fire had been used for long to keep land open and clear.

The prescribed fire went very well. Cal Fire staff and superintendents worked through the day to control the burn and kept it moving forward. The upper story of the forest was protected and during the next two days more than 10 acres were burned. Fire personnel stood watch for more than 48 hours after the last flame disappeared to ensure the fire was out. All together it was a complex and collaborative effort to reduce available fuel, create an important fire-break, and bring new life to the forest.

Throughout the day a five-person crew from Providence Pictures filmed the event, catching the blaze on film and interviewing fire crews and others. Providence is including the fire and the work of the Amah Mutsun in a four-part series for PBS about Native people in North America.

Nicole Heller from POST spoke to Providence Pictures of the value of fire in maintaining a healthy forest ecology; and Rick Flores from UC Santa Cruz, spoke about the use of fire by Native tribes to tend the landscape and to encourage certain plants and trees to flourish.



The author with Tribal Chair Valentin Lopez. Photo courtesy Sempervirens Fund.

Val Lopez was also on camera all day. The fire ceremony was filmed for the first time and at the end of the day Val spoke about the past and the way his ancestors thought of the forest and of all living things as kin, as family. Val spoke of the ways that the Amah Mutsun worked to tend the wild landscapes of the mountains and coastal valleys. He spoke of the Tribe's intention to undertake that work again—as a sacred duty and as a sensible approach to comprehensive management of protected and private lands.

By 5PM the first day of the burn, the fire crews had declared a stop to the burn, and were cleaning up the perimeter and checking the land before dark. Providence Pictures continued to film, and Val dutifully did take after take walking across the blackened forest floor through the smoke and remnant flames talking about the past and the cruel history his ancestors endured. He talked about the future and the work ahead to restore the land to its former condition, and to restore his Tribe to its role as stewards of Popeloutchom.

NOTES FROM THE NATIVE STEWARDSHIP CORPS

By Eleanor Castro, Tribal Elder and Amah Mutsun Land Trust Board Member



Photo courtesy Eleanor Castro

The AMLT Native Stewardship Corps reconnects tribal members with traditional cultural practices, places, and knowledge through conservation fieldwork and cultural education. Here Tribal Elder Eleanor Castro describes her work with the Native Stewards, the members of the AMLT Native Stewardship Corps.

My name is Eleanor Castro. I am an Elder of the Amah Tribal Band. It is a honor and a privilege working with the Amah Mutsun Land Trust and being accepted as a member of the Board of Directors.

As an Elder to the stewards it has been an unexpected honor. When I was asked to go out and meet with the stewards I didn't know what to expect, but it has turned out to be a great experience for me and the stewards.

My job was to teach and inspire our stewards, but I have learned and have been inspired by our stewards also. The work has given me the privilege of feeling and hearing what the ancestors wanted from me and from the stewards. Creator has put me here to help the stewards to gain knowledge not only of the land but to feel that this is where we come from and where we belong. The ancestors want us to be proud of who we are and where we come from.

Working out on the coast north of Santa Cruz and at Pie Ranch was a great experience. I was asked to cook and be there for the stewards in any way to help them in the weeks we were out there.

As Elder I was able to be confidant, be a spiritual leader, and be a person the stewards could go to for whatever was on their minds. As a woman I was able to help any women who needed to speak to another woman and feel that they do belong there.

I feel that the Creator has made me a jewelry-maker and a traditional cultural teacher. I have learned many native traditions, and all that I have learned, I pass down to our people – especially the youth.

This position has taught me a lot, and the stewards have taught me too. I love working with all the people who have brought us all together for these blessings and wonderful experiences and I'm glad to be part of it.

Thank you.

AMAH MUTSUN ETHNOBOTNY

By Sara French, AMLT Research Associate



[Photo](#) by Nimmolo

Ethnobotany is the study of the human relationship with plants. Each AMLT newsletter highlights a native plant that is used by the Amah Mutsun. We hope you enjoy learning more about the useful and culturally significant plants all around us.

California bay – **sokkochi**

Umbellularia californica

Fall is the time to gather acorns, buckeye fruits, rose hips, and bay nuts. The California Bay, called **sokkochiin** the Mutsun language, produces green fruits that resemble a small avocado – and in fact, the California bay and the avocado are in the same plant family, *Lauraceae*. The Mutsun people have traditionally eaten both the fleshy part and the kernel of the abundant fruits of the California Bay, called bay nuts. Fruits are gathered from the ground when they were green or turning purple, but not yet wrinkled and black. To eat the kernel the flesh is removed from the seeds immediately after gathering, and then the seeds are traditionally dried for one year. Then the dried seeds are roasted and the seed coat peeled off to reveal the edible kernel inside. These roasted kernels can be eaten whole or ground into a flour and mixed with other foods. Today the Amah Mutsun Land Trust Native Stewardship Corps continues to gather bay nuts in the fall and is experimenting with reintroducing them to the Mutsun diet.

“RAIN FOREST,” A POEM

The Amah Mutsun Land Trust seeks to advance indigenous stewardship, which stems directly from the sense of ecological knowledge and kinship held within the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band. In her poetry, Elizabeth Rodriguez, age 12, expresses environmental concern as a Mutsun youth.

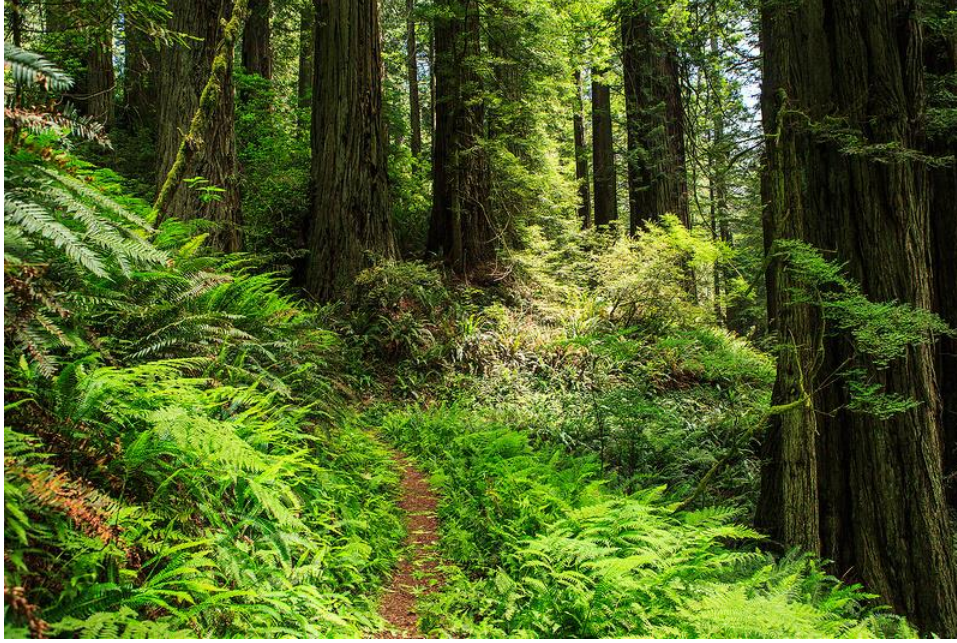


Photo by [Murray Foubister](#), [CC BY 2.0](#)

Rain Forest

Peace and quiet all day long

No sound but rain dripping off leaves

The animals are sleeping

And jaguars are purring

Wake up morning

Our home is almost gone

Cutting down trees

All day long, trees are almost gone,

What are we going to do?

Move to another home?

Now Jaguars

Are purring

And no sound

But the sound of the rain.

—

First published in Discovered: 2013 Poetry Collection by the America Library of Poetry, reprinted with the author and her parent's permission.

WISDOM FROM ASCENCIÓN

Edited by Jay Scherf, AMLT Project Assistant



Mule's ears (soorokwa). [Photo by Miguel Vieira, CC BY 2.0](#)

Ascención Solórsano was a Mutsun healer and leader who had extensive knowledge of Mutsun culture, language, plant uses, and customs. In the 1920s and '30s she shared her knowledge with John P. Harrington, an ethnographer from the Smithsonian Institute. Harrington recorded over 78,000 pages of her wisdom, which are stored at the Smithsonian. In each newsletter, we share a selection from these notes. Here are some of Ascención's words:

Soorokwa, *mule's ears, camer*

Talves sorko, *to gather mule's ears*. Sorkona, *to go and gather mule's ears*

There are two types of mule's ears, one is smaller and the other is larger, both of them are called soorokwa in the [Mutsun] language, from what I can remember. The two of them grow in the hills, but not in the brush nor under trees. They have leaves as big as one's hand, and are ash-colored. But the garden sunflowers are very different, they grow very tall.

Before, they used to eat the stems of the mule's ears...

They used to gather the seeds to make a good pinole.

The root of the small type of mule's ears is as thick as one's finger and is whitish inside.

[The mule's ears also have medicinal uses.]