

The Humbug Partnership

By: Jane Braxton Little

On 29 June 2004, Lorena Gorbet stood before a newly assembled council of state and federal agencies and made a bold request: “I’m here to ask for land. This is an opportunity for you to right a past wrong.”

Gorbet, a Mountain Maidu Indian, repeated her request to the Pacific Forest and Watershed Lands Stewardship Council in 2005. And in 2006. And annually for the next seven years.

When her turn to ask for land came in November 2013, Gorbet could not hide the twinkle in her large brown eyes. This time the request was pro forma; moments later the Stewardship Council unanimously recommended that the Maidu Summit Consortium hold title “in perpetuity” to Humbug Valley in northeastern California, a 2,325-acre remnant of Maidu ancestral homeland. The recommendation, expected to be finalized next year, marks the first time in California history that ancestral lands have been returned to a tribe not formally recognized by the federal government.

“I thought this day would never come,” said Gorbet, a warm woman whose short stature belies her stubborn strength.



Lorena Gorbet has been asking the Stewardship Council for land since 2004. The Maidu Summit is now poised to receive title to Humbug Valley. Photograph by Jane Braxton Little

The return of Humbug Valley to the Mountain Maidu is more than a one-time repatriation to redress past wrongs. It is a surge in a groundswell of stewardship activity by Native Americans on lands across the country. The sheer size and cultural importance of Humbug Valley has thrust the Maidu Summit into the forefront of a movement to conserve ancestral territories using land trusts, conservation easements, and other tools that combine science and traditional ecological knowledge and techniques. What is evolving on this site 150 miles north of Sacramento is by all accounts an experiment—a start-up still building basic organizational skills. Yet the promise of this acquisition is already inspiring other tribes to carve their own paths to land conservation.

“That’s the magic of Humbug,” said Ken Holbrook, Maidu Summit executive director.

Tending the forests and grasslands of what is now northeastern California, Mountain Maidu have lived among the hills and valleys of the northern Sierra Nevada since the beginnings of memory. In Humbug and other wet meadows in the headwaters of the Feather River, they farmed camas bulbs for food, harvested wormwood for medicines, and pruned willows and maples for basket materials. They cultivated oaks, encouraging low branches and big bushy heads to produce acorns, the mainstay of their diet. It was the forest understory, not the towering pines and firs, that provided Maidu people with the necessities of life.

When Europeans arrived with the Gold Rush, Maidu were forced off their primary gathering sites. Early in the twentieth century, power companies recognized the economic potential of the Feather River and its tributaries. The dams they built to direct water into their hydroelectric turbines flooded the lush meadows of

the Maidu homelands, creating Lake Almanor, Butt Lake, and Walker Lake. Most Maidu retreated into a century of hostility, bitter over the loss of land, language, and culture. Today the tribe is a scattered collection of rancherias and family clans largely landless and unrecognized by the federal government.

The early dam builders acquired Humbug Valley, too, and held it in reserve for a reservoir. During its decades of ownership, Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E) leased the meadow to cattle ranchers for summer grazing, opened a public campground along Yellow Creek, and stocked the stream with nonnative German brown trout. But Humbug Valley was never flooded.

In 2001, following an energy crisis that caused rolling blackouts and contributed to the company's \$9 billion debt, PG&E filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection. Three years later, a deal forged by the state Public Utilities Commission and a host of conservation groups permanently protected 140,000 acres of PG&E land for habitat, open space, and public recreation. The lands came under the control of the Pacific Forest and Watershed Lands Stewardship Council, formed to decide the future of the more than a thousand separate parcels. Humbug Valley is one of them.

PG&E's bankruptcy settlement was the godsend Gorbet and other Mountain Maidu had been waiting for. Over the years they had worked on several partnerships with what many still call "the dominant culture." They had appealed to foundations for funds to buy land they could manage using traditional values. Along with their gathering sites, the Maidu lost salmon and snapping turtles, ceremonies, language, and song—"everything that goes with the land," Gorbet said. "We have always been looking for compensation for what we lost. Always." Humbug Valley, replete with grinding stones, burial grounds, and sacred springs still in relatively pristine condition, became their primary focus.



Beverly Ogle and her family erected this rock at the entrance to Humbug Valley welcoming all to the Maidu historic homeland. Photograph by Jane Braxton Little

To compete for ownership, they brought together various groups to form the nonprofit Maidu Summit Consortium. The nine member organizations had often been at odds with one another. Now, however, something was pulling them together, said Holbrook. To prove their worth as potential owners to the Stewardship Council, the consortium completed a seventy-four-page management plan and constructed an ethnographic background and record of lands allotted to Maidu. They conducted a botanical study and identified archaeological sites in Humbug Valley. They also attended meeting after meeting with the Stewardship Council, always repeating their simple request for land.

What moved their application to the forefront of the council's attention was an unlikely alliance with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. The department had also applied for ownership of Humbug Valley, putting it in direct competition with the Maidu Summit. The state's management plan emphasized Yellow Creek, which meanders through the valley and hosts a population of trophy brown trout planted years earlier and now wildly popular among anglers.

The competing ownership applications brought the Maidu into close contact with state wildlife officials. They met frequently on the ground to argue about managing Yellow Creek and grazing cattle along its shores. Gorbet and other Maidu were appalled by Fish and Wildlife's proposal to return cattle to the valley, a practice PG&E discontinued in 2001. They wanted to let the valley rid itself of all nonnative species, including brown trout, and they were willing to wait for the decades—even centuries—it might take.

"That was not ideal for us," said Tina Bartlett, a Fish and Wildlife regional manager.

As they argued and scuffed dirt with the toes of their boots, people on both sides began to hear new things. Traditional Maidu willow management, aimed at producing basket materials, might help restore habitat for the endangered willow flycatcher, Bartlett said. The decades of data the agency had collected on the Humbug fishery might help eventually restore native trout, Gorbet acknowledged. As the tone of their meetings began to shift, department scientists asked more questions and listened more closely. So did the Maidu.

Gradually, a notion began to take shape among state wildlife officials. "Maybe we didn't need to hold title to the land. Maybe we could accomplish our goals as a partner," said Bartlett. So the state agency withdrew its application for ownership of Humbug Valley and instead endorsed the Maidu application. According to Bartlett, "It was just the right thing to do."



The Maidu Summit Consortium gathers in Oakland after the Stewardship Council voted unanimously to recommend ownership of Humbug Valley. Lorena Gorbet and Beverly Benner Ogle, front row, are among those who led the 10-year effort. Photograph by Jane Braxton Little

The joint proposal the department and the Maidu Summit made to the Stewardship Council emphasized management that combines science and traditional Maidu ecological knowledge and techniques. It epitomized the collaboration that is one of the council's primary goals. No one thinks good intentions and careful planning alone are enough to conserve Humbug's natural resources. The partners must complete a final management plan, which will determine the long-term future of the valley's natural resources. Like other PG&E parcels deeded to new owners, the Maidu Summit must comply with the terms of a conservation easement that forbids subdivisions, road building, mining, and other development conflicting with natural resource conservation.

The Maidu partnership with the state Department of Fish and Wildlife is "a historic opportunity for all of us to learn from each other," said Charlton H. Bonham, director of the agency.

It already provides a model for other Native American tribes. Encouraged by the Maidu success, the Pit River Tribe recently asked the Stewardship Council for title to land in the Hat Creek area now owned by PG&E. Elsewhere Native American groups are forging partnerships with state and federal agencies to protect natural resources in places they occupied for centuries. The North Fork Mono Tribe is working in the Sierra National Forest to return natural fire to the groves where their ancestors lived. The Amah Mutsun Tribe is collaborating with the National Park Service to restore native grasses and sedges in California's Pinnacles National Monument.

The Maidu success is part of a movement burgeoning around ancestral homelands. Different groups are utilizing different approaches to conservation but all are rooted in traditional Native American stewardship techniques, according to Beth Rose Middleton, an associate professor of Native American studies at University of California, Davis. The Maidu Summit is a founding member of a consortium of native land trusts and conservancies working with tribes and public agencies to protect sacred lands. Middleton believes their efforts are expanding the concept of environment to embrace the traditional value of place as part of identity, responsibility, and continuity.

For Gorbet, these developments have as much to do with social justice as land conservation and it's about time. "Change is happening," she said. "It's a new millennia for Native people."

With the title to Humbug Valley expected to be given to the Maidu Summit next year, Gorbet might have taken a break from her annual requests to the Stewardship Council. However, in September she was back again with a familiar message: "I'm here to ask for land." This time it's a request for ownership or easement to around 800 acres of PG&E land in the Lake Almanor area.



Yellow Creek as it meanders through Humbug Valley. Photograph by the Feather River Land Trust



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