

Return *of the* Sinkyone

THE NATIVE PEOPLE OF THIS PLACE
ENVISION A NEW KIND OF PARK
—AND AN OLD NATURAL BALANCE—
ALONG THE CALIFORNIA COAST.

Sinkyone Wilderness State Park

"Many people are inclined to put on a sentimental air and charge that the white man has been the cause of all this decimation in [the Indians'] ranks. Such, however, does not seem to be the case. The truth is that they had served their purpose in the great economy of God, and the fullness of time for their disappearance from the earth has come, and they are going to go." —History of Mendocino County, 1880

"Soon, about ten o'clock in the morning, some white men came. They killed my grandfather and my mother and my father. I saw them do it. I was a big girl at the time. Then they killed my baby sister and cut her heart out and threw it in the brush where I ran and hid. My little sister was a baby, just crawling around. I didn't know what to do. I was so scared that I guess I just hid there a long time with my little sister's heart in my hands."

—Sally Bell, quoted in G. A. Nomland's *Sinkyone Notes*, 1935

NEAR MILEPOST 10.5 ON the Usal Road, I park my pickup beneath a dusty fir, throw a sack of cookies in my backpack, and hike off downhill looking for Sally Bell. Not the Sinkyone Indian woman herself, of course—dead more than 60 years—but the grove of redwood trees that bears her name here on the coast of Northern California. This is Sally Bell's home ground: from the coastal meadows overlooking Needle Rock, where as a child in the 1860s Bell covered in the bushes while U.S. soldiers slaughtered her kin; to the alder-graced campground at Usal, where I will join local Indian people celebrating the anticipated creation of an unprecedented intertribal park.

If all goes as planned, by late this year the InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council—a nonprofit consortium of ten federally recognized Indian groups, including Pomo, Wailaki, and Yuki people—will assume title to more than 3,800 acres of seaside mountains so convoluted that California's main coastal highway never invaded them. I want to see the Sally Bell Grove because it is where the fight for the park began in 1983, when environmentalists and Indian people drew a line on the forest floor,



Survivor Sally Bell with her husband.

climbing and making human chains around trees to prevent their harvest by the Georgia-Pacific Corporation. A subsequent lawsuit by the Environmental Protection Information Center, the Sierra Club, and the National Indian Treaty Council halted the cut, and in 1986 Georgia-Pacific sold more than 7,100 acres to the Trust for Public Land and the California State Coastal Conservancy. A little less than half of that land—the dramatic seaward strip and remnant redwood groves

like Sally Bell—went to substantially enlarge the existing Sinkyone Wilderness State Park, where it is today threaded by the California Coastal Trail. It is the adjoining upland parcel of rolling second-growth Douglas fir, scrubby ceanothus, and resurgent tan oak that will be sold to the Indian group, for \$1.4 million.

But the story of the park really goes back to those thousands of years when the north coast of California was one of the most populated regions of prehistoric North America. The Sinkyone people—one of several local Athabaskan-speaking groups—lived each winter along the South Fork of the Eel River, or "Sinkikok" in their language, from which Europeans derived the name for both the re-

BY WILLIAM POOLE

gion and the people. During the course of the year, the Sinkyone would move from the region's ridges down to the coast, collecting, according to the season, tan oak acorns, seaweed, salt, salmon and surf perch, camas bulbs and soap root, horehound and angelica root for treating colds, ten varieties of berries, five varieties of nuts, four varieties of seeds, and dozens of other foods and medicines.

It is such pursuits that contemporary Sinkyone descendants and other Indians now seek to nurture in Sinkyone InterTribal Park, restoring both the land itself and a traditional Native American land ethic. In so doing they hope to set the world back in order in at least this one corner of North America, not only to resuscitate a much-abused landscape, but to model a new relationship (based on an old relationship) to the natural world. Their success would complete a stunning reversal of this coast's environmental history, of which the slaughter and scattering of Native people was but the open-

trace a line of crimson above the western horizon. Scalloped headlands sweep off to the north, and dry meadows of thigh-high grass stretch for miles, bronzed in the evening light and broken only where creeks have carved deep gulches to the sea. Behind the meadows rise dark hillsides of Douglas fir. In the distance, the recumbent bodies of Roosevelt elk are islets in a bay of grass.

No one knows precisely where in this meadowy expanse Sally Bell's family may have been cut down, and the horrible incident would have been but a drop in an ocean of blood had not Bell lived to tell the tale. Thousands of Native people were slaughtered on the North Coast in the decades following the Gold Rush, while many others were enslaved or dragged off to reservations. Despite all this, Indians never "disappeared" from the Sinkyone, or anywhere else along California's North Coast. After a few decades of the most intense persecution, they were back, traversing the trails from inland reservations to the coast, where they would camp out and harvest what they could each summer. By the 1970s, local Indians were vocal enough to protest when a bulletin board at the state park visitors' center at Needle Rock proclaimed the Sinkyone a "vanished people."

One of the geographic truths in the Sinkyone is that in a land so steep and wooded, humans have time and again sought out the same relatively flat, open places. Within a few miles of the visitors' center one can easily trace the first hundred years of European settlement. The center itself was once the rude board farmhouse of a family named Stewart; the park's walk-in campsites are tucked behind a leaning barn, into a decrepit apple orchard, along an abandoned railroad bed. At nearby Bear Harbor, a spicy grove of imported eucalyptus trees runs wild, along with once domestic calla lilies, water iris, and blue-bottomed myrtle, where an ocean-front farmhouse once stood.

The settlers scratched farms into the oceanside clearings and grazed livestock in the elk pastures, and it is easy for one with a weakness for husbandry to fall into nostalgic reverie amid all this agricultural abandonment. Standing at evening by the antique barn, with swallows carving the incipient darkness above my head and the ocean a plain of pewter to the west, it is hard not to wish that the farmers had reached the balance with the land Indians had achieved. But a commercial rather than an agricultural paradigm quickly came to rule here, with the only balance at issue being that between payment and debit, resources and receipts.

One cogent symbol of this change is growing on the hillsides: the tan oak tree, the Indian staple that became a staple for white immigrants as well, although of commerce rather than sustenance. Sinkyone people had farmed the oaks by burning the underbrush and worm-infested acorns, and so preserved tree health, just as they'd burned the meadows to attract elk and other large game. The newcomers, though, stripped the oaks of their bark, which was used in tanning leather, and left the husked trees to rot. By the 1920s, many sections of the Sinkyone were all but denuded of living adult tan oaks. A Sinkyone survivor into those times told a story



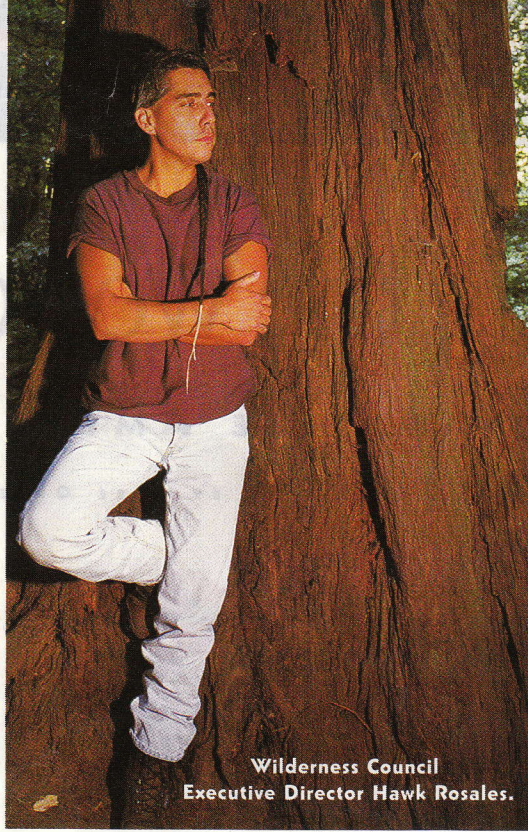
Roosevelt elk in the Sinkyone.

ing chapter. It might also contribute to an alternate understanding of wilderness, not as land untouched by human influence, but as land in balance with human influence, as the Sinkyone was for perhaps 14,000 years.

ONE EVENING IN THE NORTHERN REACHES OF SINKYONE Wilderness State Park, I sit on the bluff 200 feet above Needle Rock—now more a sea-washed butt of a needle than the spire that the name suggests—and watch the sinking sun

about Nagaicho, the legendary Sinkyone creator, who said of the bark harvest that "it looks just like my people lying around, lying around with all their skin cut off."

Tan oak bark, along with redwood shakes and redwood railroad ties, was shipped from Needle Rock, Bear Harbor, and other coastal points, often loaded via chutes or cables from the surrounding cliffs. The redwood lumber harvest began later. The same Mendocino County history that proclaimed the Godly purpose behind Native American decline could still boast in 1880 of "immense bodies of redwood . . . in which the sounds of the woodsman's ax has not yet echoed." From this date it took a hundred years to log 98 percent of the Sinkyone's old growth.



Wilderness Council
Executive Director Hawk Rosales.

The Indians have pitched their camp in a grassy clearing between a stygian redwood grove and an alder-hung creek. About 50 people eventually show up, Indians and their supporters. Friday night the fire circle is blessed with offerings of tobacco and prayer, and all day Saturday campers continue to arrive—their vehicles bouncing down the dusty seven-mile entry road from the Coast Highway.

Events unwind at a leisurely pace: communal meals and hikes to the beach, where children play "dare-to-dip" in the frigid water and men seine for surf perch with triangular nets. In the evening comes fire-lit music from the Yakayo Flickers, a local drum group, and Pomo singing, accompanied by the steady beat of elder-

"MANY TRIBES ARE WATCHING WHAT WE'RE DOING RIGHT NOW," ROSALES SAYS. "IF WE CAN DO THIS, OTHER TRIBES CAN."

By the turn of the century, logging railroads snaked inland from Bear Harbor and Usal Cove, where a town sprang up behind a 1,600-foot wharf and a lumber mill that employed 300 people. With the full flowering of mechanized logging after World War II, Caterpillar tractors began carving haul roads into the farthest corners of the most isolated groves. The timber industry became one of the largest employers on California's North Coast, and wielded impressive influence with government. But although timber companies like to speak of their business as agriculture, clearcutting an old-growth forest is more like mining gold than like growing corn: once harvested, the forest cannot return for many human lifespans. Industrial logging also clouded the region's salmon streams with silt, destroying the one renewable Native resource that had been adopted into the immigrant economy.

AT USAL COVE, THE 1,600-FOOT WHARF IS GONE NOW; THE lumber mill, the town, all gone, replaced by berry patches, alder thickets, and meadows dotted with state park campsites. Below the campground, Usal Creek threads a level valley for about a mile, deeply shaded and swelling finally into a small, bright estuary at its seaward end. Beyond this, a graceful half-crescent of beach confronts the ocean: an opening in the Sinkyone rampart.

berry clapper sticks on the singer's hands. On Saturday night, after much anticipation, young runners arrive from the reservation at Round Valley, 60 miles away. They have run in tag teams for many hours, but still retain energy to circle the fire to the cheers of the gathered campers. At all hours, children can be found exploring the edges of the creek where it bounds the campsite, while attentive grandparents look on with expressions that say, "This is what it's all about."

"We got this far by setting a good example," Council Chair Priscilla Hunter tells a group of Indians that evening. A handsome Pomo woman, Hunter is a leader of her rancheria (a small reservation), and has helped spearhead the fight for the Sinkyone since soon after the lawsuit over the Sally Bell Grove. Now she stands in the firelight holding her three-year-old granddaughter in her arms. "We hope this project will teach all Indian people to get back to protecting Mother Earth, and to stand up and say that Indian people won't be pushed around any more. It is a blessing for each of us to come up here and be part of this land."

ON SATURDAY AFTERNOON OF THE USAL GATHERING, Hawk Rosales leads a dozen curious hikers on a steep climb north along the boundary of the new park. Rosales—a 33-year-old Apache silversmith, saddlemaker, and horse

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SINKYONE PARK

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trainer—is the executive director of the InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council. As he hikes, he points out brushy ceanothus and coyote bush beside the rutted road, along with thimbleberries, huckleberries, and wild raspberries, a favorite of local bears.

On a height a thousand feet above the sea, Rosales stops to point out a wandering linear clearing headed down through the state park toward the ocean. Here, under state park contract, local Indians are helping to rehabilitate an old logging road—planting native grasses and trees and acting as monitors for the heavy equipment that re-contours the hillsides. As monitors they are authorized to stop the work at any time they believe a Native burial or historic site to be in danger.

“It’s been real empowering to local Indian people to be out here directing these efforts,” Rosales says. “Ten years ago Indians were totally excluded from projects like this. The attitude was: What? Indians? What do they have to do with this? Well, we’re defining how this thing needs to go forward because this is really Indian land, and state parks are starting to acknowledge that.”

Not everyone agrees with the plan for the InterTribal park, of course. Some local loggers feel cheated. In the mid-1980s, county officials, state agencies, and loggers envisioned that this land would someday be sold by the Trust for Public Land and the Coastal Conservancy for “multiple use,” which many people took to mean industrial logging. But as the Indians have made their case over the years—as they have petitioned for the land on the grounds of justice and prior custody—they have convinced officials that their proposal also incorporates a kind of multiple use.

The Indians have won points for persistence. Since 1989, the InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council has raised more than \$400,000 to support

its projects. The council expects to announce soon a gift of \$1.4 million from the Lannan Foundation of Los Angeles to purchase the new park, contingent upon approval of a conservation easement under which the Indians would hold the land.

As currently drafted, the easement stipulates that the land may be used for ecotourism, for a native-plants nursery and, perhaps most controversial to some of the Indians’ supporters, even for limited logging. The unusual easement, to be held and monitored by the Pacific Forest Trust, is intended to guarantee a sustainable, mature forest.

“WE HOPE THIS PROJECT WILL TEACH ALL INDIAN PEOPLE TO GET BACK TO PROTECTING MOTHER EARTH.”

— Priscilla Hunter

It defines what a mature redwood-fir forest should look like (a multi-story canopy, a mix of native vegetation of different ages, dead snags, and fallen logs) and then permits logging only to achieve and maintain such a forest. It goes so far as to stipulate the number of large redwoods per acre, and to prohibit the harvest of old growth, stream corridors, steep slopes, and spotted owl and marbled murrelet habitat. The easement thus attempts to bring into the present something like the balance under which Native people long harvested resources on this land—using them without using them up.

LATER, AS I HIKE DOWNHILL TOWARD the Sally Bell Grove, views open up over Little Jackass Creek to the coast beyond Usal. In 1911, a travel writer named J. Smeaton Chase pronounced the forests near here “the finest I had seen, and evidently virgin, for there was no mark of either cutting or fire”—not an idle commendation, since by that time Chase had trekked 800 miles from the Mexican border. But in the years since, whole towns have been planned, constructed, inhabited, and abandoned. There are fewer people than there used

to be, fewer farms, fewer salmon—and far fewer old trees.

The day I retrace Chase’s route, the Usal Road is lined with second-growth redwood along with second-growth Douglas fir and a thick understory of brush. Off the road, the land seems more battered, thinly timbered where it does not wear the weed-patch look of a regenerating clearcut: scraggly tan oaks and firs filling in where the redwoods were ripped out, and exotic pampas grass mixing with ceanothus.

The grove is so inconspicuous that I pass it by at first. But backtracking and pushing my way into the woods I see what was invisible from the trail: massive trees marching downhill into the state park against the shimmering backdrop of the sea on land so steep it is difficult to stay on your feet. Finding a fallen log, I sit to

enjoy the silence and eat lunch, and think about a little girl who watched her family massacred 15 miles to the north; and I remember that when the deputies came to arrest the demonstrators here in 1983, one of them gave her name as Sally Bell.

A pretty enough island of redwoods, I think, although much hacked-back from what it once was. But it’s what’s left here, and when it comes to setting the world back in order, there is simply no other place to start. ■

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