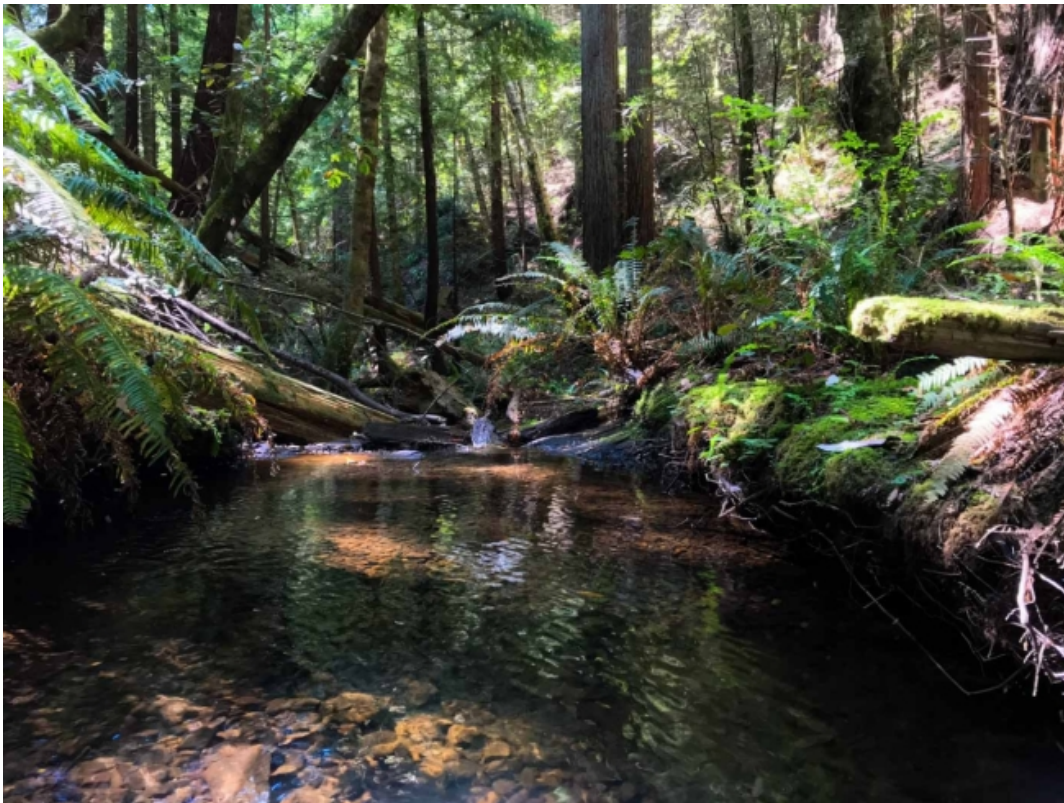


Ecocentricity Blog - Back Where It Belongs: The Importance of Native American Land Stewardship

By: John A. Lanier

NEWS RELEASE BY RAY C. ANDERSON FOUNDATION

Northampton, MA | March 02, 2022 09:31 AM Eastern Standard Time



Tc'ih-Léh-Dûñ is a critical wildlife corridor, providing stream habitat for coho salmon and steelhead trout. Photo by Alex Herr, NCRM Inc.

It's storytime in 'ye olde Ecocentricity blog, so pull up a chair around the campfire. We have to go back generations for this story, specifically to Monday, January 24, 1848. At the time, the United States was winding down its war with Mexico, a war that would result in Mexico ceding most of the present-day southwest to the Americans. This story took place in a portion of that ceded land, the small town of Coloma, California, which lies just to the northeast of Sacramento. The star of the story was a humble gentleman by the name of James Wilson Marshall.

The Story of James Wilson Marshall, A Young Man Who Went West

Marshall was born in New Jersey in 1810, but he left home in his mid-twenties and headed west across America. His travels took him to Missouri and then Oregon, from whence he journeyed south into Northern California. It was there that he finally tried to put down roots, acquiring a small farm suitable for cattle ranching. Months later though, the Mexican-American War broke out, and Marshall enlisted in the local American regiment. He fought in the war for only a matter of months, but by the time he returned to his farm, his cattle had all wandered off or been stolen.

In need of income, he approached a local magistrate by the name of John Sutter, who agreed to hire Marshall to construct and operate a sawmill in the region. Marshall began scouting the region, and that was when he decided upon Coloma as a suitable town. He and his crew started construction of the sawmill in August 1847, and it was coming along nicely by January of the following year. That was when Marshall hit a snag, though. The mill would be powered by a waterwheel, and the ditch that would drain water away from the wheel was too small for the necessary volume of water. While some of the crew worked to complete the mill during the day, others worked evenings to enlarge the ditch. Each morning, Marshall would go inspect the excavation progress.

Which brings us to that fateful Monday morning on January 24, 1848. Marshall took a look at the ditch, which had grown incrementally deeper from the previous night's work. For the first time, he noticed a few shiny flecks in the channel. He climbed down and dug a few nuggets of the shiny mineral out of the earth. He inspected them closely, and then beat one of them between two rocks. He found that he could hammer it into a flatter shape without breaking it. He gathered a few more nuggets, and then went back to one of his crew members, a gentleman by the name of Mr. Scott. Holding the nuggets out in the palm of his hand, Marshall said to Scott, "I have found it." "What is it?," Scott replied.

"Gold," said Marshall.

The California Gold Rush and The California Indigenous Peoples - More Was Taken Than Just Gold

Thus began the California Gold Rush. News quickly spread around the region, and then across the country, and then around the world. Hundreds of thousands of people flocked to California, all in search of more shiny nuggets. Tragically, Marshall's discovery turned out to be his downfall. His mill would soon fail as his crew deserted him, all choosing to join in the rush for gold. James Wilson Marshall would go on to scratch out a living for the remaining 37 years of his life, but he never found sustained financial success.

Time has been kind to the California Gold Rush, at least in terms of the American folklore that has sprung up around this historical event. It has a certain mystique, being the event

that catapulted the region into national importance. Within six years, the Gold Rush swelled San Francisco's population from 200 residents to more than 35,000, and in that window of time, California became the 31st state to join the Union. Today, the Gold Rush lives on in the name of San Francisco's National Football League team, the 49ers, referring to the year (1849) in which the Gold Rush began in earnest. In the minds of many, the Gold Rush is California's birth story.

That, however, would be too rosy of an historical picture. It's not like the 49ers and other Gold Rushers found an empty land when they settled on our country's west coast. They found many native peoples who had lived on and with the land for centuries. It's a story common in nearly every corner of America, but it played out in particularly brutal fashion in California. Thousands of Native Americans were killed in the three decades after the discovery of gold in California, more still were displaced from their lands, and some were even captured and bonded into slavery to assist in the mining of gold. The California Gold Rush wasn't just about taking gold from the earth. It was about taking life, liberty, and land from the people who were there first. For me personally, that sure takes the shine off any fond remembrances of this historical event.

Returning California Land to Its Rightful Stewards

And so I was glad to see that there was a recent giving-back of traditional land to the people who historically stewarded the lands of northern California. In December, the nonprofit conservation organization **Save the Redwoods League** conveyed 523 acres of forestland about 200 miles north of San Francisco to the **InterTribal Sinkiyone Wilderness Council**. The Council is a consortium of ten tribes that works to protect the tribes' traditional lands and waters. The land, which had been called Andersonia West, has been renamed **Tc'ih-Léh-Dûñ**, meaning "Fish Run Place" in the Sinkiyone language.

There is more to this story, however. As a conservation organization, the Save the Redwoods League had been primarily interested in this land for its ecological value. They **purchased the land in 2020** for \$3.55 million, with the funds coming entirely from Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E). That's the local utility, and in order to comply with the Endangered Species Act, it is required to provide **funding for land conservation** to help offset the habitat destruction resulting from its operations. This all started, in other words, with a utility internalizing an external cost because of environmental regulations.

The Save the Redwoods League saw the opportunity to do more than just preserve habitat in this story. To play their part, all they needed to do was to ensure the land was conserved. In making the land transfer to the Council, the League received a conservation easement on the land in exchange. This was no sacrifice for the Council, as they are fully aligned in wanting the land permanently protected. In fact, there is good evidence to show that entrusting land stewardship to Indigenous Peoples can result in

enhanced biodiversity and carbon sequestration outcomes. It's a classic example of pulling two weeds with one yank.

This story fills me with hope that a model has been set in our country. Lots of amazing organizations are working on conservation, and most of them utilize conservation easements in the process. Surely there are Native American tribes who would stand ready to resume management of their traditional lands. In doing so, perhaps we can help to not only heal the earth, but also our relationships with the people who are clearly her best stewards. Doing so would be worth its weight in gold.

This blog is available weekly via email subscription. [**Click here to subscribe.**](#)

[**Ecocentricity Blog: Cooking with Gas, and Why We Probably Shouldn't Be**](#)

[**Ecocentricity Blog: Tracking Our Emissions**](#)

[**Ecocentricity Blog: The Economics of Coal Burning Simply Do Not Pencil Out**](#)

[**View additional multimedia and more ESG storytelling from Ray C. Anderson Foundation on 3blmedia.com**](#)

Tags

[**DIVERSITY & INCLUSION**](#)

[**SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS**](#)