



News Release

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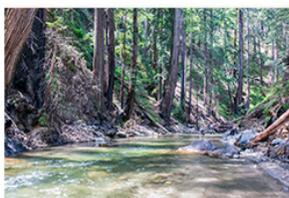
In Big Sur, the first lands ever returned to the Esselen Tribe mean conservation and cultural resilience

BIG SUR, California—At the heart of one of California’s most scenic stretches of coastline, where endangered condors soar above multi-million-dollar properties, the Esselen Tribe of Monterey County has regained its first ancestral homelands since it was displaced by the Spanish four centuries ago.

On Friday, the Esselen Tribe, Western Rivers Conservancy and the California Natural Resources Agency completed a landmark conservation project that places the 1,199-acre Adler Ranch, located roughly 20 miles south of Monterey, into Esselen ownership.

"Words cannot begin to describe the importance of these ancestral lands to our People," stated Tom Little Bear Nason, Tribal Chairman of the Esselen Tribe of Monterey County. "It is with great honor that we become stewards of these sacred indigenous lands once again. This land will allow us to protect our traditions and preserve the cultural heritage of the historic tribes of this region."

The catalyst for this historic project was the Little Sur River, a near-pristine steelhead stream that flows out of the Ventana Wilderness and Santa Lucia Mountains to the Pacific, two miles north of Point Sur. A mile of the stream flows through a deep, redwood-shaded canyon on the former ranch.



Media photos can be found at: <http://www.westernrivers.org/littlesurimagegallery/>

When the ranch went up for sale, Western Rivers Conservancy set out to purchase it with the goal of protecting the stretch of the Little Sur that flows through the property, along with the ranch’s ancient stands of old-growth redwood trees and pristine oak and chaparral woodlands.

“The Little Sur River is a rarity in a state where so many small coastal streams have all but disappeared,” said Peter Colby, California program director for Western Rivers Conservancy.

“Protecting this stretch of the river is a real win for the fish and wildlife of California, and the accomplishment of many lifetimes for the Esselen people. We’re very proud of this partnership.”

After coming together around their shared conservation vision for the property, Western Rivers Conservancy and the Esselen Tribe set out to raise the money needed to transfer the ranch to the tribe. In 2019, the partners applied for a grant from the California Natural Resources Agency, which later awarded the tribe \$4.5 million so it could purchase the land from Western Rivers Conservancy.

On Friday, conveyance of the ranch was finalized, and the Esselen people now have nearly two square miles of Big Sur, at the heart of the tribe’s ancestral domain, to call their own.

The property is a fraction of the tribe’s former territory, but it is enough to allow the Esselen to reinvigorate tribal culture, conduct traditional ceremonies, provide educational opportunities to tribal members, and host the public to teach people about tribal culture and history.

The project will also have a significant conservation impact. The Little Sur River is considered the Central Coast’s most important and pristine spawning stream for threatened south-central coast steelhead, which once returned to this stretch of the coast by the tens of thousands. Today, it is likely that fewer than 100 fish return to the Little Sur River each year, making stream protections vitally important.

The area also provides excellent habitat for diverse and imperiled wildlife, including California spotted owl, endangered California condor and threatened California red-legged frog.

For the Esselen, the property is sacred ground and considered the gateway to the interior mountains of the Santa Lucia range. It faces Pico Blanco, or “Pixchi,” which is the most sacred spot on the coast for the Esselen People and the center of the Esselen origin story.

The Esselen plan to build a traditional village on the property for tribal use and plan to allow other tribes in the area, including the Rumsen, Ohlone and Amah Mutsun, to use the property as well.

For Western Rivers Conservancy, the project is another step forward in its effort to conserve the West’s rivers for the benefit of fish, wildlife and people. The organization regularly partners with Native American tribes, repatriating tribal homelands as a way to protect critical stretches of important streams.

"This would not have been possible without the incredible partnership we have forged with the Western Rivers Conservancy," said Tom Little Bear Nason. "We are perfectly aligned in our values and our shared vision to not only preserve and protect our ancestral lands but to conserve the property and the critical habitat and species along the Little Sur River. And we are so thankful to the Big Sur Land Trust, the Conservancy for the Range of the Condor and all of the volunteers and community leaders that supported our efforts along the way."

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ABOUT THE PROJECT PARTNERS

About the Esselen Tribe of Monterey County

The Mission of the ETMC is to preserve and to protect our cultural heritage and ancestral sacred sites. The efforts of the organization are not solely dedicated to the Esselen Tribe, but encompass protection and preservation of the Esselen, Rumsen, Chalone, Sureño, Chunchunes and Guatcharrone people, which includes but is not limited to the villages of Achasta, Chalon, Echilat, Ensen, Excelen, Esslenajan, Ixchenta, Jojopan, Kuchun, Pachepas, Sargenta-Ruc, Soccoronda, & Tucutnut, all which are located within sacred pre-historic and historic tribal lands of Monterey County, California.

The Esselen Tribe of Monterey County, a 501(c)3 Non-Profit Organization, was founded with the goal of continuing cultural traditions and preserving the cultural heritage of the historic tribes that are located within Monterey County, along with protecting and preserving the recognized and unrecognized sacred lands and archeological sites. For more information, please visit www.esselentribe.org.

About Western Rivers Conservancy

Western Rivers Conservancy acquires lands along rivers throughout the West to conserve critical habitat and to create or improve public access for compatible use and enjoyment. By working with federal, state and local agencies, Native American tribes and other organizations and by applying decades of land acquisition experience, WRC secures the health of whole ecosystems. WRC has protected hundreds of miles of stream frontage on great western rivers, including the Klamath, Eel, Goose Creek/Smith, Rio Grande, Yampa, John Day, Salmon, Snake, North Umpqua and Madison Rivers. To learn more, visit www.westernrivers.org.

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