

# The Carmel Pine Cone

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## Deal pending for Esselen tribe to buy ranch

By CHRIS COUNTS

IF ALL goes according to plan, it won't be a Silicon Valley executive or a land conservation group that soon takes ownership of a remote 1,200-acre ranch in Big Sur but a Native American tribe with deep local roots.



PHOTO/WESTERN RIVERS CONSERVANCY

The 1,200-acre Adler Ranch could soon be acquired by the Esselen Tribe of Monterey County. In this photo, towering Pico Blanco can be seen just to the south of the property, which the tribe says is culturally important.

But the takeover is not a done deal yet, despite local media reports to the contrary, Peter Colby of the Western Rivers Conservancy told *The Pine Cone* this week. His group is brokering the deal between the current owner of the ranch, the Adler family of Sweden, and the Esselen Tribe of Monterey County.

"A contract for the sale is in place, but a number of steps need to be completed first before the land is transferred," Colby said.

While Colby didn't say how much the land is selling for, it was listed at \$8 million when *The Pine Cone* reported about it in 2017. But earlier this month, the California Natural Resources Agency announced that something called "the Esselen Tribal Lands Conservation Project" received a \$4.52 million grant from state taxpayers.

"It is with great honor that our tribe has been called by our ancestors to become stewards of these sacred indigenous lands once again," tribal chairman Tom Little Bear Nason said. "These lands are home to many ancient villages of our people, and directly across the Little Sur River sits Pico Blanco or 'Pitchi,' which is the

most sacred spot on the coast for the Esselen People and the center of our origin story."

Long the home of the late Axel Adler, the ranch is located at the east end of Palo Colorado Road, about 8 miles from Highway 1.

The *Pine Cone* reported two years ago that Western Rivers Conservancy was set to purchase the land — and one prospective buyer was the United States Forest Service. But Congressman Jimmy Panetta and others pushed back against the idea.

In their application for the state tax grant, tribal representatives said their ancestors lived on the land for centuries before being displaced. The grant would give the tribe ownership of a prime piece of land in Big Sur, "making these ancestral lands available to tribal members forever."

### 'Traditional ceremonies'

"This will mark the first acquisition of their ancestral homelands by the Esselen people," the application reads. "To this day, the Esselen people have not regained even a fragment of their ancestral lands, which has severely curtailed their ability to carry on traditional burials and other ceremonies."

The property is located across the Little Sur River from Pico Blanco, a dramatic 3,700 peak that serves as

a landmark along the coast. One of California's smallest tribes, the Esselen once occupied a territory that spanned from Point Sur south to Big Creek and east to Soledad and Greenfield, according to the late historian Gary Breschini.

The arrival of the Spanish decimated the tribe, and many were forced to live and work at Carmel Mission, which was founded in 1771. But according to the tribe's website, "some Esselen escaped the missions entirely by retreating to the rugged interior mountains." "It now appears that a small group survived into the 1840s before

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Besides offering dramatic views of the ocean and backcountry, the Adler Ranch touches the North Fork of the Little Sur River, which is shaded by towering redwoods.

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