



The Carmel Pine Cone

Esselen tribe closes deal on Big Sur land, but won't build on it

By CHRIS COUNTS

WITH THE news that the Esselen Tribe of Monterey County has acquired a 1,200-acre property in Big Sur for \$4.5 million, the obvious question is what the tribe might be planning to build there. But this week, tribal chairman Tom Little Bear Nason put to rest any speculation.

"We're not building a casino," Nason told *The Pine Cone*. "It's going to be a place where we can do our ceremonies, continue our cultural traditions and repatriate our ancestors' remains."

Nason also said the land is protected by a conservation easement, which means there's very little anyone could legally build there.

That's fine with the tribe which, for the first time since California was colonized by immigrants from Europe in the 18th century, will have a place of their own to bury their ancestors. The topic is particularly relevant given the ongoing controversy over development and burials at Carmel Point, and the absence of an appropriate place to repatriate remains.

"We don't want our ancestors disturbed," Nason explained. "We want them to have a safe haven."

The property, which is located at the end of Palo Colorado Road about 8 miles from Highway 1, comes with an old cabin and barn. Besides creating a burial ground, the tribe wants to establish a campground, along with sites for ceremonies and sweat lodges. Roadwork and fencing need to be done, and there are plans to fix some trails and build some new ones.

But first, there will be a lengthy environmental planning process that could take a couple years. Nason said the tribe is getting help from the Big Sur Land Trust and others as they negotiate the process.

Access to the land is quite limited —

at least for now — because of extensive storm damage to the upper few miles of Palo Colorado Road. The road provides the only "easy" access to the somewhat isolated property.

When the environmental studies are complete and the road is fixed, the land will be available not only to members of the Esselen Tribe of Monterey County, but to others with local indigenous roots, such as the Ohlone and the Rumsen. But general public access will be very limited, and when it happens, small groups will be led onto the land by Native American docents.

The tribe also plans to maintain a historical fuel break that locals say is critical to protecting nearby homes, and offers an alternative route to safety in case Palo Colorado Road is blocked.

Sold by the family of longtime resident Axel Adler, the property is covered with grasslands, chaparral, oaks and redwoods, and offers sweeping views west to the ocean and east to the backcountry. It is home to a variety of endangered or threatened species, including the marbled murrelet, the California spotted owl and Dudley's lousewort. The nearby Little Sur River is a protected waterway that offers habitat for spawning steelhead.

A major milestone

Nason said the acquisition of the property represents a major milestone for the tribe. 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.

"Words cannot begin to describe the importance of these ancestral lands to our people," Nason added. "It is with great honor that we become stewards of these sa-

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cred indigenous lands once again."

The tribe announced in October that it was acquiring the land, and this week the deal closed escrow.

The transaction was made possible by the nonprofit Western Rivers Conservancy, which originally intended to sell the land to the United States Forest Service. But residents, fearful they might lose the fuelbreak and concerned the federal agency lacks the resources to take care of the land, pushed back against the idea. In response, the conservancy brokered a deal between the late Axel Adler's family and the Esselen Tribe of Monterey County, which used a \$4.5 million grant from the California Natural Resources Agency — in other words, from taxpayers — to pay for the land.

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