

Southern California Oak Woodlands Forest Gathering

By Dimitri Pappas (Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office)

September 17 to 20, 2023 I attended the Southern California Oak Woodlands Forest Gathering event held at the La Jolla Indian Campground; a 4-day camping retreat created by the [Water Solutions Network](#). In my 3 years of working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, I had never been invited to something so cool.

Hosted by the La Jolla Band of Luiseño Indians, participants included State Parks, U.S. Forest Service, Resource Conservation District, Regional Water Quality Control Board, and more came together with their expertise and energy to work toward the stated goal of “unleashing the powers of connections and collaboration for equitable and sustainable forest stewardship.” There were so many highlights to the experience, but I'll just share a few.

The event began with participants meeting each other as people first. We introduced ourselves without stating our employers or job titles. Rather introductions focused on each of us as people. This simple request needed to be reiterated a few times, but oh man was it vital to the experience. It's amazing how sharing our favorite hobbies, outdoor experiences, ice cream flavors, etc., without titles or job responsibilities massively improved our ability to connect on a personal level before eventually holding more complicated, challenging dialogues related to policy and improving processes.

Another highlight was participating in the traditional tanning process of rabbit hides. This experience really humbled me, as I had no clue just how strong rabbit hides were, nor how many steps were required to complete the process.



Image 1. Tribal member demonstrating how to stretch and remove fatty tissues from the rabbit hide.

We also attended an interactive workshop at Palomar Mountain demonstrating the numerous steps involved in making wii'wish, a traditional acorn dish. The wii'wish workshop helped put into context the significance of the forest management work that La Jolla Tribal members have been conducting to combat gold spotted oak borer (*Agrilus auroguttatus*; GSOB) infestations throughout the La Jolla Indian Campground. It became clear that the threat from GSOB on the oak trees are not just biological or aesthetic, but also cultural.



Image 3. Dimitri Pappas (USFWS) participating in the wii'wish workshop.



Image 2. Joelene Tamm from the La Jolla Tribe showing us oaks infested with GSOB and explaining their lifecycle.



Image 4. Wii'wish making process.

Few things are more universally enjoyable than a great meal alongside great company, and we had both of those things in spades for the whole event. Pauma Casino staff graciously prepared a variety of delicious dishes, often with at least one traditional dish per meal. My one concern during breakfast, lunch, and dinner was that this experience would ruin future camping food experiences forever because the food was just *that* good.



Image 5 and 6. Just one of the many delicious meals provided by Pauma Casino catering, as well as grilled rabbit.

Lastly, it was invaluable to hear from several Tribal elders and members about the ecological and cultural importance of managing their lands and resources through prescribed and cultural burns. Hearing the perspectives of these individuals helped create dialogues amongst participants to understand how we can better support Tribal practices.

The Forest Gathering event at the La Jolla Indian Campground facilitated important interpersonal, science, and policy discussions that will serve to improve future coordination amongst all organizations involved.



Image 7. Participants presenting their ideas from a policy brainstorm activity.

Thank you to all Tribal elders, staff, and volunteers who made the Gathering possible, and a special thanks to Joelene and the La Jolla Tribe for extending the invitation to the Service and being such wonderful hosts to the group.

Forest Gatherings are facilitated by the Water Solutions Network and funded by the California Department of Conservation and the U.S. Forest Service. Visit www.watersolutionsnetwork.org/forest-gatherings for more information.



Image 8. A glorious view of the San Luis Rey River.