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Policymaking in the Wild: The Tale of a Genesee Valley Gathering

The Genesee Valley is in the northern Sierra Nevada in California, a strip of meadow and pastureland between mountains forested with Douglas fir and ponderosa pine. In the August summertime the grasses are dry and yellow, except near the creek where lush greenness signals water. Willow brush grows thick on the sandy creek banks, up to the clear water that shows a shallow sand-covered bottom.

This is Indian Creek, which runs through the Genesee Valley from east to west. Follow Indian Creek sixteen miles upriver and you'll reach Antelope Lake. Downriver, Indian Creek follows a winding path through agricultural land and wooded hills until it runs into the North Fork of the Feather River. The Feather River is the northernmost and largest river in the Sierra Nevada and a key water source for the State Water Project, which delivers water from Northern to Southern California. Feather River runs into the Sacramento River in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, a broad, flat expanse checkered with farmland that molds itself to the river's shape. From there the Feather reaches the San Francisco Bay, the brisk, breezy inlet ringed by suburbs, tech company complexes, and wildlife preserves.

Early in August of 2017, an unlikely group convened in Genesee Valley in the upper reaches of California's watersheds. They were state policymakers, local government officials, local landowners, NGO representatives, academics, and Mountain Maidu Tribe members. They were also poets and artists, backcountry hikers and bear-encounter-survivors, readers and orators, wine-lovers and venison-roasting experts, and myself, one naive intern. We had come together for a three-day camping trip to discuss policy solutions for managing the upper watersheds of California.

I was here mostly as a helping hand to set up chairs, fetch water from the pump down the road, and help cook meals. I had also helped with some of the meeting planning, collecting RSVPs and organizing the itinerary. During discussions, I listened and I took notes. When I began my internship at the California Governor's Office of Planning and Research (OPR) earlier that summer, this site, where the only protection from the elements was the pine canopy and the only place with cell phone reception was in the middle of a field a quarter mile from camp, was the last place I would have imagined attending a policy meeting.

On August 1, I travelled up from Sacramento with Abby, the other OPR intern. We drove through long, flat expanses of farmland punctuated by occasional cities and towns. As our route took us farther and farther north, we began to veer east, leaving the farms behind us and entering the golden brown foothills. The elevation began to rise, and then we were truly in the mountains, navigating curving roads that hugged sheer slopes and bordered steep drops to a river gorge below. The grasslands and chaparral had given way to dense pines that guarded our way.

Abby had just finished her freshman year at UPenn. She was a staunch vegan and an avid lover of Russian history and, like me, was still searching for what she wanted to do with her life. At some point after the mountain roads began, we discovered our mutual love for Simon and Garfunkel, and their nostalgic croon accompanied us the rest of the way through the pines.

Several miles before reaching Genesee Valley, we stopped at Taylorsville, a town with a population of 140 residents that was the last we would pass through before reaching the

campsite. We each had a slice of pie at the homey Hanson's Homemade pie shop before continuing on. We reached the campsite in mid-afternoon by way of an unpaved road. It was situated at the edge of the valley meadow, under a stand of trees that formed the edge of a vast expanse of forest continuing up into the mountains behind us. It was a hot, heavy day, the grass and pine needle layer dry and crisp where we set up our tent. We were some of the first ones there, but others began trickling in as the afternoon wore on. They came in hiking boots and khakis, wide-brimmed hats and flannel. There were about twenty of us by nightfall; more would be arriving in the morning.

The gathering was co-organized by Debbie Franco, OPR's Community and Rural Affairs Advisor and my mentor for the summer. The other organizer was Trina Cunningham, a member of the Mountain Maidu Tribe. Trina has long been active in organizing the Maidu community around water management, promoting adoption of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) in land management planning, and preserving the Maidu culture. Traditional Ecological Knowledge, as I would learn during the gathering, is the knowledge of the environment that indigenous people have acquired over centuries.

Trina and Debbie had known each other for some years through what Debbie calls the "water world," the loose network of people involved in California water management. When Trina came to a conference in Sacramento earlier that year, Debbie asked for her help in bridging the divides between urban, rural, and tribal communities in California around watershed management issues. Trina, who four years earlier had helped to organize a TEK Symposium in Genesee Valley, suggested bringing urban San Francisco and Sacramento-based policymakers up to Genesee Valley. And that's when the idea for the Genesee Valley Gathering was conceived.

They decided to bring state policy-influencers from the Bay Area and Sacramento to the Genesee Valley as a way to reverse the common imbalance of power in policy discussions that favors urban policy makers and excludes others, especially tribal members. Trina and Debbie wanted to build trust between statewide actors, locals, and tribes and to bridge the gap between policymakers and the places and people they would be affecting. Collaboration would be crucial in addressing issues such as restoring healthy forests, using fire as a management technique, funding local water management projects, and increasing tribal representation.

Here in the remote Genesee Valley, the local folks' expertise in these matters would be at the forefront. Here, Debbie said, it was less likely that "the agency folks will see themselves as the . . . gatekeepers." Rather than trying to navigate the world of legal regulations, their energies would be focused on coming up with creative and collaborative solutions to the declining health of forest ecosystems. As Debbie put it, the setting created an "organic community that allows people to shift their social location in relationship to one another and create a space where the conversation can be different".

Indeed, on the first night when we took a moonlit walk through the tall meadow grass to wade in the creek, each person's steps parted a path for the next. When we got lost among the dense brush sheltering the water, we helped each other shine lights and part the branches to find the way. The night closed with formal introductions carried out in the near-dark with the night chill coming on and insects flitting in our faces, a reminder that not one of us could keep at bay the cycle of the world.

The next day began with a welcome from the Maidu elders and a history of the land we stood on. A thread of loss wove together their stories, stories about Genesee's transition from pre-colonial times to the Spanish arrival to becoming the site of mining operations in the mid-1800s to becoming private property and federal land today. They spoke of the porcupines and beavers, wild ginger and huckleberry that once abounded in the forests but were now scarce. They spoke of their language, which only a few elders now remember with any fluency. Trina's late brother, Farrell Cunningham, had gathered knowledge of the language from elders and had taught the Maidu language to younger generations before he passed away [2].

Ben Cunningham, a Maidu elder, spoke slowly and gazed into the distance from under his baseball cap as he conjured his childhood memories of the land. But his tone gained intensity and his gaze directness when he spoke of his tribe's name – the Mountain Maidu. "Maidu", translated literally, simply means "person", and it was a name assigned to the tribe by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. In reality, the Maidu were many communities of native people, including the Yetomato Koyo, who originally inhabited the Genesee Valley. Naming, like map-making, flattened the intricacies of existing cultures and communities. Later, Trina told me that although the closest translation of "Maidu" is "person", the word does not always refer to a human person. There is a word for a human person – *Wona Maidu.* But there are also words for tree people and water people and flower people.

It was with this history in mind, the history of human people and plant people and water people, that we began the official discussion about upper watershed management policy that afternoon. The day was hot and smelled of baking dirt and dried grass as we arrayed ourselves in a circle of chairs in a clearing. I sat in the back, notepad perched on my knee, ready to fulfill

my job as observer and note-taker. We began by brainstorming the qualities important to a healthy watershed and then transitioned to discussing more concrete forest management strategies that can be used to achieve a healthy watershed.

If I had expected the conversation to present me with some cohesive thesis of watershed management needs, that was not the case. My mind could not process fast enough the ways in which each new idea fit in to the web of ideas, and my pen could barely keep up with the flow of comments. The discussion displayed a broad variety of diverse but interconnected interests.

Forest resilience, someone began. The forests should be healthy enough to withstand wildfires and drought and climate change. They should also support the economic wellbeing of local communities, another person added. Perhaps carefully managed forests could support both logging and healthy ecosystems. Perhaps there could be a market for biochar, the carbon-rich product of organic matter burned in low oxygen that can create fertile agricultural soil. The forests should not only provide economic opportunities but also preserve culturally valuable resources, yet another person chimed in.

The Maidu people once relied on the forests for food, including acorns and huckleberries, deer and quail. Trina advocated for ensuring that tribal communities have greater representation in land management policy. Landowners can learn much from tribal knowledge about how to sustainably manage their lands. The Maidu community has a long history of using fire to manage the landscape; they know which plants are rejuvenated by fire and which ones require fire to drop their seeds.

As the watershed priorities and management techniques piled up, people also began to suggest a flurry of strategies for putting them into practice. Jonathan Kusel of the Sierra Institute suggested seeking state funding for forest management projects. Martha Davis of the Inland Empire Utilities Agency and long-time player in California water politics stressed the need to integrate the voices of locals from across California and craft a unified message. Adrian Covert of the Bay Area Council suggested creating channels to share scientific knowledge between upstream and downstream decision makers, and Don Gordon of CalFire proposed piloting local management projects to demonstrate their efficacy. Throughout the discussion, there was an emphasis on enacting statewide change based on local knowledge and action in a bottom-up approach.

One of the forest management strategies the conversation dwelled on was using controlled burning to thin the forest. Trina called fire “one of the greatest tenders of the landscape”. Forests without fire grow too dense, with trees crowding each other out and competing for nutrients and sunlight. This results in smaller, less healthy trees rather than the large, old-growth trees that provide habitat to native animals and plants. In the past, not only were natural wildfires allowed to burn, but indigenous people also started their own controlled fires to limit forest density and restore soil fertility. As native people were displaced from their land, these practices decreased. Later, with the creation of the US Forest Service in the late 1800s, forest fires were purposely suppressed to prevent property damage. Additionally, the California Air Quality Act currently restricts controlled burning because of its potential to release carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. As a result of all these limits on forest fire, the Maidu community and other Genesee Valley locals have seen forest health declining.

There is now a push to bring fire back to the land. This push is a key example of the TEK movement, the movement to treat tribal people as experts and incorporate their traditional ecological knowledge into institutionalized land management. Trina cites the “loss of landscape scale fire” and the loss of a human relationship with the land as the two largest threats to the

upper watershed ecosystem. The former may be remedied by changes in land management policy, but in order for policy to change, the latter must be addressed.

One of the challenges that seemed to underlie the conversation on forest management techniques was identifying the ideal forest in a historical context. Should we be striving for a Sierra Nevada that looks like it did before any European presence? Is that even possible? How do we balance this with the modern demands on forest resources, from paper and timber to water and agricultural land? More broadly – whose interests matter and who holds responsibility?

And that brought to light an even more fundamental question, at least to me: what was my place in all of this?

I was here because I was I was an intern and a note-taker. That put me in a position to observe, and as a college student during the summer before her senior year, I was content to observe everything I could about policymaking. I had recently decided I wanted to pursue environmental policy as a career, though what form this would take and what it would entail I did not know. So to see this form of collaborative policy discussion gave me a whole new perspective on what policymaking could be. Rather than posturing and formal, it was intimate and personal. I saw people forming partnerships, if not friendships, that would last and go on to influence the water and land management landscape of California. Most importantly, people's values, not their roles, were of the foremost importance, and they were willing and open to accepting others' values and stories.

Many themes raised during this gathering recalled an ongoing conversation among environmentalists about what wilderness truly is. Wilderness was originally thought of, and often is still thought of, as a natural space where humans have had no significant effect on the landscape. "Wilderness" in the American West brings to mind virgin forests and towering mountains, untouched, before European or white American settlers came. The prevailing myth is that the indigenous people who lived here hunted and gathered so sparsely that they made no dent on the pristine ecosystems. But the reality is that much of the landscape would have been drastically different if it were not for indigenous people's land management practices such as controlled burnings and strategic food gathering.

Tending the Wild by M. Kat Anderson makes the case that "indigenous land management practices were largely successful in promoting habitat heterogeneity, increasing biodiversity, and maintaining certain vegetation types that would otherwise have undergone successional change" [1]. Anderson explains that the "parklike forests and the grassland habitats" that are considered cornerstones of "wilderness" in the American West would not have existed had indigenous people not managed the lands.

Recently in environmental writing and scholarship, the "pristine wilderness" myth has been challenged by conversation of the importance of indigenous land management practices, such as controlled burning, to the landscape. But it's also important that these academic ideas are given practical implications. The use of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) in land management planning has entered the discourse and played an important role in this Genesee Valley Upper Watershed Gathering. Some of the main questions that those at the meeting were grappling with are: How can our knowledge about the traditional land management practices of indigenous peoples influence our land management plans today? What does "preserving

ecosystems" look like? What ecological ideal do we strive for? What lessons can we learn from traditional ecological knowledge that are applicable today?

The next morning we rose early, just after sunrise, to make breakfast. Over the meal, we began our day's agenda with a discussion of what exactly the term "upper watershed" means. The "upper watershed" had brought us all here, folded us within its valleys, yet it remained unknown and mysterious. Jonathan Kusel from the Sierra Institute and Henry McCann from the Public Policy Institute of California produced maps, each outlining different areas of interest in the upper Sierra Nevada waterways. This discrepancy highlighted the shortcomings of traditional regulatory delineations to encompass the complexity of watershed issues. Particularly important to Debbie in her aim to break down intra-state boundaries was demonstrating that watersheds are not isolated geographies but systems that connect everyone to one another.

Like the shifting morning mist that hazed out the distant hills and dissipated with the rising sun as we ate, the "upper watershed" is an elusive thing that resists definition. It's not so much a defined region on the map but a relational concept. The way Debbie explained it was that the "upper watershed is defined by the lower place you're standing". Everything upriver and of a higher elevation is generally in your upper watershed. It's where the water flows down to reach your tap, your sprinkler heads, your local farm's irrigation, your favorite pond that swells with water and frog-song in the spring. So the Bay Area is in Los Angeles' upper watershed, and Yosemite is in the Bay Area's upper watershed. The term "upper watershed" forces us to place ourselves on the land and then to look around us and see where we're situated. Up in the Genesee Valley, we were more or less in the uppermost of upper watersheds. The valley is part of the highest reaches of the State Water Project, which brings water from Northern California to the arid Southern California.

Later that night, after a dinner of quail, huckleberry sauce, and red lentil curry – a Maidu-fusion cuisine – cooked on the open grill, we built up a roaring bonfire and sat around it long into the night until it had burned itself to coals. The glow of the fire and the darkness outside its circle of light invited old words out into the open.

Trina spoke of the Maidu language and recited some of the words she knew. *Babum-chom* she said, words formed like perfect smooth pebbles. *Babum-chom* is the Maidu word for the pine tree. Literally, it means "the tree that splits the wind". And indeed, the pine trees around us were splitting the wind that breezed through our camp. It was a light wind tonight, a fresh and cold wind that carried earthy, mysterious smells from the forest. In the forest ecosystem, pine trees split the wind for oaks and other trees; they are towering sources of shelter and this is reflected in their name. In this way, the Maidu language demonstrates its ability to contain and transmit ecological information through generations.

Language not only reveals what a culture knows about the world but how it positions itself in the world. If the English language were to have words for tree people, flower people, and water people as the Maidu language does, would the English-speaking world consider its relationship with nature differently? Would we view humans as separate from pristine nature if we did not have the word "wilderness"? In *Tending the Wild,* Anderson explains that many native Californian languages do not have a word for "wilderness" because "California Indians did not distinguish between managed land and wild land as we do today" (Anderson 3). Indeed,

Trina confirmed that the Maidu language has no word for "wilderness". To the Maidu, all land is land that has a relationship with humans.

As the fire shriveled down to embers and people began to melt off into the dark in the direction of their tents, the whole gathering began to feel like a dream. Perhaps when the morning broke the enchantment would be gone with the night. As people prepared to head back to their spheres of the world, they would pick up their titles again and gather their reserve around themselves. The organic community that had sprung up in three days would be gone, leaving this piece of forest and meadow to mend the furrows of our cars and tents.

I myself would return to downtown Sacramento, to my windowless cubicle in the basement of OPR. And there, in what seemed a world apart from the Genesee Valley, I would try to ignore the *ding* of email and text alerts and transcribe the notes from the meeting. I would summarize them, bullet-point them, flow-chart them, try to crystallize the key messages from the meeting and outline next steps, all the while trying to recall the essential feeling of being under pine trees in the mountains. The language of policymaking imposed by the grey air-conditioned office felt inadequate. It could not convey the scent of warm dirt, the trickle of distant water, the feeling of hazy mountains that were already an ephemeral memory. But as I sent the notes in a follow-up email to all the participants, I hoped that the strength of that memory would fuel their resolve to maintain the collaboration and take action.

For my part, would be coming out of the summer with a new sense of what policymaking could and should be – true engagement with the people and places that it affects. I've always had a weakness for good stories, and here was a story to tell. The story of strangers who meet in the woods and part ways again, a little bit changed. The story of people who belong to the land and call for others to love it too. Our proximity to the mountains and forest during those three days allowed a new consciousness of the land and its ancient relationship with humans to develop. It allowed new stories that would not normally be included in a policy discussion to surface, for the stories of water and land in California are interwoven with the stories of the people who depend on them. The stories impart on us a responsibility to the land and to each other – a vital dimension of environmental policy.

At the close of the meeting, the participants had expressed the need to approach the issue of upper watershed management from multiple, interconnected approaches. One was capacity-building, creating coalitions of locals and tribal members who would collaborate with other rural landowners and tribes from across the state to consolidate political power. Another was on-the-ground land management whereby local landowners in collaboration with tribal members would start piloting small-scale sustainable land management practice incorporating TEK. They would also need a funding mechanism, whether through grants or tax money dedicated to upper watershed management. Finally, there would be an educational outreach component to express to the rest of California that the health of the upper watersheds is critical to their wellbeing.

Since the meeting, Trina has continued to work on amplifying tribes' voices within state policy and facilitating collaborative cultural preservation. When I spoke with her over the phone in May this year, she was in the middle of organizing a Big Time, a social gathering of tribes of the Sierra Nevada. She's also working to organize a tribal forum for California tribes to be held in July. In all her work, she strives to create systems by which tribes from across California can consolidate political power to achieve common goals and to share and preserve their culture. "It's important for us to re-identify [our goals] together so that the work we're doing isn't splitting us apart," she told me. "[We must] more effectively partner and provide leadership in ecology."

As I sat in my swivel chair in the OPR basement sending emails, I thought back to the second day of the gathering, the day of the hailstorm.

Right after our afternoon discussion, we had taken to huddling close in the dusty shade of the trees to escape the sun. When clouds began to materialize as a haze between the mountains and the sky, I hoped they'd provide some relief from the relentless heat of the day. But as they thickened into a grey muffler above the valley, they seemed to trap heat and moisture so that it was not only hot but stiflingly muggy. We languished on the picnic chairs, trying to distract each other with small talk. I spoke with Abby and Adrian about east coast bars and west coast saloons. Our words came out damp, forced from our heavy lungs.

The first few raindrops were a revelation. As one, we looked up past the canopy of pine boughs to the heavy grey sky that poured first a sprinkle then a torrent down on us. We ran for cover and huddled close to trunks of trees where the branches overhead were wide and sheltering. But still the rain poured down, streaming down our faces so that we blinked at each other through a grey, wet veil.

And then the rain hardened and there was hail. Small, hard nubs of ice clung to our hair, dusted our shoulders, and formed a white carpet over the pine needles on the ground. The world was transformed. We were on a grey, grey planet of ice. The temperature had dropped 20 degrees and now we stood cold and shivering in t-shirts. We yelled over the downpour, "Can you believe this?" "No, it's crazy!" Each ice grain that pelted us shocked us into a fierce attention to the world.

Eventually the rain and hail subsided, and we moved cautiously together out from under our pine bough shelters, lest the torrent start again. As the last rains drizzled themselves out, we wordlessly gathered by the great grill and rigged up a canopy covering it, creating a makeshift kitchen. We began to cook dinner together, each falling into a rhythm of vegetable cutting and sauce stirring.

Within thirty minutes, the evening sun was shining and the ice melted into the cushion of pine needles, into the soil, seeping into the groundwater or joining the river. Perhaps it was my imagination but it seemed that the sound of the creek had grown just the slightest bit louder as though swelled by the half-hour downpour. Its distant swish sounded full and satiated as it mingled with the whisper of the grass, heavy with moisture.

The hailstorm was what Debbie called a “watershed moment”. We’d witnessed the world showing its hand and for a moment were united by awe.