

# Missing and Murdered Native Women and Girls

## National Statistics

### Violence against American Indian/Alaska Native Women

Compared to all other races, they are...

**2.5x** as likely to experience violent crimes

**2x** more likely to experience rape or sexual assault crimes

### 1.5 million women

More than **4/5** AI/AK Native women experienced violence in their lifetime



### Homicide

#3 leading cause of death among 10 - 24 year olds

#5 leading cause of death among 25 - 34 year olds



**40%** Victims of sex trafficking are identified as AI/AK Native women

### National Crime Information Center Missing and Unidentified Person 2020 Statistics

**4244**  
0-20 year olds

**1049**  
21+ year olds

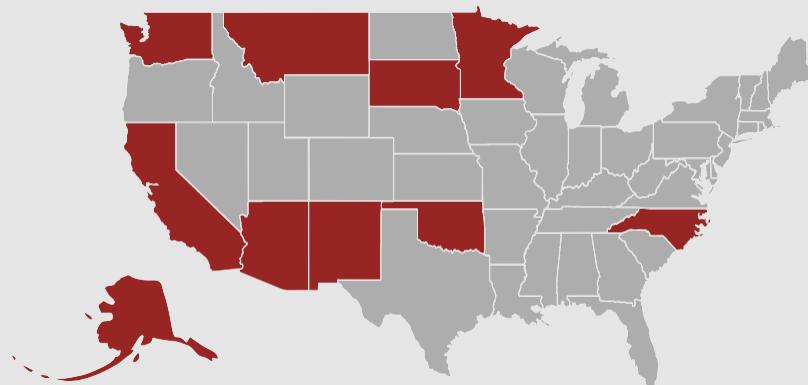


**578**

cases still open at end of 2020

**690\*** were logged into the federal database

### Top 10 states with highest number of MMIWG cases \*\*



\* (NamUS, as of 12-1-20) \*\* (NamUS, as of 8-1-21)

2020 NCIC statistics from [www.fbi.gov/file-repository/2020-ncic-missing-person-and-unidentified-person-statistics.pdf](http://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/2020-ncic-missing-person-and-unidentified-person-statistics.pdf)

**2020 National Crime Information Center (NCIC) Missing Person and Unidentified Person Statistics  
Pursuant to the Requirements of the Crime Control Act of 1990, Pub. L. No. 101-647, 104 Stat. 4789**

**2020 NCIC MISSING AND UNIDENTIFIED PERSON  
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## **NCIC MISSING PERSON FILE**

The NCIC's Missing Person File was implemented in 1975. Records in the Missing Person File are retained indefinitely, until the individual is located, or the record is canceled by the entering agency. The Missing Person File contains records for individuals reported missing who:

- Have a proven physical or mental disability (Disability – EMD).
- Are missing under circumstances indicating that they may be in physical danger (Endangered – EME).
- Are missing after a catastrophe (Catastrophe Victim – EMV).
- Are missing under circumstances indicating their disappearance may not have been voluntary (Involuntary – EMI).
- Are under the age of 21 and do not meet the above criteria (Juvenile – EMJ).
- Are 21 and older and do not meet any of the above criteria but for whom there is a reasonable concern for their safety (Other – EMO).

As of December 31, 2020, NCIC contained 89,637 active missing person records. Juveniles under the age of 18 account for 30,396 (34 percent) of the records and 38,869 (43 percent) of the records when juveniles are defined as under 21 years of age\*

During 2020, there were 543,018 missing person records entered into NCIC. Missing Person records purged during the same period totaled 480,832. Reasons for these removals include: a law enforcement agency located the subject; the individual returned home; or the record had to be removed by the entering agency due to a determination that the record is invalid.

The Missing Person Circumstances (MPC) field is optional and has been available since July 1999 when the NCIC 2000 upgrade became operational. Of the 543,018 records entered in 2020; the MPC field was utilized in 259,802 (48 percent). When the MPC field was utilized in 2020 entries; 246,310 (94.80 percent) were coded as Runaway; 2,593 (1 percent) as Abducted by Non-custodial Parent; 276 (.11 percent) as Abducted by Stranger; and 10,623 (4.09 percent) as Adult – Federally required entry.

*\*This fulfills requirements as set forth in the Crime Control Act of 1990, Pub. L. No. 101-647, 104 Stat. 4789, which requires the Attorney General to publish a statistical summary of reports of missing children. In 2003, Suzanne's Law amended this Act by changing the age of mandatory missing person record entry from under 18 to under 21 years of age. See 34 U.S.C. § 41307 (a).*

## **2020 MISSING PERSON ACTIVITY**

ACTIVE ENTRIES AS OF 12/31/2020	89,637
TOTAL FILE TRANSACTIONS	1,658,818
ENTRIES - Records entered do not include supplemental record entry messages which are used to add specific identifiers, including dental, to a Missing Person (MP) record on file in NCIC.	543,018
CANCELED & CLEARED - Total of removed canceled and cleared messages received by NCIC. Excluded are counts of supplemental records cancellation messages which are used to remove specific identifiers, including dental data, from a MP record.	480,832
LOCATES (LM) - Transactions to remove entries when the subject has been found by an agency other than the entering agency.	60,040
MODIFIED (MM) - Transactions used to add, delete, or change data in records.	343,311
ENTRIES OF SUPPLEMENTAL DATA (EMN- entry of supplemental data, EMP- entry person with information (PWI), EMPN - entry PWI supplemental data) - Counts of supplemental dental entry and cancellation messages are not available by individual files, as multiple files utilize the same message keys; ED - Enter Dental, CD - Cancel Dental, and MD - Modify supplemental Dental. System-wide, 19,640 Dental Records were entered in 2020.	194,196
CANCELED SUPPLEMENTAL (XMN)	5,472
QUERIED MISSING PERSON FILE ONLY (QM) - Agencies inquire on a record for information.	31,949
QUERIED NCIC SYSTEM-WIDE BY NAME (ALL QWs and ZWs)	1,640,640,342

## 2020 MISSING PERSON ENTRY/PURGED TRANSACTIONS

	ENTRY							PURGE						
	JUV	END	INV	DIS	CAT	OTHER	MONTHLY	JUV	END	INV	DIS	CAT	OTHER	MONTHLY
JAN	33,435	3,619	1,217	2,509	11	9,575	50,366	34,453	3,700	1,153	2,536	12	9,799	51,653
FEB	32,999	3,219	1,112	2,481	11	8,863	48,685	33,073	3,301	1,212	2,437	8	8,683	48,714
MAR	36,557	3,446	1,191	2,664	13	9,379	53,250	35,427	3,461	1,188	2,766	9	9,329	52,180
APR	28,970	2,909	942	2,247	18	8,134	43,220	29,124	2,956	946	2,266	15	8,259	43,566
MAY	27,822	3,345	1,065	2,382	20	9,050	43,684	27,354	3,296	1,003	2,385	16	8,917	42,971
JUN	25,900	3,682	1,164	2,526	21	9,654	42,947	26,042	3,567	1,149	2,445	19	9,225	42,447
JUL	27,265	3,774	1,147	2,728	20	10,657	45,591	27,256	3,760	1,155	2,717	20	10,254	45,162
AUG	27,349	3,986	1,178	2,627	20	10,219	45,379	27,100	3,888	1,142	2,598	19	9,986	44,733
SEP	28,586	3,632	1,193	2,473	100	9,667	45,651	28,520	3,643	1,190	2,406	92	9,401	45,252
OCT	28,346	3,686	1,107	2,424	18	9,564	45,145	28,263	3,655	1,122	2,516	28	9,402	44,986
NOV	26,569	3,216	938	2,112	8	8,713	41,556	26,242	3,252	955	2,063	11	8,423	40,946
DEC	22,439	3,153	981	2,019	19	8,933	37,544	23,300	3,092	901	2,078	16	8,875	38,262
YEARLY	346,237	41,667	13,235	29,192	279	112,408	543,018	346,154	41,571	13,116	29,213	265	110,553	540,872

Entry - Number of records entered during the month.

Purge - Number of records canceled/cleared/located during the month but entered from any time.

JUV/EMJ - Entry of a person under age 21 who is missing and does not meet any of the entry criteria set forth in the other categories.

END/EME - Entry of a person of any age who is missing under circumstances indicating that their physical safety may be in danger.

INV/EMI - Entry of any age person who is missing under circumstances indicated that the disappearance may not have been voluntary; i.e., abduction/kidnapping.

DIS/EMD - A person of any age who is missing and under proven physical/mental disability or is senile, thereby, subjecting themselves or others to personal and immediate danger.

CAT/EMV - A person of any age who is missing after a catastrophe.

OTHER/EMO - A person over age 21 not meeting criteria for entry in any other category, who is missing and from whom there is a reasonable concern for their safety.

## 2020 MISSING PERSON ENTRY BY AGE/SEX/RACE

Individuals Age 0 to 17 and Age 18 and Over															
	FEMALE					MALE					UNK				
AGE	ASIAN	BLACK	INDIAN	UNK	WHITE*	ASIAN	BLACK	INDIAN	UNK	WHITE*	ASIAN	BLACK	INDIAN	UNK	WHITE*
0-17	2,984	70,754	4,128	6,741	112,879	2,376	62,275	2,932	5,698	94,526	0	16	2	18	19
18+	2,305	19,545	1,165	2,187	46,056	3,107	29,874	1,336	3,572	68,147	0	3	2	7	10

Individuals Age 0 to 20 and Age 21 and Over															
	FEMALE					MALE					UNK				
AGE	ASIAN	BLACK	INDIAN	UNK	WHITE*	ASIAN	BLACK	INDIAN	UNK	WHITE*	ASIAN	BLACK	INDIAN	UNK	WHITE*
0-20	3,249	75,679	4,244	7,236	118,967	2,621	66,519	3,050	6,136	100,421	0	18	2	19	23
21+	2,040	14,620	1,049	1,692	39,968	2,862	25,630	1,218	3,134	62,252	0	1	2	6	6

Unknown Age - No Date of Birth Provided**															
	FEMALE					MALE					UNK				
UNK AGE	ASIAN	BLACK	INDIAN	UNK	WHITE*	ASIAN	BLACK	INDIAN	UNK	WHITE*	ASIAN	BLACK	INDIAN	UNK	WHITE*
NO DOB	0	34	2	10	94	4	47	8	27	128	0	0	0	0	0

ALL AGES															
	FEMALE					MALE					UNK				
AGE	ASIAN	BLACK	INDIAN	UNK	WHITE*	ASIAN	BLACK	INDIAN	UNK	WHITE*	ASIAN	BLACK	INDIAN	UNK	WHITE*
ALL	5,289	90,333	5,295	8,938	159,029	5,487	92,196	4,276	9,297	162,801	0	19	4	25	29

ENTRY SUMMARY					
AGE	JUV	ADULT	ALL	ENTRIES WITH NO DOB	TOTAL ENTRIES
0-17	365,348	177,316	542,664	354	543,018
0-20	388,184	154,480	542,664	354	543,018

\* Race White - Includes Hispanic

\*\* Date of Birth is a conditional field, not mandatory, for the entry of a missing person.

## 2020 MISSING PERSON ENTRY BY CATEGORY/AGE/SEX

Individuals Age 0 to 17 and Age 18 and Over																		
	FEMALE						MALE						UNK					
AGE	JUV	END	INV	DIS	CAT	OTHER	JUV	END	INV	DIS	CAT	OTHER	JUV	END	INV	DIS	CAT	OTHER
0-17	186,823	4,523	2,200	2,232	28	1,680	158,158	4,083	2,278	1,874	27	1,387	31	23	1	0	0	0
18+	613	12,761	4,115	9,214	83	44,472	605	20,235	4,618	15,836	138	64,604	0	3	0	7	0	12

Individuals Age 0 to 20 and Age 21 and Over																		
	FEMALE						MALE						UNK					
AGE	JUV	END	INV	DIS	CAT	OTHER	JUV	END	INV	DIS	CAT	OTHER	JUV	END	INV	DIS	CAT	OTHER
0-20	187,429	6,056	3,858	3,248	32	8,752	158,739	5,680	3,333	2,980	38	7,977	31	24	1	1	0	5
21+	7	11,228	2,457	8,198	79	37,400	24	18,638	3,563	14,730	127	58,014	0	2	0	6	0	7

Unknown Age - No Date of Birth Provided*																		
UNK AGE	FEMALE						MALE						UNK					
NO DOB	JUV	END	INV	DIS	CAT	OTHER	JUV	END	INV	DIS	CAT	OTHER	JUV	END	INV	DIS	CAT	OTHER
NO DOB	0	28	7	18	0	87	0	37	17	23	3	134	0	0	0	0	0	0

All Ages																		
	FEMALE						MALE						UNK					
AGE	JUV	END	INV	DIS	CAT	OTHER	JUV	END	INV	DIS	CAT	OTHER	JUV	END	INV	DIS	CAT	OTHER
ALL	187,436	17,312	6,322	11,464	111	46,239	158,763	24,355	6,913	17,733	168	66,125	31	26	1	7	0	12

LEGEND	
JUV	Juvenile
END	Endangered
INV	Involuntary
DIS	Disability
CAT	Catastrophe Victim
OTHER	Other

\* Date of Birth is a conditional field, not mandatory, for the entry of a missing person.

## 2020 MISSING PERSON ENTRY BY CATEGORY WITH BREAKDOWN BY SEX/RACE

<b>JUVENILE</b>					
	<b>ASIAN</b>	<b>BLACK</b>	<b>INDIAN</b>	<b>UNK</b>	<b>WHITE*</b>
<b>FEMALE</b>	2,842	66,879	3,965	6,085	107,665
<b>MALE</b>	2,245	58,838	2,837	5,141	89,702
<b>UNK</b>	0	10	2	5	14
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>5,087</b>	<b>125,727</b>	<b>6,804</b>	<b>11,231</b>	<b>197,381</b>

<b>ENDANGERED</b>					
	<b>ASIAN</b>	<b>BLACK</b>	<b>INDIAN</b>	<b>UNK</b>	<b>WHITE*</b>
<b>FEMALE</b>	374	4,194	356	685	11,703
<b>MALE</b>	494	5,596	347	950	16,968
<b>UNK</b>	0	6	0	14	6
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>868</b>	<b>9,796</b>	<b>703</b>	<b>1,649</b>	<b>28,677</b>

<b>INVOLUNTARY</b>					
	<b>ASIAN</b>	<b>BLACK</b>	<b>INDIAN</b>	<b>UNK</b>	<b>WHITE*</b>
<b>FEMALE</b>	107	2,801	102	523	2,789
<b>MALE</b>	108	2,948	78	521	3,258
<b>UNK</b>	0	0	0	0	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>215</b>	<b>5,749</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>1,044</b>	<b>6,048</b>

<b>DISABILITY</b>					
	<b>ASIAN</b>	<b>BLACK</b>	<b>INDIAN</b>	<b>UNK</b>	<b>WHITE*</b>
<b>FEMALE</b>	335	4,383	107	194	6,445
<b>MALE</b>	425	6,408	150	394	10,356
<b>UNK</b>	0	1	0	4	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>760</b>	<b>10,792</b>	<b>257</b>	<b>592</b>	<b>16,803</b>

<b>CATASTROPHE VICTIM</b>					
	<b>ASIAN</b>	<b>BLACK</b>	<b>INDIAN</b>	<b>UNK</b>	<b>WHITE*</b>
<b>FEMALE</b>	2	10	0	6	93
<b>MALE</b>	6	25	1	7	129
<b>UNK</b>	0	0	0	0	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>222</b>

<b>OTHER</b>					
	<b>ASIAN</b>	<b>BLACK</b>	<b>INDIAN</b>	<b>UNK</b>	<b>WHITE*</b>
<b>FEMALE</b>	1,629	12,066	765	1,445	30,334
<b>MALE</b>	2,209	18,381	863	2,284	42,388
<b>UNK</b>	0	2	2	2	6
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>3,838</b>	<b>30,449</b>	<b>1,630</b>	<b>3,731</b>	<b>72,728</b>

<b>LEGEND</b>	
JUV	Juvenile
END	Endangered
INV	Involuntary
DIS	Disability
CAT	Catastrophe Victim
OTHER	Other

\* Race White - includes Hispanic



## 2020 END-OF-YEAR ACTIVE MISSING PERSON RECORD COUNT BY SEX/RACE

END-OF-YEAR ACTIVE MISSING PERSON RECORD COUNT					
	ASIAN	BLACK	INDIAN	UNK	WHITE*
FEMALE	927	13,899	578	4,182	20,990
MALE	1,108	14,302	918	5,004	27,720
UNK	0	2	0	3	4
TOTAL	<b>2,035</b>	<b>28,203</b>	<b>1,496</b>	<b>9,189</b>	<b>48,714</b>

## **NCIC UNIDENTIFIED PERSON FILE**

NCIC's Unidentified Person File came online in 1983. Records are retained indefinitely, unless removed by the entering agency. The Unidentified Person File contains records of:

- Unidentified deceased person (Deceased – EUD).
- Person of any age who are living and unable to determine their identity (Living – EUL).
- Unidentified catastrophe victims (Catastrophe Victim – EUV).

As of December 31, 2020, there were 8,284 unidentified person records in the NCIC. During 2020, there were 800 unidentified person records entered into the NCIC.\*\* The records entered in 2020 consisted of 530 (66 percent) deceased unidentified bodies, 12 (2 percent) unidentified catastrophe victims, and 258 (32 percent) living persons who could not ascertain their identity. In 2020, 704 records were canceled or cleared by the entering agency for reasons such as the remains being identified or the record being invalid.

\* Race White - includes Hispanic

\*\*Use of the Unidentified Person File is voluntary

## 2020 UNIDENTIFIED PERSON CATEGORY COUNTS

	DECEASED			CATASTROPHE VICTIM			LIVING			TOTAL	TOTAL	TOTAL
	ACTIVE	ENTRY	CANCEL	ACTIVE	ENTRY	CANCEL	ACTIVE	ENTRY	CANCEL	ACTIVE	ENTRY	CANCEL
JAN	7,979	37	45	33	2	1	169	25	25	8,181	64	71
FEB	7,991	44	32	34	1	0	167	12	14	8,192	57	46
MAR	7,993	42	40	35	1	0	166	27	28	8,194	70	68
APR	8,005	40	28	36	1	0	164	11	13	8,205	52	41
MAY	8,024	52	33	36	0	0	169	23	18	8,229	75	51
JUN	8,028	50	46	38	3	1	170	15	14	8,236	68	61
JUL	8,055	57	30	38	1	1	172	10	8	8,265	68	39
AUG	8,054	41	42	38	1	1	169	26	29	8,261	68	72
SEP	8,056	47	45	38	2	2	174	31	26	8,268	80	73
OCT	8,061	52	47	37	0	1	181	40	33	8,279	92	81
NOV	8,079	39	21	37	0	0	188	24	17	8,304	63	38
DEC	8,088	29	20	37	0	0	159	14	43	8,284	43	63
Y-T-D	8,088	530	429	37	12	7	159	258	268	8,284	800	704

Entry - Number of entries entered during the month.

Cancel - Number of entries canceled/cleared during the month but entered from any time period.

Deceased - A person who is no longer living for whom the identity cannot be ascertained. This category also includes body parts when a body has been dismembered.

Catastrophe victim - A person who is a victim of a catastrophe for whom the identity cannot be ascertained or body parts when a body has been dismembered as the results of a catastrophe.

Living - A person who is living and unable to ascertain his/her identity, e.g., amnesia victim, infant. The information on unidentified living persons should only be included if the person gives his/her consent or if they are physically or mentally unable to give consent.

Total File Transactions – The sum of entered and canceled transactions.

## **NCIC MISSING AND UNIDENTIFIED PERSON CONTACT INFORMATION**

The Criminal Justice Information Services (CJIS) Division, Global Law Enforcement Support Section, NCIC Operations & Policy Unit, NCIC Investigative and Operational Assistance Group (IOAG), distributes monthly NCIC extracts, the Missing Person Active/Expired Analysis, and the Unidentified Person Active/Expired Analysis to each CJIS Systems Officer and/or to the agency in the state that has been designated as a point of contact.

The IOAG routinely responds to requests for nationwide statistics from law enforcement agencies and the media concerning the NCIC Missing Person and Unidentified Person Files for public release.

The monthly statistics are calculated to address the most frequently requested data. Archived statistics are available upon request.

If you have any questions or need further assistance, please contact the IOAG via email, at [ioau@fbi.gov](mailto:ioau@fbi.gov).

[https://www.montereycountyweekly.com/news/cover/the-esselen-tribe-formerly-landless-was-once-declared-extinct-now-they-re-a-big-sur/article\\_9211458c-fd62-11ec-9418-1fdb3f6d5b09.html](https://www.montereycountyweekly.com/news/cover/the-esselen-tribe-formerly-landless-was-once-declared-extinct-now-they-re-a-big-sur/article_9211458c-fd62-11ec-9418-1fdb3f6d5b09.html)

CENTERPIECE

Back to the Land

## The Esselen Tribe, formerly landless, was once declared extinct. Now they're a Big Sur property owner at the forefront of a movement.

Sara Rubin

Jul 7, 2022



Members of the Esselen Tribe host staff from the Big Sur Land Trust on the land. The nonprofit has provided technical assistance, including hiring a firm to conduct an environmental assessment.

DANIEL DREIFUSS

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From the top of Bixby Mountain, nearly 3,000 feet tall, the landscape of Big Sur unfolds like corduroy. Deep redwood-lined canyons are carved into the earth in every direction, and to the west is the expanse of the Pacific Ocean.

This peak was named for Charles Bixby, who arrived here in 1875. And according to a real estate listing a few years ago, this place was “originally settled” by Bixby. In the timeline of that story of this land, it was Bixby – who developed a successful mill and a landing to ship lumber at the mouth of the canyon below – who got here first. A Swedish man named Axel Adler bought the land known as Rancho Aguila starting in 1950, and it became known as Adler Ranch.

But there is an entirely different timeline if you use a different starting point. It wasn't Western settlers who settled this mountaintop first. It was Indigenous people, thousands of years prior. By the time Charles Bixby was born in 1836, Spanish missionaries had systematically destroyed Indigenous communities. A generation later, in 1902, anthropologist Alfred Kroeber visited Central California. “The Costanoan group,” Kroeber wrote in 1925, referring to Indigenous communities using the Spanish term, “is extinct so far as all practical purposes are concerned.”

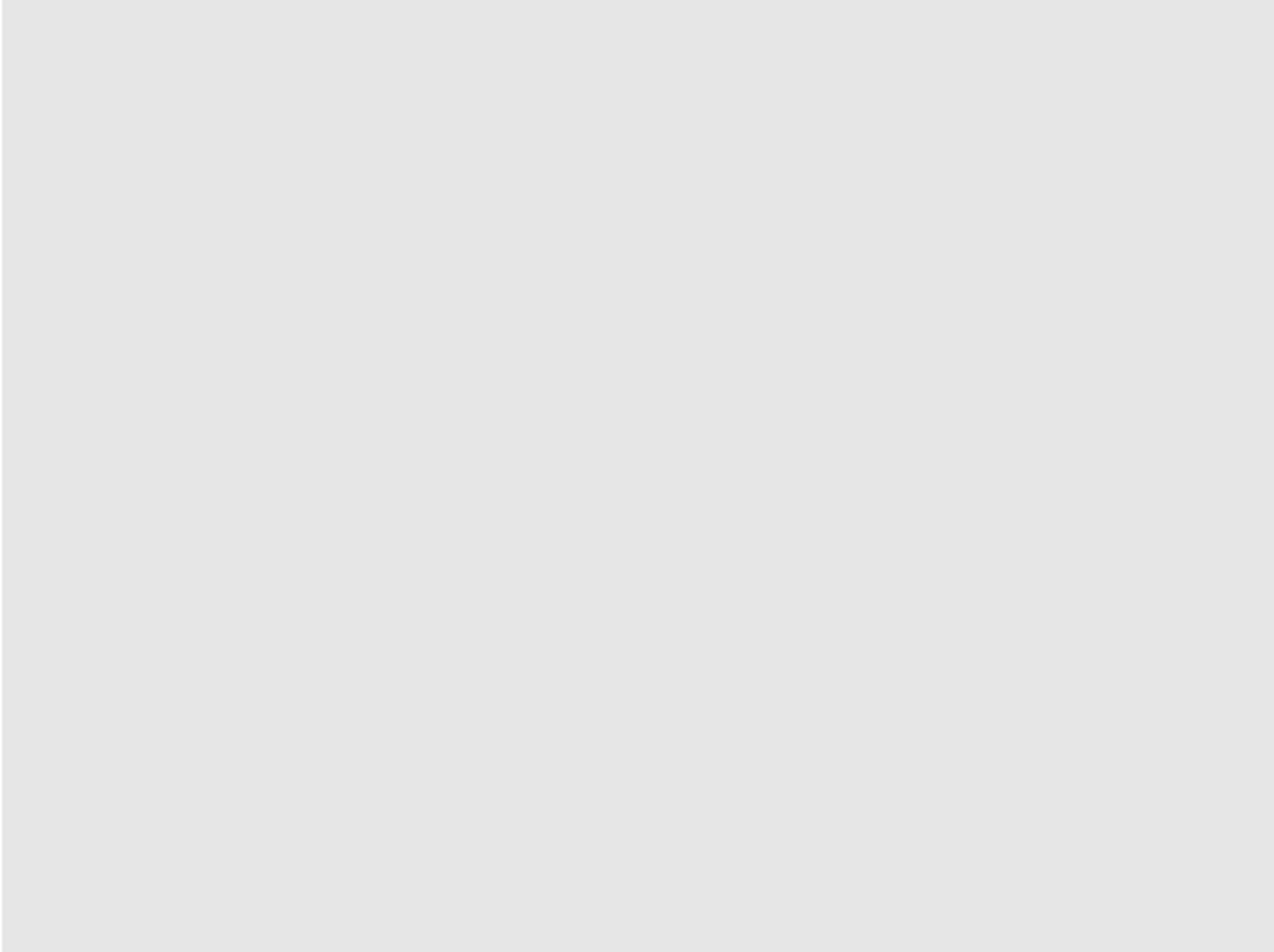
But the people who lived here more than 8,000 years ago are not extinct. And today, they call this land their own.

Before it was Adler Ranch and before it was Rancho Aguila, this place was called Sargenta-Ruc, a Rumsen word for the district here. Today, for the first time, the Esselen Tribe owns this land in Sargenta-Ruc – the land where their creation myth begins.

But unlike that story, which features a coyote, hummingbird, eagle, tick and sand flea, this land – and the property deed – is not a myth. And this place represents a return of land to a landless people who were once proclaimed extinct.

“Every time I come up here, it's still: Am I dreaming, or is this real?” says Tom Little Bear Nason, chair of the Esselen Tribe.

Vice chair Cari Herthel says: “It's not just a story, it's not just a myth. It's very real for us.”



Tom Little Bear Nason plays his flute for a baby named Kit Coyote on the land formerly called Sargenta-Ruc. “When I am playing it I am praying it,” Nason says of the flute. “The sound travels across the mountains.”

DANIEL DREIFUSS

**THE REALITY OF THE ESSELEN TRIBE OWNING THIS LAND WAS A DREAM STARTING SOME 30 YEARS AGO**, Nason says. He grew up in Tassajara, and he got to know Adler by riding horses and Jeeps on the property. Adler fell in love with Big Sur and lived a rustic life on the property – his house never had plumbing. He hiked the property and picked up hitchhikers to share Big Sur with them. He loved dancing and used to host big parties. At one point, Nason says, Adler spoke about giving the land to the Esselen Tribe, but there was no organized entity – no federally recognized tribe, no nonprofit or corporation – that was prepared to receive it.

In 1965, Adler deeded the property one-fifth each to his five children, but he continued to spend extended periods on Adler Ranch. He died on June 20, 2004, and his ashes were scattered on the land he loved.

After he died, a tax saga to sort out those one-fifth shares ensued and his family listed the property for sale. At one point, they were seeking \$15 million for 1,119 acres. “I have never seen a better opportunity to own a national treasure,” the Sotheby’s listing agent wrote. “The property includes meadows cascading over a thousand feet into a huge canyon with the power of the Grand Canyon and stunning mountain peaks jetting skyward with Pico Blanco commanding the southern view and a bowl of jagged mountains at the headwaters to the east.”

Multiple offers fell through over the years. At some point, shortly after he joined the staff of the Western Rivers Conservancy in 2015, California Program Director Peter Colby heard about the Adler Ranch. With a mile of the north fork of the Little Sur River – prime steelhead habitat – flowing through it, it was in alignment with the Portland-based nonprofit’s motto: “Sometimes to save a river, you have to buy it.”

Western Rivers does just that – buy rivers – then give them to someone else. In the case of Adler Ranch, the entity that Colby had in mind to give it to was the U.S. Forest Service.

“We were under contract,” Colby says. “Then we learned that local homeowners were vituperatively opposed to the Forest Service acquiring this particular property.”

That opposition came from organized groups like the Community Association of Big Sur and Fire Safe Council For Monterey County, and from dozens of residents. They were concerned about a few things public ownership by the Forest Service might mean: more traffic on Palo Colorado Road, more visitors potentially starting campfires and trespassing, and whether the Forest Service would maintain a critical 1.6-mile fire break on the property, protecting the Palo Colorado community. In 2017, dozens of people – including Palo Colorado homeowners who’d lost everything in the Soberanes Fire – signed a petition asking U.S. Rep. Jimmy Panetta and then-senators Kamala Harris and Dianne Feinstein to oppose the deal.

“The USFS does not have the means to maintain the land they are already responsible for in Big Sur,” one Pfeiffer Ridge resident wrote. “Acquiring more private property like this and turning it over to the USFS does not help the land or the people. The money should be used to support the land they already own.”

For a while, Colby thought the tide might turn. He reached out to community members and attended a meeting of the Big Sur Multi-Agency Advisory Council. “I was roundly pilloried,” he says.



But when he sensed that the local congressman (Panetta) would not support acquisition by a federal agency (the Forest Service), he thought it was over. The Western Rivers Conservancy terminated the contract and walked away.

Colby had met Nason, one of few supporters, at a meeting. Months passed before Colby called to suggest they meet. In June of 2018, California voters approved Prop. 68, a \$4.1 billion bond for parks, environment and water projects. A portion of funding, \$30 million, was earmarked for Native American groups – and Colby saw a new path forward. If Western Rivers Conservancy could support the Esselen Tribe and help secure Prop. 68 funds and provide real estate expertise to make the deal go through, maybe the tribe – not the Forest Service – could ultimately own the property.

The Esselen Tribe incorporated as a 501(c)(3) for the purpose of holding title to the land. The California Department of Natural Resources granted \$4.52 million to the nonprofit. The Adler family agreed to sell the property to the tribe for \$4.3 million, and they [closed in July of 2020](#).

And for one year, nobody from the Esselen Tribe visited the place. Instead, they let it rest and prayed for the land.

**THE APPROACH TO THE LAND IS ROUGH.** First, it requires getting past the locked gate on Palo Colorado Road in Big Sur, which has been closed to public traffic for over five years due to slides. The pavement, what's left of it, ends at Bottcher's Gap, about eight miles up from Highway 1. To get to the land, a final half-mile requires an ATV or a four-wheel drive truck to get up the steep grade. It's advisable to carry a chainsaw – there might be fallen limbs on the road, and with a dropoff, there's no alternate route.

It's a picture-perfect day a little over a year after the tribe bought the property, with a brilliant blue sky and the ocean shimmering in the distance. Nason is leading the first tour for tribal members, who are here from as near as down the road and as far as Idaho. As if on a cue, a condor glides by below the group as they arrive in a caravan of trucks and ATVs on a ridge that offers the first breathtaking views.

“Welcome to your land,” Nason tells the group of about a dozen Esselen Tribe members.

“It feels pretty incredible,” Herthel says. “To be here is so *rich*, to be able to stand in remembrance. It's hard to put it into words. It's the capacity to demonstrate the resilience of our ancestry; that resiliency is ever present.

“I represent the women and children and wounds of the past. After missionization and colonization, that we are standing here is sacred. This is a sacred moment.”

Herthel whispers to a 6-month-old baby girl named Kit Coyote Condon, the youngest known Esselen descendant at the moment: “Look at that sacred mountain. That’s *your* mountain.”

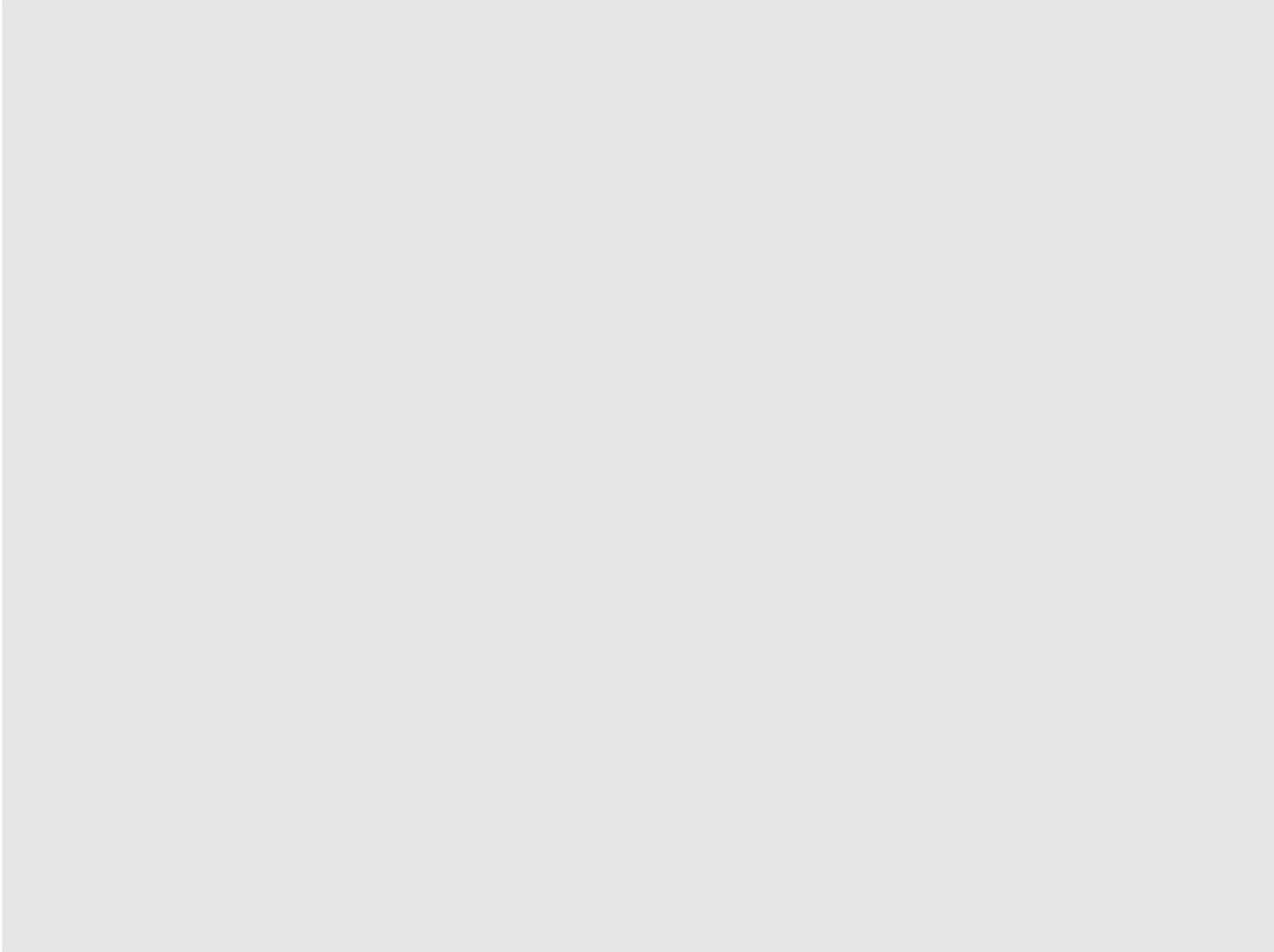
Pico Blanco, called Pixchi, juts upward, a triangular white peak. From this angle, looking south, it resembles a turtle – its shell is the peak, and you can see its little legs and head and tail. This is Turtle Island, the place where the creation myth is set; the world was flooded except for that peak when people were made.

Looking west offers a clear view of the notch in Ventana Double Cone – what the Esselen call the window, a gateway for souls to move to the spirit world.

“This is the center of our tribal Esselen universe,” Nason says.

Stephen Arévalo, 35, has spent the past 15 years tapping into his Indigenous heritage. “It ties into everything,” he says. “Being here is powerful – next-level supernatural.” He says he’s dreamed of this place before, this particular overlook on Mescal Ridge, without having ever seen it before.

Unlike Arévalo, Kit Coyote will grow up her entire life knowing her Indigenous story, and having land to call her own.



The 1,119-acre property, formerly known as Adler Ranch and Rancho Aguila, includes deed restrictions limiting development to two modest structures.

DANIEL DREIFUSS

**NASON PLAYS A CEREMONIAL FLUTE WITH A BEAR CARVED INTO IT**, made for him in 1992 by fellow tribal members. That year he traveled to Washington, D.C. and played it inside the U.S. Capitol. The Esselen Tribe, that same year, filed a letter of intent with the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs seeking federal tribal recognition. So did the Ohlone/Costanoan-Esselen Nation (OCEN).

Federal recognition for tribes comes with certain benefits that only tribal entities are entitled to receive. The determination by the Office of Federal Acknowledgement is based on genealogical and cultural analysis – essentially, their bureaucratic determination of whether a tribe is for real.

But it's largely due to the federal government that tribal histories are not intact.

In 1927, L. A. Dorrington, Superintendent of the Sacramento Indian Agency, sent a letter to the U.S. Commissioner of Indian Affairs detailing how many Indigenous people lived in each California county, “in the matter of purchasing land for homeless California Indians.”

In Monterey County, Dorrington wrote, the Indigenous population was just 79, and they “do not require land for home site.”

In a 2010 dissertation titled “Recognizing Indians: Place, Identity, History and the Federal Acknowledgement of the Ohlone/Costanoan-Esselen Nation,” Philip Lavery looked at the chicken-and-egg problem of federal recognition and landlessness. By treating the tribe as non-existent – federally unrecognized – it’s harder for them to attain land. If only they had land, they might be recognizable to the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs.

“The federal government’s failure to act has only abetted the theft of Esselen lands, making it more difficult for the Esselen to persist as a tribal community,” Lavery wrote. “Furthering their official erasure was the consensus in anthropology concerning their extinction.”

The erasure continued until as recently as 1953, when several Esselen families living on Dutra Street in downtown Monterey were forced out. They’d been there since the mid-1800s, and the city of Monterey used eminent domain to make way for the police and fire stations, Lavery reported.

In 1994, the Monterey County Board of Supervisors passed a resolution supporting federal recognition. Lavery helped OCEN gather reams of documents to persuade the Bureau of Indian Affairs they were in fact a tribe. But the BIA was unpersuaded of the tribe’s continuity, and with a technical disagreement, the pending application was taken off the books – something Lavery says just perpetuates the erasure. “There is this basic irony that the government is asking for evidence of the very thing it tried to destroy.”

**THE ESSELEN TRIBE, LED BY NASON AND HERTHEL, IS NO LONGER INTERESTED IN SEEKING FEDERAL RECOGNITION.** Their end game was land, and they’ve gotten that. But another Esselen nonprofit, OCEN is still very much interested in federal recognition, and also in acquiring land.

OCEN, currently chaired by Louise Miranda Ramirez, has been in [on-and-off-again talks about Fort Ord land](#) since the Army base there closed in 1994. To do that, they had to team up with a federally recognized tribe, so they formed the Esselen-Hoopa Redevelopment

Authority with the intent to receive 40 to 45 acres of Fort Ord lands from Monterey County. After that deal fell apart, they hoped to receive 12 acres from Seaside – a deal that again unraveled.

The latest iteration of Ramirez’s Fort Ord vision included a gathering place, a cultural center, a roundhouse, a sweat lodge and a hotel for revenue. “OCEN does not have money to pay for the land,” Ramirez wrote in a 2013 letter to the Monterey County Board of Supervisors. She wanted the government to give land back to Indigenous people, who had previously been forced out.

The proposal fell apart, in part because of public concern that the tribe would eventually build a casino. That is similarly a chicken-and-egg issue: If the tribe is not federally recognized, it cannot build a casino. If it were to become recognized as a sovereign nation, it could – even though Ramirez repeatedly assured the public that was never the intent. Her vision was, and is, for a spiritual center and gathering place.

“Our plans are education and culture and bringing that to the people,” she says. “We have to know who we are and we have to be able to exist, and a casino is not going to do that.”

Most recently, she looked into whether the tribe could obtain a former NOAA building in Pacific Grove that the [federal government auctioned off to the highest bidder](#) – again, driven by dollars, not justice. Ramirez wants a place to bury her ancestors, and she wants a place that is easier for tribal members to get to than remote Adler Ranch. And she feels betrayed by groups that helped advance the Adler acquisition, worried it puts OCEN even further behind in line to get land.

Nason and Ramirez are distantly related, both Esselen. Herthel, now vice chair of the Esselen Tribe, is a former chair of OCEN. Their groups are pursuing different paths toward the same goal: getting land back.

“I look at it as Republicans and Democrats. It’s deeper than that, but it’s easy for people to understand,” Herthel says of the two groups. “It’s very political, and it’s political because that’s what we do when we have to go through the process of systems and agencies and grants – you have to create these political bodies.

“At the end of the day, we’re all on this planet Earth, we’re all relatives, it’s just we’ve got different opinions.”

**THERE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN DIFFERENT TRIBES WITH DIFFERENT OPINIONS.** Ideas about which Indigenous group was where are generally based on a specific moment in time – when Europeans who came in contact with Indigenous people recorded what they saw at that moment in history.

The word “Ohlone” refers to multiple tribes in Central and Northern California, a broad and non-specific term applying to the region from San Francisco to Big Sur. “Costanoan” overlaps but is usually avoided by Indigenous people today, since it is a colonial Spanish word.

Spanish colonization of California – and construction of its first mission – began in 1769. The first written reference to the Esselen is in records from Mission San Carlos in Carmel, according to a history by anthropologists Gary Breschini and Trudy Haversat. On May 9, 1775, Father Junipero Serra himself rode up the Carmel River Valley and baptized Pachepas, the chief of a village called Xasáuan. Serra renamed Pachepas Miguel Gregorio. Xasáuan became called Cachagua.

The Spanish renamed places and people wherever they went, obscuring the history of Indigenous people before them. Then came anthropologists – mostly white – looking to simplify a complex history, or government officials looking to gather a census on the total number of Indigenous people.

But there was overlap and movement of tribes, both before the Spanish arrived and after. Sargenta-Ruc was Esselen, then Rumsen, as the Esselen moved south. Esselen people migrated as other Ohlone tribes moved into their territory, pushing them deeper into the Santa Lucia Mountains. Then came missionaries, and they moved into more remote places. As Gov. Filipe de Neve wrote in 1782, Spanish patrols were going badly, sometimes resulting in deaths, as they went into “the mountains where the natives took refuge.”

Today, all are welcome to visit the Adler Ranch property and do rituals there. In fact, that is spelled out in the deed, calling it “a location for the Esselen Tribe of Monterey County and other Native American people to undertake cultural and ceremonial activities.”

The deed also forbids development with a few exceptions – a visitor center and a residence for a caretaker, each no more than 3,000 square feet and no taller than one story.

The Esselen Tribe wants to host more visitors and events. To that end, they have [put in a bid for the 368-acre Boy Scout camp next door to Adler Ranch, for sale for \\$1.8 million](#). Tribal leaders hope to use the camp facilities for events like

workshops on traditional food and medicine gathering, sharing song and dance, rites of passage and land stewardship training.

“Program participants will connect with nature while learning how the Esselen people have lived in harmony with the Earth for thousands of years,” according to the tribe’s bid. (Of course, that includes fire management – the very reason neighbors originally opposed the sale of Adler Ranch to the U.S. Forest Service.)

In their application to acquire the scout camp, the Esselen Tribe wrote: “Having been displaced from our ancestral homelands for generations, our tribe has recently embarked upon a journey to re-acquire lands originally inhabited by our ancestors.”

Nason met with the Boy Scouts on June 30 about their proposal and is waiting to hear back. Whether or not the tribe gets that property, they plan to open the land to the public for limited tours by appointment this year.

**IN THE FIRST YEAR OF OWNERSHIP**, the Esselen Tribe only allowed biologists onto their 1,119 acres for the purposes of conducting a baseline environmental assessment. Next, an archaeological assessment and an ethnographic history are coming. The tribe is trying to get to know this land that has been given back – “rematriated” is the term often used, feminized for Mother Earth.

The Tribe’s story is just one example in the growing Land Back movement that calls to return stolen land to Indigenous people across the globe, whether or not they are officially recognized by government entities. In 2020, the California State Lands Commission gave 40 acres of land in Inyo County to the Lone Pine Paiute-Shoshone people. In 2019, the city of Eureka returned more than 200 acres of land on Duluwat Island to the Wiyot Tribe, who endured a massacre. In 2022, Save the Redwoods League gave 523 acres in Mendocino County to the Intertribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council, a group of 10 tribes.

“Land Back is happening,” Nason says, “and not just here.”

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## Correction

This story has been updated to reflect the following correction. While the Rumsen word for the district where the Esselen land is located is Sargenta-Ruc—its former name before it was Adler Ranch and Rancho Aguila—a new name for the land has not yet been determined. This

story originally reported that it was currently being called Sargenta-Ruc.

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## Sara Rubin

Sara Rubin loves long public meetings, red pens and reading (on newsprint). She has been editor of the Monterey County Weekly since 2016, and has been on staff since 2010.