

Coast Miwok council fundraises for land

by [Ben Stocking](#), Point Reyes Light, June 7, 2023

The Coast Miwok Tribal Council is hoping to take its place in the movement to return Native lands to their original inhabitants with the purchase of a 26-acre property nestled in the Nicasio Valley.

The council has a June 18 deadline to raise the land's \$1.3 million purchase price. Joe Sanchez, a tribal council elder and San Mateo County resident, said the council has raised about \$400,000 so far. It plans to use the property to preserve Coast Miwok cultural and spiritual traditions, offer educational programs and share Indigenous best practices of land restoration and soil resiliency with greater Marin County.

The property, at 1800 Old Rancheria Road, is located near a site where the Huukuiko people, as they were originally known, lived for more than 10,000 years in one of the last known Miwok settlements, 'Etcha Tamal.

"The ancestors are calling us home," Mr. Sanchez said. "They were taken away brutally and dishonestly. But we're still here, and we want to be back on our own land."

Although several potential buyers expressed interest, the owners, Peter and Nicole Mollison, agreed to sell to the council if it can meet the deadline, Mr. Sanchez said. In a letter to the couple, he outlined his hopes for the property.

"Our vision is to have a place to come together as we did for thousands of years to help keep all things in balance," Mr. Sanchez wrote. "Today, more than ever, we—all of us—need this."

He said other potential buyers see the land and think about how large a house they would build and what architect to use. "We see your land and think, 'Welcome home.' Your land already knows us," he wrote.

Sean Solway, the real estate agent representing the Mollisons, said the couple is part of a multi-generational Marin family and used to divide their time between Nicasio and Lake Tahoe, where they now reside. "They are very excited and honored to be part of a landmark homecoming for the Coastal Miwok in Nicasio Valley," he said.

The council had been searching for a suitable property for months. In late April, when it learned the land was for sale, it approached the owners and embarked on a fundraising campaign. Council members have reached out to foundations and met with potential donors at small gatherings, and have set up a nonprofit that would own and manage the property. Donations to the effort are tax-deductible.

Last Saturday, the council invited supporters to view the property. The parcel extends across a valley near Halleck Creek Ranch, at the far end of Old Rancheria Road, which dead ends two miles east of town.

Among the individuals and organizations who have donated so far is the Sierra Club of Marin. “I think it’s an incredible opportunity for us to return a small piece of land to the people it was stolen from,” said Barbara Bogard, a member of the chapter’s executive committee.

The San Francisco Bay chapter matched their \$2,500 donation, said Ms. Bogard, who also made a personal contribution. “As an organization committed to both environmental stewardship and social equity, we view the purchase and the tribal council’s long-term vision for the land as an opportunity to weave these two missions together,” she said. Steve Saarman and Liese Keon, who live just down the road, were thrilled to hear that they might soon have the council for a neighbor.

“We support this acquisition and the transition of this land back to its ancestral roots, where the songs and stories of the Miwok will have a meaningful voice once again,” they wrote in a letter of support.

The property abuts the site of one of the last permanent Coast Miwok villages, 'Etcha Tamal. The people called themselves Huukuiko (Hoo-Koo-E-Koo). It wasn't until modern times that ethnographers named them the Coast Miwok.

Before outsiders usurped their land, the Coast Miwok lived in a valley blessed with abundant plant and animal life.

“Nicasio Valley provided an excellent environment for the Coast Miwok to live, eat and trade,” West Marin historian Dewey Livingston wrote in his book “Nicasio: The Historic Valley At The Center of West Marin.” “It featured rich grasslands, prolific oak trees and redwoods, plentiful game and fish, year-round fresh water and nearby access to shellfish at Tomales and Drakes Bays.”

Coast Miwok culture revolved around family and land, with elaborate ceremonies and rituals of birth, initiation, marriage and death. They had strong traditions of storytelling, singing and crafts and were known for weaving sturdy baskets that they adorned with plants, shells and feathers. They lived peacefully in Nicasio until the arrival of outsiders from Spain, Mexico and the United States between the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

“The story mirrors that of the country—ancient native culture interrupted by foreign intrusion with its laws and diseases—and has the typical sad ending,” Mr. Livingston wrote. “Spanish missionaries, Mexican government, American settlers: all arrived and usurped traditional culture and land in a remarkably short period of time.”

Many Indian tribes, including the Coast Miwok, were matriarchal, with women holding positions of power. If it succeeds in purchasing the Nicasio property, the Coast Miwok Tribal Council will take its place in a growing rematriation movement.

The council has consulted with an East Bay group, the Sogorea Te' Land Trust, which negotiated a cultural easement with the City of Oakland that returned land formerly known as Sequoia Point to Indigenous care last year.

Mr. Sanchez said the return of the land to Coast Miwok hands would bring things full circle.

“From an Indigenous point of view, land is priceless,” he said. “We don’t own the land, the land owns us. We are the land.”

To learn more and to donate, go to <http://www.coastmiwokofmarin.org/huukuiko.html> or email Nancy Binzen at nancy@wisdomtracks.com.