

What happened to local Native Americans' harmonious relationship with Sonoma County?

By Jenny Blaker

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For thousands of years, the area we call Sonoma County was one of the most densely populated in all of North America. The Laguna de Santa Rosa was the meeting place of three great tribes, the Southern Pomo, the Coast Miwok and the Wappo. These definitions were based on distinctive language groupings. The Southern Pomo occupied most of the area around what is now Sebastopol, the Coast Miwok territory covered what is now Marin and Sonoma counties extending as far north as Cotati, and the Wappo lived to the east.

The lives of the people were intimately connected with the land, the water and the natural rhythm of the seasons. They lived near lakes, rivers, and streams. In summer they dispersed to temporary encampments along the water's edge. In winter they retreated to more permanent villages away from the changing flood zones.

Wildlife was abundant and food was plentiful. Salmon filled the rivers on their great migrations to and from their spawning grounds in the mountains to the east. Elk, pronghorn antelope and grizzly bears roamed freely. The sky was thick with ducks and geese. The people hunted and trapped deer, rabbits, and other animals and wildfowl for meat, fur, and feathers. They gathered clams and mussels, and abalone and kelp from the seashores. They actively managed the plants around them, pruning and selectively harvesting tule reeds, for shelters, boats, clothing, and cordage. They used fire-hardened digging sticks to dig for roots and tubers, and divided bulbs. They tended beds of sedges, weaving the long roots of the sedge to create intricate baskets used for many purposes. They collected greens, berries, nuts, seeds, and acorns. Acorns were a staple food. Ground, leached and boiled, they provided a nutritious base for soups, mush, and bread. Herbs were collected and used for medicinal purposes including brewing into teas. Water was boiled in tightly woven baskets, using hot stones.

At their great seasonal gatherings, the peoples from the north, east and south met to foster inter-tribal bonds and to trade. They traded obsidian, a black, glass-like rock that cuts sharper than steel and has a cleaner edge. It was made into arrow heads, spear points and more. They also traded exquisitely woven baskets, some decorated with feathers, shells, and beads. Pomo and Coast Miwok baskets - still made today - are some of the finest in the world.

In less than 200 years, everything has changed. Ninety percent of native populations were decimated by diseases even before the waves of incoming settlers arrived. The deep-rooted perennial native bunch grasses gave way to invasive grasses introduced, sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally, with herds of Spanish cattle, sheep and horses. In 1892, a hunter shot 6,200 ducks, more than the current total population of wildfowl, in a single day. The grizzly bear, elk and pronghorn became extinct. The large open lakes that once existed in the Laguna were drained and filled.

By the mid 1960s 75 percent of the riparian forest had been destroyed and the yellow-billed cuckoo had been seen for the last time. Many of the lands surrounding the Laguna were drained or filled to make way for roads, the railroad, agriculture and urban development. Many of its waterways were straightened and sometimes even lined with concrete. By 1990, 92 percent of the Laguna's riparian habitat had disappeared. Now, there are major concerns about sedimentation, loss of habitat and native species, the impacts of invasive species, and threats to water quality.

What lessons can be learned from the distant and the recent past? Recently the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation published "Enhancing and Caring for the Laguna," a two-volume restoration and management plan which has taken two years to complete. From March 29 - April 1, the Foundation will hold a four-day State of the Laguna Conference at Sonoma State University, including a Science Symposium, information tables, and field trips, with tours to demonstrate ecological restoration projects already underway, including in Cotati.

On Monday, March 5, the next Inside/Outside Nature Education presentation, hosted by the Cotati Creek Critters, will feature two representatives of the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, speaking on aspects of "Local Native American Relationships with the Land."

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