

# BRINGING THE PEOPLE BACK TO THE LAND: THE TENDING AND GATHERING GARDEN PROJECT

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The Native American Tending and Gathering Garden at the Cache Creek Nature Preserve in Yolo County started as a one-woman landscape plan. In the past three years, it has grown into a long-term, multi-level restoration project, with a steering committee of twenty-plus people. This transformation is due largely to an investment in a participatory research process. As a committee member, herein I will share some personal thoughts and observations on how this process is working for us.

To appreciate the Cache Creek Nature Preserve (CCNP) and the work of the Cache Creek Conservancy (CCC), it helps to know a bit about recent Creek history. The headwaters of the creek are up at Clear Lake, the largest natural lake in California completely within the state borders. Cache Creek extends for 75 miles through three counties. An environmental and recreational treasure, Cache Creek is also an excellent source of aggregate. In the post-war building boom of the 1950's, the small gravel extraction companies along the creek markedly increased their mining activity. Ensuing concern over the mining led to decades of community discord. Competing interests and values among mining companies, landowners, farmers, and other local stakeholders created fissures in the community. Repeated efforts at resolution bore no fruit.

In 1996, after painstaking discussions and deliberation, the Yolo County Board of Supervisors adopted the Cache Creek Resource Management Plan (CCRMP). As stated in this document, the development of this plan was based "on the key assumption that the creek must be viewed as an integrated system, with the emphasis on the management of all Cache Creek's resources, rather than a singular focus on any one issue." Thus, Yolo County had a road map that addressed the main issues of concerned parties and established community accountability for future activity.

From the CCRMP emerged a shared vision that focused on revitalization of the riparian habitat. The CCC, a non-profit corporation with a diverse, multi-talented Board of Directors, was created to guide the work of restoration along the creek. Funded by a tonnage-based voluntary contribution from the aggregate companies, the CCC also benefits from grants, in-kind contributions, and other funding sources. In 1999, a regional construction and materials leader, A. Teichert and Son (company), donated the 130- acre creekside property that is now the CCNP. This gift provided a home for some of the most innovative restoration work in the local area.

Located at the lower end of Cache Creek, the Preserve has become an important focal point in Yolo County. (Learn more at <http://www.cachecreekconservancy.org>) In addition to the Tending and Gathering Garden, the CCNP also hosts restoration projects such as the rice-straw bale and willow erosion control experiment, the Tamarix and Arundo donax (invasive species) removal effort, and the dramatic transformation of the 30-acre mining pit into a thriving wetland. The Preserve also has an active education program that welcomes numerous visitors who come for educational programs, community events, or the grace of a day in the country.

The reputation and receptivity of the CCC led scholar Shannon Brawley to believe that the Preserve might offer a good home to her landscape project. She met with Jan Lowrey, Executive Director of the CCC, to discuss her landscape architecture project. She wanted to grow a garden of plants indigenous to California, and make it available to Native basket weavers who suffered a scarcity of traditional plant gathering areas. Although this plan would later evolve into something much larger, it was the starting place for her research, and Jan's positive reaction encouraged Shannon.

Shannon then went to Native American basket weavers in the local area. Matters progressed quickly as

she met with local members of the Rumsey Band of Wintun, the tribe situated closest to the CCNP. She also met with weaving teacher Kathy Wallace (Karuk, Yurok, member of the Hoopa Tribe) who lived nearby. Now, the participatory research process started. These community experts thought that Shannon's basic idea was a good one but they suggested that the project's potential was much greater. In the months to come, they would change Shannon's conception of weavers and help her to alter her project.

I came into the project at the next stage. Shannon and Kathy arranged a meeting at the Preserve with CCC staff, and a sizeable group of local Native people who actively lived in their tribal cultures. This turned into an energetic brainstorming session. By the end of it, we had a list of short and long-term objectives that encompassed outreach and education for both the Native community and the community at large. We also had a "wish list" of desirable plants for the garden, and a core group of local people willing to contribute to the project. One of the most important project developments occurred at this meeting. After discussing the variety and number of basketry plants needed to support a serious weaver, we convinced Shannon that a 2-acre site would not provide the amount of materials she envisioned. However, in that small space, we could create a demonstration garden and a living gallery where weaving teachers from various tribal traditions could bring their students to identify plants and learn to tend them. Moreover, in the background of everything else was the question of whether the plants would choose to live in the place that Shannon had selected, the shore of the mining-pit-turned-wetlands.

This group of cultural practitioners, including Shannon, Jan, and other staff, became the Steering Committee. We have members from 14 different California tribes. We have worked as a cohesive unit for the past three years. I find this extraordinary in several respects. The Native members are providing cultural expertise on a pro-bono basis to a non-Native entity, the CCC. We discuss some issues that we have not often brought forward to non-Native people. I have heard weavers share clearly painful history. A woman may tell the story of a family run out of an original home so that others may understand the significance of clearing a cultural path for those who suffer now from that long loss. At times, we have discussed some of the spiritual concerns that govern why something must happen in a certain way and not the way that might seem most logical or easiest to one not born to the culture. We are working across generational, tribal, and gender lines, to great effect. We seem to be enjoying this work.

Because this is a participatory research process that Shannon will have to write about at some point, the Steering Committee is engaged in examining and analyzing our effectiveness and success as a group. I think that we conduct ourselves as invested partners. Each person has something to give. There is a vast body of skills within our group. This influences what we are able to share with each other, and with the outer world. We help to host educational tours at the Preserve. We have developed several presentation modules that are easily adapted to the needs of visitors who come to learn about the projects at the Preserve. As community research partners, we are actively engaged with the lead scholar in the public presentation of the work. For me, this aspect of the involvement is markedly more positive from other projects I have seen where community partners are treated as consultants somewhat separate and apart from the heart of the research.

The TGG's impact on the CCC has been significant. It is my sense that of all the projects housed at the Preserve, this one has a particularly wide wingspan. Because it involves a variety of people, cultures, and skill sources, it is complex. We knew that it would be helpful to have some ground rules in place to manage interactions that could easily become unwieldy. One of our first big tasks as a steering committee was to create guidelines to govern the project. This is a continuing effort. Such discussions are perhaps the most arduous tasks associated with our participatory research process. There are those weary times when we gaze hazily at each other from across strewn papers and smudged coffee cups. An unspoken thought hovers: "I'd really rather be outside with the plants." Nevertheless, we recognize the importance of boundaries. Because of experience on school boards, non-profit boards, and related projects, Steering Committee members know that this is time well spent. While I have felt some frustration with the delicacy of the language we must employ to keep everyone involved

and satisfied, we are setting an example for other projects. At the end of this particular process, we hope to offer a report to the CCC Board that will help us all work well together and possibly serve as a model in guiding like relationships in the future.

The essential incentive for me is the research itself. The Steering Committee members have changed the shape of Shannon's research. We are looking for the answer to one of her central questions: Can we restore a former mining site to a Native Californian standard of ecological health? The answer to this question is important practically as well as academically. I feel that we have helped to set a higher standard for restoration as the cultural uses of the natural resources require an extremely healthy, managed landscape. Shannon has a more interesting set of questions and possibilities than she did at the outset of her work. Her answers will mean something to the mining community, Native tribal peoples, restoration ecologists, scholars, and those visiting schoolchildren who may be our future policy-makers. The physical garden itself, while still in the "grow-out" stages, has become a resource for some of our local weaving masters and their students.

I have lived in the Cache Creek watershed for most of my life. At last, I have an invitation to be part of the solution to problems of which I have been peripherally aware for over 30 years. It feels good to be involved with something so central to the healing of the land and the people.