

*“We Were Here, We Are Here, We Will Always Be Here:” Resource Access and Control
in a Mountain Maidu Community*

Trina Cunningham, Community Partner
Beth Rose Middleton, PhD Candidate, UC Berkeley

The power of thought is central to Mountain Maidu cosmology. The creation of the world began with the thoughts of Worldmaker, Kodoyakum. Since others have settled in the Maidu homeland, multiple thoughts are intersecting to create the world as it is now. Collective thoughts manifest in social norms, relations, and political and economic structures. Power dynamics influence whose ways of conceptualizing the world are actualized physically on the landscape. In Plumas and Lassen counties in NE California, the vast majority of the land is under non-Maidu federal and private ownership, and, as such, non-Maidu thoughts and structures organize its management. However, the land remains the place of Maidu creation and the basis of Maidu identity.

Colonial regimes attempted to create new places *and* new peoples by transforming the land, placing dams where Maidu had fished for centuries, and flooding valleys that had hosted large populations of edible bulbs. These naturalized transformations obscured whole vocabularies and sets of relationships that Maidu now struggle to unearth. From a Maidu view, a march of degrading social, political, cultural, and environmental policies since the mid-1800s has left the land and the community in disarray. Maidu people working to heal themselves and their families are continually confronted by the chaotic state of the natural world, which seems unable to help them to build strong, Maidu thoughts that will balance the Maidu world.

Following the boarding school era, WWII, and the organization and subsequent termination of local federally recognized rancherias, community members formed an array of grassroots political, educational, cultural, and social justice organizations. The goals of these organizations, generally, were to re-assert a contemporary Maidu presence in the region, gain federal recognition and services, protect important sites, teach suppressed cultural knowledge, and gain a land base. The organizations represent diverse attempts at healing following a century and a half of ongoing, internalized suppression and struggle. As the organizations shift and re-form over time, the question re-occurs as to how each (or any) of them have helped to re-institute a Maidu perspective that in turn empowers a sense of Maidu identity.

This participatory research project seeks to trace the context and character of Maidu activism to care for natural resources and build a sense of culture and community since WWII, with attention to community member’s future goals for the land and the community. The researcher works with community partners to build from both Maidu and academic theories to frame the following questions: How are Maidu perspectives on building a sense of community identity and continuity reflected in the character, goals, and extent of efforts to reassert a role in resource management? Secondly, how are Maidu efforts impacted by organizational and community shifts, and ongoing exclusion from state-controlled natural resource management?