Centering Indigenous Foodways, Culture, and Stewardship: Perspectives from the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band

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Abstract
Since time immemorial, the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band (AMTB) has stewarded terrestrial and aquatic resources in central California. Evidence from archaeology, ethnographic, and ethnohistorical records demonstrate long-term Indigenous stewardship through indigenous fire management strategies and selective harvesting of plants and animals. Spanish, Mexican, and American colonialism in California sought to erode Amah Mutsun cultural practices and relationships to land through land dispossession and banishment of traditional stewardship practices. Current legal, social, economic, and political processes reinforce these colonial legacies. As a non-federally recognized and landless tribe, access to cultural resources, including traditional foods, has been affected. Without formal acknowledgment of tribal sovereignty by the government, food sovereignty efforts have been stymied. Through several collaborative projects, the AMTB is regaining indigenous knowledge, reclaiming their sovereignty, and stewarding traditional lands. These collaborations have been integral for rebuilding foodways and food sovereignty by cultivating non-domesticated plant and animal foods following Traditional stewardship methods. Our synthesis outlines how the AMTB, through the Amah Mutsun Land Trust, is revitalizing Indigenous stewardship of landscapes and seascapes, which has precipitated a greater abundance of cultural foods, increased access to ancestral lands, and Indigenous knowledge important for rebuilding traditional foodways, thereby working towards food sovereignty.

Introduction
The acknowledgment of Indigenous sovereignty, right to self-determination, access to traditional resources, stewardship of ancestral lands, and Indigenous food sovereignty are inextricably linked (Coté 2016; Grey and Patel 2015; Whyte 2016). Across the globe, Indigenous peoples continue to advocate for and exercise their sovereign rights to traditional resources as upheld in international policy such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
At the same time, the management of traditional resources often occurs with minimal to no inclusion of Indigenous peoples, although exceptions exist, such as the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission and the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission (Whyte 2016). Through these initiatives, federally recognized tribes in the U.S. exercise their treaty-reserved hunting, gathering, and fishing rights. Therefore, these commissions support treaty-holding tribes' efforts to oversee and co-manage resources with federal and state agencies, connecting to a broader recognition of tribal sovereignty and self-determination. However, non-federally recognized tribes in the U.S. must navigate relationships with Indigenous foods, lands, and spaces without enforcement from federal treaties. Nonetheless, we recognize the complexity of tribal sovereignty related to hunting, gathering, and fishing rights for federally and non-federally recognized tribes, such as the Fish Wars that occurred on the Pacific Coast of North America during the 1960s-70s (Brown 1994; Twitchell 1989) and other struggles that continue in the present.

As Grey and Patel (2015) outline, food sovereignty continues anti-colonial struggles in modern contexts, representing one facet of broader Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination movements. According to Whyte (2016), food sovereignty represents a strategic process of Indigenous resurgence that negotiates structures of settler colonialism that erase the ecological value of foods, lands, and relationships with place for Indigenous peoples. Following Whyte (2016), we view food sovereignty as a process by which cultural resources such as food, lands, ecosystems, and the cultural practices centered around these are simultaneously negotiated to address broader tribal political, cultural, and health and wellness interconnected with settler colonialism. Therefore, food sovereignty represents Indigenous peoples' rights and ability to
define their food systems, food production, and engagement with culturally important foods produced in ways that align with each communities cultural practices and beliefs.

While the roots of food sovereignty discussions are deeply intertwined with the agricultural economies of domesticated crops and livestock, many Indigenous peoples worldwide hold deep and long-term relationships with ‘wild’ and non-domesticated resources that were stewarded and cared for since time immemorial. Often these ‘wild’ and non-domesticated resources are not provided the levels of oversight, management, and protection within federal, state, and settler-colonial governments. In others, these resources can become depleted through human disturbance, loss and degradation of habit, overharvesting, pollution, the introduction of exotic species, climate change, and other factors resulting in significant losses of critical culturally valuable species.

The reduction, ecological extinction, and extirpation of cultural keystone species have dire consequences for Indigenous peoples. Cultural values, practices, and traditions are tied to the continual presence, access, and sustainability of culturally important foods and resources (Sanchez 2020; Thornton 2015). In these instances, Indigenous people often lead efforts to protect species, ecosystems, and places of cultural significance. On the Pacific Coast of North America, these issues have been highlighted in Indigenous-led documentation and struggle for the protection of cultural-keystone species such as the Pacific lamprey (*Entosphenus tridentatus*), eulachon (*Thaleichthys pacificus*), and Surf smelt (*Hypomesus pretiosus*) (Lane 2019; Pochardt et al. 2020; Sheoships 2014).

In this paper, we outline efforts by the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band (AMTB) and the Amah Mutsun Land Trust (AMLT) towards self-determination, regaining Indigenous knowledge, reclaiming traditional homelands, stewardship of these lands, and food sovereignty within
coastal California. We highlight how the AMTB and AMLT are revitalizing Indigenous stewardship of landscapes and seascapes, practices purposefully suppressed by settler-colonialism and increasing the abundance and availability of cultural foods through the efforts outlined below. As a result, the Tribe has increased tribal access to ancestral lands, and Indigenous knowledge important for rebuilding traditional foodways, thereby working towards achieving food sovereignty.

**Background**

*Amah Mutsun Tribal Band*

The Amah Mutsun Tribal Band is composed of the descendants of the Indigenous people, including Awaswas and Mutsun speaking people, taken to missions Santa Cruz and San Juan Bautista along the central coast of California. The Amah Mutsun Tribal Band lacks federal recognition but is a state-recognized tribe. Although the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band holds no tribal lands, the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band maintains a sacred obligation to continue in the ways of their ancestors, stewarding the lands and waters of their traditional homeland. According to the Amah Mutsun creation story, Creator bestowed upon them the duty to steward their lands and the plants and animals that relied on them. The Amah Mutsun strive to uphold that obligation from the Creator, regardless of missionization, removal, and the struggles they face in returning to and stewarding their traditional territories (Lopez 2013).

Despite a brutal history of missionization and removal from ancestral lands, the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band is mobilizing ethnographic and archaeological data to aid in awakening dormant knowledge they recognize is critical to restoring and reclaiming their traditional practices and lifeways. This concept of “Dormant Knowledge” is used by Tribal Chairman
Valentin Lopez, who describes the historical trauma experienced by many Amah Mutsun members who have lost touch with traditional forms of knowledge due to removal from traditional homelands, suppression of cultural practices, and the lasting effects of colonialism. However, the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band recognizes that this knowledge is not lost but lying dormant and awaiting rediscovery and revitalization, which are goals Indigenous and collaborative archaeology can achieve.

In 2013, the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band created the Amah Mutsun Land Trust to help realize this vision of cultural revitalization and environmental restoration through applied research and stewardship. The Amah Mutsun Land Trust is a Native-led non-profit organization. Through the Amah Mutsun Land Trust, the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band is restoring Indigenous stewardship to the ancestral lands and waters of the Mutsun and Awaswas-speaking peoples, which stretch from Año Nuevo Point to the Monterey Bay, and inland to include the Pajaro and San Benito watersheds. The Amah Mutsun Land Trust focuses on education, stewardship, research, and cultural revitalization, in addition to future goals of land acquisition. The Amah Mutsun Land Trust brings an Indigenous perspective to resource management and stewardship that models constructive relationships between people and place. Active engagement with the land contributes to more diverse, resilient, and meaningful landscapes. At this time, the Amah Mutsun Land Trust owns no land. Still, it engages a Native Stewardship Corps, made up of Amah Mutsun Tribal Band members, plus an array of partners, to bring Indigenous stewardship back to their traditional homelands.

*Indigenous Stewardship and Archaeology*
The Amah Mutsun Tribal Band became actively engaged in archaeological research in 2007. At that time, Dr. Chuck Striplen, a tribal member of the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band, was a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley in the Department of Environmental Science, Policy, and Management and was interested in studying the traditional resource and environmental management practices of his ancestors, especially cultural burning practices (Striplen 2014). In collaboration with Dr. Rob Cuthrell and Professor Kent Lightfoot, UC-Berkeley, and the California Department of Parks and Recreation (CDPR), the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band initiated an eco-archaeological and collaborative study of indigenous fire use in central California at Quiroste Valley in Año Nuevo State Park.

The foundation of the collaborative project was an agreement that all research would work to minimize adverse impacts to the archaeological site(s) studied, tribal members would be included in all field research to build capacity within the Tribe, the fieldwork would avoid sensitive cultural materials, as defined by the Tribe. The study relied heavily on integrating low-impact field methodologies in the project guided by geophysics to identify discrete deposits that might contain high-densities of cultural materials and artifacts related to indigenous foodways and other activities of particular interest to the Tribe.

The collaborative research team studied multiple independent lines of evidence supporting this research. These data included fire ecology modeling, analysis of historical photos for vegetation histories, ethnohistorical and ethnographic documents, paleoethnobotanical data including phytoliths, zooarchaeological remains, the study of sediment cores for palynological and charcoal accumulation rates, dendrochronology, and fire scar histories to reconstruct fire return intervals, and ancient DNA analyses of plant remains.
The findings from this initial project suggest that the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band ancestors conducted cultural burning from at least cal AD 1000 to the time of Spanish colonization (Cuthrell 2013; Lightfoot and Lopez 2013; Striplen 2014). Building from this initial research, Sanchez (2019) and Grone (2020) commenced research with the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band in 2015 to investigate the use and potential stewardship of marine resources. During two field seasons on the Santa Cruz coastline, the research team, which included Amah Mutsun Tribal Band Native Stewardship Corps members, UC-Berkeley and UC-Santa Cruz researchers, and research staff from the California Department of Parks and Recreation, studied five archaeological sites that span the last ~7,000 years and include post-Spanish Mission era sites.

The results of these studies suggest the ancestors of the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band engaged with marine resources in sustainable ways, harvesting marine shellfish such as California mussels (*Mytilus californianus*) for ~7,000 years with evidence of potential stewardship of mussel beds by around cal AD 1,300 (Grone 2020). In addition, Indigenous fisheries targeting marine fishes demonstrated a significant shift in fishing practices during this time. While initially, a broad-based fishery focused primarily on intertidal species during the Middle Holocene, around cal AD 1,000-1,300, the fishery changed and focused almost exclusively on the mass capture of small-schooling fishes such as northern anchovy (*Engraulis mordax*) and Pacific sardine (*Sardinops sagax*) (Sanchez 2019). These shifts in foodways coincide with the timing of evidence of cultural burning to enhance the habitat and extent of coastal prairies around cal AD 1,000-1,300 and the stewardship of California mussels (Grone 2020; Lightfoot et al. 2021; Sanchez 2019; Sigona et al. 2021). Collectively these data suggest that the ancestors of the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band and their interactions with the environment were diverse during the last 7,000 years, but by cal AD 1,000-1,300 significant shifts in human-
environmental relationships occurred through the stewardship of coastal prairies, intertidal shellfish, and marine small schooling fishes.

*Indigenous Lands, Food Sovereignty, and Cultural Practice*

Through these initial studies of the long-term human-environmental relationships of the Awaswas and Mutsun-speaking peoples, the ancestors of the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band was the growing recognition that as the ancestors of the Tribe had stewarded the land and sea, these cultural practices and relationships with homelands should be restored. By 2009, CDPR and Amah Mutsun Tribal Band co-created a 220-acre (80.9 hectares or 809,371 m²) Quiroste Valley Cultural Preserve to protect cultural resources, restore native vegetation, and reimplement and experiment with traditional resource stewardship practices, such as cultural burning. Therefore, after many years of struggle to regain access to their traditional territories and practices, the Amah Mutsun are now working to restore the indigenous knowledge suppressed during colonization (Lopez 2013). Given that they do not currently possess landholdings within their tribal territory, the stewardship of their traditional lands has been facilitated by creating partnerships with public and private landowners. Through memoranda of understanding with federal and state governments and private landowners, the AMTB and AMLT are regaining access to their lands and reimplementing stewardship practices resulting in projects to restore native species and conserve these lands for future generations. Furthermore, the AMTB is continuing their research and conservation efforts through the creation of the native plant propagation program, removal of dams and stream barriers from local watersheds, reintroduction of Native fire to the landscape, and the prioritization of tribal health and wellness, outlined below.
The Native plant propagation program is an innovative program by the AMTB that intersects with archaeology and the conservation sciences. Through this project, the Tribe is mobilizing archaeological data in new and exciting ways that directly support the tribes goal of Indigenous stewardship, self-determination, and food sovereignty. The Native plant propagation program grows culturally important plants species for restoration purposes. Meaning the plants selected for propagation are those species that have been recovered in the archaeological record from sites that span the last 7,000 years. These same species are those that the Awaswas and Mutsun ancestors engaged with since time immemorial. Tribal and non-tribal participants in the project, collected the seeds of these native plants from wild populations within the tribal territories, germinated, transplanted, and tended these plants. Using these plants as seed banks and plant starters, the Tribe aims to restore these native plants to their homelands while also increasing the quantity and availability of these species for their consumption, thereby supporting food sovereignty. Through the restoration and continuation of these relationships between tribal members, lands, and culturally relevant ecosystems, plants, and animals, the Tribe is continually working towards and redefining the processes of self-determination.

**Conclusion**

The AMTB and AMLT are deeply concerned with protecting, revitalizing, and continuing Indigenous stewardship of their homelands. Through the creation of the AMLT and the Native Stewardship Corps, the Tribe is returning to and stewarding their traditional territories. This has involved partnerships with federal and state agencies and private landowners and organizations. In addition, the AMTB and AMLT have prioritized investment in the reestablishment of native plant and animal species that support broader tribal efforts of self-determination and political, social, and environmental autonomy of the Tribe.
About the Authors

Gabriel Sanchez is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology and the American Indian and Indigenous Studies Program at Michigan State University. He earned a doctorate in anthropology with an emphasis in anthropological archaeology from the University of California, Berkeley, in 2019. Gabriel specializes in Indigenous archaeology, environmental archaeology, and the study of Indigenous fisheries along the Pacific Coast of North America.

Michael Grone is an Associate State Archaeologist for the Santa Cruz District of the California Department of Parks and Recreation. Prior to this position, he worked with the Amah Mutsun Land Trust managing their Archaeological Resource Management and Coastal Stewardship Programs. He earned a doctorate in anthropology with an emphasis in anthropological archaeology from the University of California, Berkeley, in 2020. Michael specializes in historical ecology and collaborative archaeology in the Northern Monterey Bay region.

Alexii Sigona is a member of the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band and PhD student in the Department of Environmental Science, Policy, and Management at the University of California, Berkeley. As part of his research, he is interested in issues related to food sovereignty and collaborative land management to ensure his work can contribute to the Tribe’s existing knowledge and abilities to gather endemic plants and cultivate traditional crops in their homelands.

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