

## Tribes, State, and Public Work Together to Protect our Ocean

by Hawk Rosales, Executive Director of InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council  
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This December marks the 25th anniversary of the founding of InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council. Since 1986, the organization has made great strides in protecting the coastal redwood ecosystem and local tribes' traditional ways of life, and in providing education about tribally directed land conservation efforts. The Sinkyone Council is a community-based conservation initiative, formed and operated by appointed representatives of the tribal nations whose peoples have lived on, understood, and cared for North Coast lands since time immemorial.

We are pleased to take this opportunity to share with our friends and the public the deep appreciation we feel for the longstanding support from the tribes, environmental organizations, foundations, community members, and many others who have stood by us over the years. With your help we continue to fulfill our organization's aspiration of returning local tribal peoples to their rightful role of actively caring for and protecting our Mother Earth for the sake of future generations.



**Canary rockfish--California's largest remaining stocks are on the North Coast**

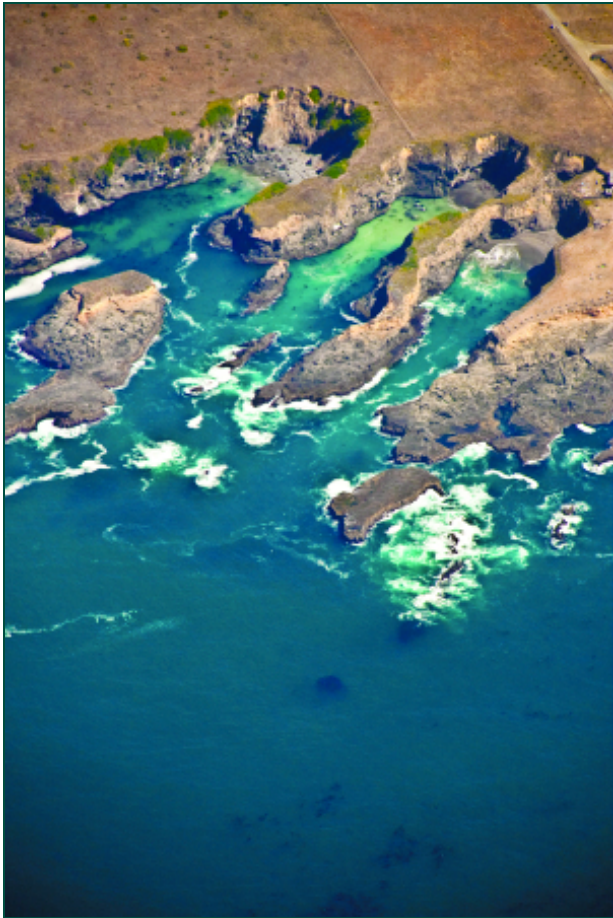
Photo: from Wonders of the Sea Vol. 3 © Marc Shargel

Two other local environmental organizations also are marking major anniversaries. Sanctuary Forest, founded in 1987, will next year be celebrating 25 years of conservation work in the Mattole and beyond. Trees Foundation was founded in 1991, and is now celebrating 20 years of supporting dozens of environmental organizations throughout the North Coast and beyond. Sanctuary and Trees continue to provide crucial leadership and services in conservation, environmental advocacy, land stewardship, and education. The Sinkyone Council is proud to have collaborated with Sanctuary and Trees, and looks forward to our continued partnerships.

Since 2009, much of the Sinkyone Council's work has focused on the North Coast's Marine Life Protection Act (MLPA) Initiative process. Our work relating to the MLPA Initiative was motivated by the critical need to protect native marine and coastal ecosystems while defending the cultures of Native peoples who depend daily upon these environments. The remainder of this article will focus on just how far in recent months

we've taken the concepts of protecting the ocean environment and preserving the traditional tribal lifeways that are inseparable from it.

The Sinkyone Council and tribes of the North Coast paid close attention on June 30, 2011, when California Secretary of Natural Resources John Laird addressed the Fish and Game Commission about the need to integrate tribal cultural uses into the design of the new marine protected areas (MPAs) planned for the North Coast. Secretary Laird stated: "I hope that if one thing comes out of this process, it's the beginning of long term trust between sovereign [tribal] governments and the state of California." Earlier, in February 2011, Laird had publicly committed to developing a formal tribal consultation policy for the Resources Agency to address the need for improved communication, and ultimately collaboration, between sovereign tribes and the state with regard to the management and stewardship of California's natural resources.



**North of Kibesillah Rock, Mendocino County**

Photo: Arcata Photo Studios/Ocean Conservancy

Most people are not fully aware of the extent of injustice, government sanctioned violence, and forced removal of tribal peoples from their homeland that has marred the history of this state's relations with its indigenous inhabitants. Over the last 150 years in Northern California, the region's old-growth redwood rain forest also has been subjected to destruction that has severely impacted salmon and other wildlife, as well as those tribes dependent on the forest and sea for their survival. The tribes have not been responsible for the over-extraction and degradation of the natural world--threats that certainly will affect the future of all people. Yet, even as times and perspectives have changed, longstanding prejudices and bureaucratic shortsightedness have challenged sovereign Indian tribes' continued use and stewardship of land and ocean resources. But recent events seem to offer hope that, at last, a new era is beginning.

California Indian tribes welcomed Governor Jerry Brown's September 2011 executive order creating a new gubernatorial tribal advisor position and making it official state policy to consult with California tribes as sovereign governments on the full range of issues affecting them. For California's tribal peoples, this unprecedented move not only heralds a time of greater respect and influence over their own destiny, but also suggests a new cooperation between the state and tribes is on the horizon, with potentially significant benefits to both. The Brown

Administration also has made remarkable progress in a few short months working with North Coast tribes on management and protection of marine resources.

The Sinkyone Council is comprised of ten federally recognized tribes that retain ancient and enduring ancestral and cultural ties to the coastline and inland areas of Mendocino, Lake, and southern Humboldt Counties. Our member tribes have depended on the ocean for food, for the continuation of their culture, and for their very existence since the beginning of time. In 2009, our council members were alarmed to learn that California, through the MLPA, was starting to design MPAs in their ancestral territories, and that new regulations might disallow the traditional take of seaweed, finfish, shellfish, and other marine resources by North Coast tribes who conduct traditional, non-commercial gathering, harvesting, fishing, and ceremonial



activities in the areas planned for the new MPAs. That planning process could easily have produced another intolerable outcome in the bleak history of California's dealings with tribal peoples. Instead, it marked the start of a remarkable journey resulting in state officials committing to better honoring tribal contributions, past and present.

What went right? North Coast tribes--from Tolowa and Yurok in the far north to Wiyot in the Humboldt Bay, Bear River Band on the Mattole-Sinkyone coast, and Cahto and Pomo peoples in the south of the region--resolved together to protect their peoples' traditional gathering rights through concerted action and came to the table with practical solutions for how the State could accomplish important ocean conservation goals while protecting tribal traditions.

The tribes' cultural ways and spiritual beliefs have informed each step of their engagement in this process. For the tribes, protection of the ocean and traditional cultural use of marine resources are inseparable ideas.

We have successfully argued that without the careful use and stewardship of marine plant and animal species, these gifts will steadily decline and may someday vanish. A broad range of North Coast residents and local governments, recreational and commercial fishermen, and harbor districts and conservation groups committed to standing in solidarity with the tribes.

State officials, including California Natural Resources Agency's Secretary John Laird, Assemblymember Wesley Chesbro, Senator Noreen Evans, and members and staff of the MLPA Initiative, the Department of Fish and Game, and the Fish and Game Commission, carefully considered tribal concerns and ultimately committed to meeting the challenges of managing ocean resources while respecting and protecting the cultural traditions and the ancient stewardship knowledge of local tribes.

After many months of grueling work, tribes and other local residents agreed to support a marine protection plan for the North Coast that will avoid key traditional tribal gathering places and allow for continued tribal fishing, gathering, harvesting, and stewardship in many of the new protected areas. The plan will also create several fully protected marine life refuges in high-priority conservation areas. The process has been far from perfect or easy, yet the tribes' persistence--and the state's willingness to listen and work toward a solution--has paid off.

For the first time in the state's history, it appears that California will formally recognize and protect the tribes' traditional cultural use of marine resources. These efforts and successes clearly demonstrate that the tribes, the public, and the government of California can work together to achieve conservation for both the environment and the traditional tribal cultures that are dependent upon healthy and abundant ecosystems.

The Sinkyone Council sees enormous value in integrating traditional tribal gathering and harvesting with



**Simpson's sun star resting in some particularly rich habitat off the Mendocino Coast.**

Photo: from Wonders of the Sea Vol. 3 © Marc Shargel

long-term resource protection, which will bring about a healthier ocean environment that is more ecologically balanced and productive for the benefit of future generations of humans and all our relations.



**Seaweed and Mussels, south of Cape Mendocino.**

Photo: by Arcata Photo Studios/Ocean Conservancy

We are pleased to have been involved in every step of the North Coast MLPA process, and to have been instrumental in crafting a solution to ensure lasting protections for our precious ocean and the tribes' cultural ways--a solution that is supported by the people and the government of our state.

And we look forward to contributing to important ongoing educational efforts to increase agencies' and the public's awareness and understanding of the tribes' traditional ecological knowledge and stewardship ethic that have kept our natural world in balance for millennia.

Much work remains to build long-term trust between California and the many tribes of this state. But an important page has been turned.

Secretary Laird's new tribal consultation policy signals an intent to respect the tribes' knowledge and interests regarding management of the state's natural resources broadly. The policy will create opportunities for meaningful tribal participation in stewardship and co-management of the state's natural resources, and will open a new chapter in tribal-state relations. Much of the impetus for the policy has grown out of the discussions with tribes and lessons learned during the MLPA process.

The Brown Administration and the Resources Agency have made tremendous strides in a few short months. We celebrate this significant progress and will stay focused on building a brighter future--for tribes and for California.



**Rockport Bay on the Lost Coast, Mendocino County**

Photo: by Arcata Photo Studios/Ocean Conservancy

The road ahead in our work to bring about environmental and social justice will be a long and a challenging one, but through the continued guidance of tribal traditional values and unwavering commitment from the tribes, the state, and many allies, we can together reach the goal of a better world.

For a list of links to articles about the Sinkyone Council in *National Geographic*, the *International Journal of Wilderness*, and other publications go to: [www.treesfoundation.org/affiliates/specific-22](http://www.treesfoundation.org/affiliates/specific-22)

*A November 10, 2011 EcoNews Report by Jennifer Kalt of the Humboldt Baykeeper, broadcast on radio station KHSU features a discussion about the Marine Life Protection Act in the North Coast. On the program were Hawk Rosales of InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council, Jennifer Savage of Ocean Conservancy, and Beth Werner of Humboldt Baykeeper. [Access the show here.](#)*

*This article can be found online at [www.treesfoundation.org/publications/article-473](http://www.treesfoundation.org/publications/article-473)*

*Forest & River News is produced by Trees Foundation. For more information contact:*

**InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council**

P.O. Box 1523

Ukiah, CA 95482

Phone: (707) 468-9500