

California's oldest weekly newspaper of continuous publication

# Mariposa Weekly Gazette.

And MINER

## Healing, learning, growing

Creek parkway project is much more than restoration

November 16, 2023

By GREG LITTLE Editor



Anthony Lerma is shown being interviewed by filmmaker Amanda Law last Thursday at the Mariposa Creek Parkway. Cara Goger, executive director of the Mariposa County Arts Council, is also shown. Photos by Greg Little

It was quite the scene last Thursday morning just off of 8th Street in Mariposa.

Plants, buckets, irrigation lines — and people.

Lots of people.

“This is part of a learning journey program,” said Bridget Fithian, executive director of the Sierra Foothill Conservancy.

She said that with a small spade in her hand and with people constantly greeting her and asking questions.

All for good reason.

In many ways, just seeing the area along the next phase of the Mariposa Creek Parkway was astounding. Not that long ago, there was nothing but overgrowth, to the point where humans could not walk and probably many animals.

Since that time, the conservancy and many partners have turned the place into what it used to be, which has been the goal all along.

Fithian said this is part of the Mariposa Creek Parkway Master Plan but what was happening last week went well beyond Mariposa.

For the first part of the week, it was representatives of the conservancy, Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation, the Mariposa County Arts Council and Mariposa County who were working as part of the restoration project.



Bridget Fithian, executive director of the Sierra Foothill Conservancy, is shown working at the project last week.

Fithian said the “multi-year project” has involved cutting out invasive species, burning dead brush and trees and restoring the land. They have also been planting native species, returning them to the site.

That was happening on Thursday, where many people were in their clothes that can get dirty, digging, planting and laying irrigation lines.

But there was also something else happening.

Fithian said there were a group of people from all across the state visiting Mariposa to see how the partnership related to the parkway were literally coming to fruition.

“All of this in little ‘ol Mariposa,” said Fithian.

There were representatives from conservation groups in Santa Cruz, Big Sur, the Eastern Sierra Land Trust and even the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

The goal, she said, was to “help organizations build partnerships with tribes.”



Many people were busy planting and doing a lot of other work last week along the Mariposa Creek Parkway.

That’s something Fithian knows a little bit about.

She is currently the board chair of the California Council of Land Trusts, a statewide organization focused not on just preserving land, but also building lasting partnerships.

Fithian calls it “good faith partnerships” with tribes which she said “helps to bring indigenous communities into conservation work.”

For example, in this particular project, the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation has been deeply involved, even choosing the plants to put along the parkway.

That’s just a small sample of why so many people traveled to Mariposa last week. The local tribe has been involved in every aspect of the parkway, including how the old vegetation was removed and burned.

“We want to uplift the examples of doing the work successfully,” said Fithian.

In no way tooting her own horn, Fithian said the conservancy is “pretty advanced” when it comes to fostering those relationships and that is why she felt it important to share with groups from around the state.



Kay Ogden of the Eastern Sierra Land Trust, gets her hands dirty helping plant native species along the parkway.

Fithian said there are many areas around the state where conservation groups are working with tribes to return land as well as working together in other areas of conservation.

“They have so much wisdom of land,” she said, adding that developing those partnerships is “part of the solution.”

Although anyone who may have seen some of the work that was happening last week might think it was just a bunch of people putting in some plants, there was so much more.

“It’s about relationships and partnerships,” said Fithian.

She said there is something “special” about Mariposa, including the fact it is a small community where people are “more connected and that brings us together.”

The fruits of that labor were evident last week.

“The folks who are visiting are blown away,” said Fithian. “They are wanting to learn how this works.”

Part of that message is understanding history — much of it dark for Native American tribes throughout California and the nation. It is undeniable that indigenous people in this country were exploited, killed, had land stolen and so much more.

Fithian thinks it is important for groups to understand that is part of developing partnerships with tribes; to relate to the past but build toward the future.

“We are carrying our history,” said Fithian.

As part of the visit, Fithian said those who came were given a tour of the town, including a look at the new murals in Mariposa.

“We’re trying to do what is right for the community,” said Fithian. “We bring our skills together.”

### **Eye-opening experience**

Rachel Saunders, conservation director for the Big Sur Land Trust, was impressed.

“This is an inspiring environment,” said Saunders.

The Big Sur Land Trust was formed in 1978 and has been involved in preserving 45,000 acres of land.

She said one thing that stood out to her is the “dynamic and smart people who are doing an incredible project.”

Saunders cited the “deep and growing relationship” between the tribe, conservancy, arts council and Mariposa County as evidence such work can be accomplished.

She said her group has been meeting with tribal groups throughout the year as part of the 18-month learning journey. Saunders believes it is paying off.

“Working authentically with tribes,” she said is one of the “key lessons” and themes of the experience.

She called “relationships” the “underpinning to long lasting partnerships.”

Saunders said by working with tribes and indigenous people, it gives her the opportunity “to take back those learnings; it brings us new insights and helps elevate their voices.”

She added it also “opens our eyes.”

Saunders called it a “very moving experience,” saying it is not only about learning the true history, but also “learnings of the heart.”

She acknowledged the “horrendous history” of Native American people and said getting to know that history is critical in working with current tribes.

“I think we are very humbled by what we have learned,” she said.

Saunders also said it is in “both directions,” and especially noted the partnerships between the local tribe, the various agencies and the county government.

“You don’t always see that,” she said.

Kay Ogden, executive director and CEO of the Eastern Sierra Land Trust, echoed those sentiments.

“The journey has been astounding,” she said.

The Eastern Sierra Land Trust, headquartered in Bishop, covers Inyo, Mono and Alpine counties in California as well as western Nevada. The three California counties make up 9 percent of the land in the state.

It was formed in 2001 and has conserved 23,000 acres.

She was impressed by what is taking place in Mariposa. “It’s astounding the innovation, creativity and thoughtfulness of the project,” said Ogden.

She called the various partnerships “innovative and so based on the community’s values.”

Ogden said she is “learning some things but I continue to learn.”

She said it is important to hear the “trauma of the past” while learning how to work together today.

“It’s a start toward being better,” she said.

Asked if she will be taking some of this information back and working to use it, Ogden quickly replied: “We are already applying it.”

For example, she said her group is working with the Mono Lake Kutzadika Tribe to return 160 acres of land.

What she said is really important in working with that tribe is “coming to the table.”

For instance, she said the conservation group took the lead in doing the work for the grant for the project while the tribe is building the stewardship plan.

“I think this is the beginning of where conservation should go,” said Ogden.

She was also highly complimentary of the people working to make this project happen.

“It is so fortunate to have these visionary leaders in this community,” she said. “This is so exciting on every level.”

### **The Miwuk perspective**

Aanthony Lerma was just trying to help plant some native species and do whatever needed to be done.

But last Thursday, the stewardship coordinator for the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation was more of a celebrity.

He spent quite a bit of time talking into a camera held by Amanda Law, a filmmaker who is documenting the project. He then sat down for an interview with this newspaper.

“This is the blood veins of Mariposa Creek,” said Lerma, looking around the project and thinking about how that area was so vital to his ancestors.

He said that “aside from being Native American,” seeing the progress makes him proud “as a citizen of Mariposa.”

Lerma has been in his role as the stewardship coordinator for the tribe for about a year.

That role, he said, is to “bring indigenous representation back into these types of projects.”

Lerma said he takes his job seriously, knowing he is representing the Miwuk people.

“I take the role with a lot of respect and honor,” he said.

One goal, he said, is to “show people we are still here.”

He added “it’s really about perspective,” saying not only does he consider the past but also thinks “about generations from now,” knowing they will be able to appreciate what is now being done at the parkway.

Lerma also said he has worked closely with many agencies, like CAL FIRE and all of the other groups involved.

“Most of the agencies love it,” he said of working with tribal members and learning about past techniques that still apply today – some maybe better than modern methods.

He said people from other counties look this way and said “it is like family over there.”

Lerma said part of that is that Mariposa County is a small community and he also thinks the fact the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation is not federally recognized has, in some way, brought everyone in the community together.

“We’ve had to integrate with the community,” said Lerma.

But Lerma also recognizes there is a lot of learning still to be done by people who are not Native American.

“I also know this is still an educational process,” he said.

As for the partnerships which have not just been formed, but solidified, Lerma said “it means a lot.”

He believes that education can be “in a good way,” and was grateful for the many people who came last week.

As for the overall project, Lerma had these words: “It’s been healing for the community.”

## Related Stories by Mariposa Gazette

[Go To The Local News Section](#)



### CCAH staff updates hospital board on new Medi-Cal plan

Starting in January, Mariposa County will be utilizing a new Medi-Cal plan. Central California Alliance for Health (CCAH) will begin...



### News and notes from the Mariposa County Sheriff’s Office

Jail Booking Report Here are some of the highlights from the recent booking reports at the Mariposa County Jail. All...



### Details being ironed out for hospital CEO interviews

Starting Nov. 28, the John C. Fremont Healthcare District board, members of the staff and even a citizens’ committee will...

[Load More](#)

This site uses Akismet to reduce spam. [Learn how your comment data is processed.](#)