

6.6 Impacts of Climate Change on the Nevada City Rancheria Nisenan Tribe



The Nevada City Rancheria Nisenan Tribe faces increasingly severe drought and wildfire, and the degradation of important habitats, sources of water, food, material and medicine. They see an overlap in the consequences of climate change, colonization, genocide, and hydraulic mining in their region.

Background

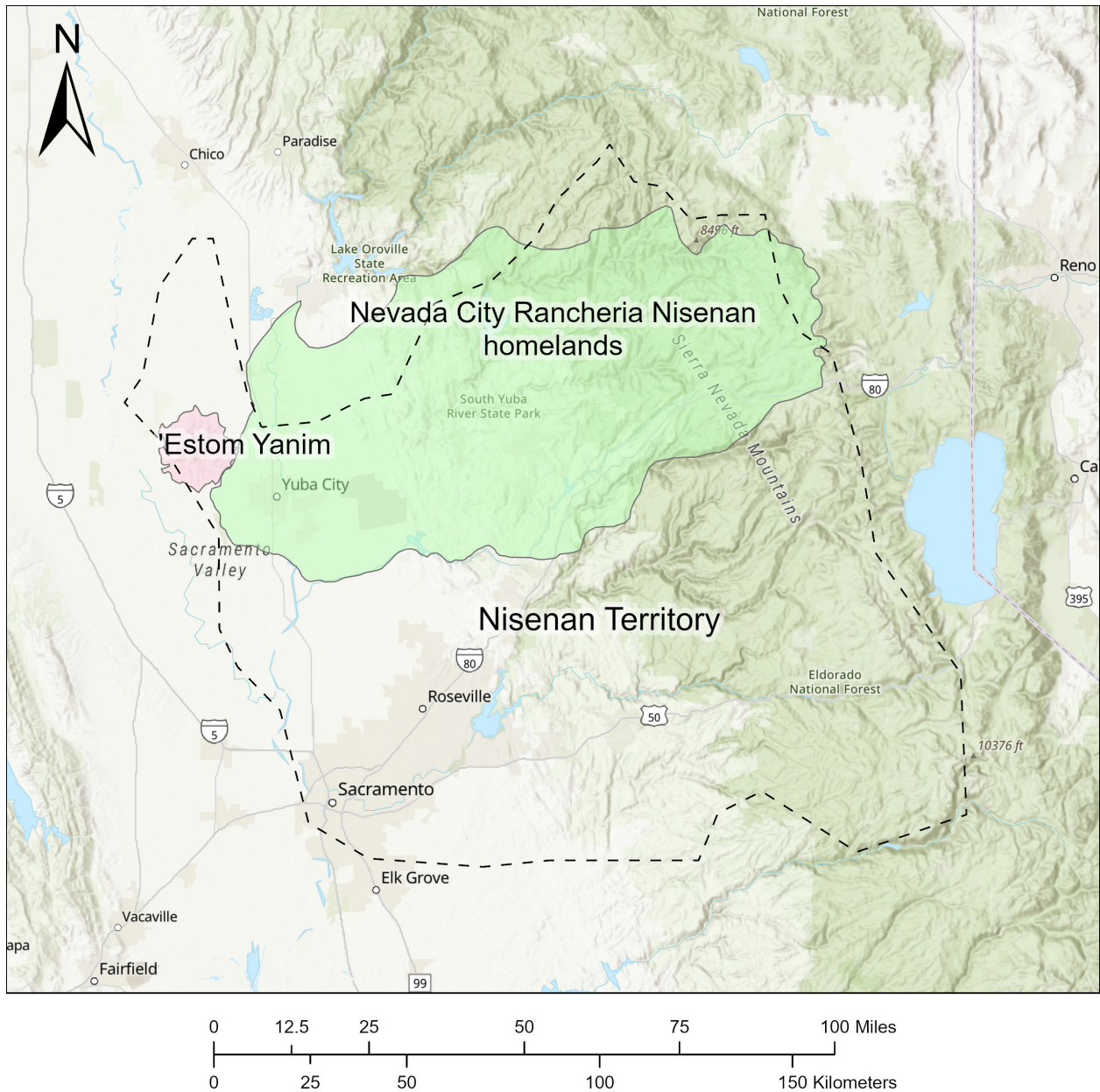
The Nevada City Rancheria Nisenan have lived in their Ancestral Homelands, situated in Northern California, since time immemorial. The southern boundary of the territory begins below the Cosumnes River. From there, it runs east to Kyburz and includes both banks of the Sacramento River to the west. From Kyburz, the boundary winds its way north to Gold Lake then west along ridges and canyons to the south fork of the Feather River. From there, it moves southwest to the Sacred Mountain, 'Estom Yanim (Marysville Buttes) and finally, finds its way back down the Sacramento River ([Figure 6.6.1](#)).

In the past, Nisenan lived in towns made up of extended family groups of different sizes and led by a Huk (Headman) or Mayan (Headwoman). Like many other tribes throughout the United States, the Nisenan have been misidentified and mislabeled. The Nisenan have been lumped together under inaccurate labels such as "Maidu", "digger" and "southern Maidu". However, the Nisenan are a separate Tribe with their own Cultural lifeways, their own leaders and holy people, a distinct geographic territory and their own ancient and unique language.

Within the greater Nisenan territory are diverse groups speaking their own dialect, bound within their own geographies and unique Cultural identities. The Nisenan people who today identify with the Nevada City Rancheria come from two language "districts" that encompass a territory with a vast east to west orientation. Beginning on the valley floor and moving up the foothills in elevation, the Tribe took advantage of the abundant landscape and ecological diversity.



Figure 6.6.1. Nisenan Homelands.



Source: Esri, TomTom, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS, © OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS User Community (2025)

The California Gold Rush caused environmental and social devastation to the Nisenan people and homelands, the effects of which persist to this day. Prior to 1849, the population of Nisenan residing in the area was very conservatively estimated to be



around 7,000 people (Johnson, 2018). Natural resources, such as elk, deer, salmon, trout, freshwater eel, acorns, grass seeds, edible bulbs and roots, mushrooms, fruit, basketry materials, and wood were abundant enough that the Nisenan people were able to support a society of up to 20,000. By 1867, the population was estimated at less than 500. Miners and settlers devastated the people, the animals, and the land in a very short amount of time.

Nevada City Rancheria was the name of the Federally Recognized Nisenan Reservation located just outside of Nevada City on Cement Hill. In 1964, the Reservation and the Tribe were wrongfully terminated. The Nevada City Rancheria Nisenan are working to have their Federal Recognition restored.

Climate change and the Nevada City Rancheria Nisenan

The Nevada City Rancheria Nisenan have lived through great changes in the environment before. Through stories that have been passed down through generations about the land, the animals, and the best way to be in relationship with the world around them, the Nisenan have always stewarded the land and cared for it and it has cared for them in return. They have survived through periods of extreme heat, extreme cold, and near-starvation.

While the Tribe believes that what they are seeing today in their Homelands is unprecedented and concerning, they feel that using the phrase “climate change” glosses over what is truly happening. They feel it is more accurate that globally, and as evidenced locally, extraction of minerals and other materials for a profit, damming of rivers, removal of large mammals and other key species, and removal of tribes that stewarded the land are the direct and ongoing causes of large-scale environmental change. The Tribe has observed direct harm brought upon the land and local Indigenous people during the California gold rush and in the 124 years since then. They note that conservation groups and Western scientists frequently choose one species or topic to focus on instead of addressing the broad trend: environmental destruction for economic profit is causing cascading harm.

The Tribe feels it is most accurate to address the changes holistically, using narratives which draw from thousands of years of relationship with the land. The following



perspective is shared by Tribal Spokesperson and Council Member, Shelly Covert, and reflects lived experiences across generations.

I'm seeing with my own eyes the moment we are all in. It's profound for me. There is what's obvious: as I walk outside on the asphalt, seeing dead friends [roadkill animals] on the side of the road. Seeing the runoff going into the streams. Where there used to be a coyote den and now there's not. If you haven't been here long enough to see the change, you don't know how it used to be and how much has been lost. If you don't know, then how can you care? You don't see the heavy foot of mankind on nature. We just impacted our food source for three seasons by ruining the place where the deer used to graze and now they've gone somewhere else, far away. There are reactions for every action, and you only need to spend a little time in nature to know that and to see what we've done.

I sit in a unique position to have heard so many stories from my Ancestors about when they were little, and the stories that they heard from their Ancestors. But I don't even have to go that far back – the change is already visible just from my own childhood to today, and I'm not that old. We used to live to be over 100 years old; think about how useful that was, to have five or six generations alive at the same time, sharing their knowledge. Old Betsy on the reservation lived to be 112 years old, and another Ancestor lived to be 124. If 18 was the median age for having a baby, then they could have had seven generations alive at one time. I can barely fathom that. More recently, we did briefly have five generations when grandma was still alive and there was a baby born—but imagine having seven generations alive to pass down stories. The different generations were all living in the same household and sharing wisdom. We don't do that anymore. How far we are from living in one place and taking care of it, understanding it and passing that knowledge on. Without that tradition, what are the backdoor ways we could get people to learn these stories and promote the Earth? Without that in place, living together and passing it on, I don't know the pathways back.

The biggest thing missing for me is that care and respect for the Earth. It's like grandpa used to say, "if you're doing something and it hurts someone else, don't do it." If you're using a resource and that is causing harm, don't use it. At the core of the conversation,



it is important to be as basic, as non-scientific as we can be. It is hotter now than before: what happened? We cut down all the big trees that were the engine for our clean air and water. We paved all the surfaces; we made things hotter with our pavement. We dumped chemical pollutants into our air and water and soil. We killed all the grizzlies who were here first, whose digging helped bring the water. There used to be so many more flocks of birds – those flocks are gone. There are so many factors that people can't see. We need to be using laymen's terms so that people can hear it, see it, feel it, and care. It's not caring if a driveway goes through a meadow because you think that driveway needs to be in a straight line. That meadow serves an important purpose and has been there forever. Go around it. It's ignorance, putting modern life on top of a planet that we don't understand and don't have a connection to anymore.

The Tribe, being poor and oppressed, ends up living in the most highly impacted places, at ground zero of climate change. Where the mountains were blown away for hard rock mining, where the forests were clear cut, the riverbeds blasted, the diggings: who's going to live there? The Tribe. Climate change is a long football throw and the Tribe was there at the start of the throw. If you're unfortunate enough to live where there is gold, or diamonds, or anything of value that they are going to extract, those tribes living there are going to experience it the worst. If you fell and lost the function of a lung, you are never going to be the same for the rest of your life. Everywhere that tribes have experienced resource extraction, it is like we have lost an organ, but we stay. We continue to live. We can't get up and run. After living through genocide, through environmental genocide, the people tend to stay in that spot.

The rest of the world is feeling the way, way long aftereffect of climate change. The genocide, the clearcutting, the original pollution of the environment is the source of climate change. When they do it, they think, "no one's gonna know about it, no one's gonna feel this." It is always going to be this way unless we can put our two ends together. I really believe we can have our cake and eat it too if we can get back to the laymen's way of caring for the Earth and each other, if we develop smartly. It's the genocide and deep environmental destruction. We can put bandaids on things but that's not fixing the problem. It's only going to get worse the more people are on the planet doing these things.



Modern privileges are at the tips of my fingers. I still engage in it every day. I'm not being judgmental. We don't have easy answers until we have constant reminders and things that we can do about it every single day. I get it, but I'm still participating in that cycle of the long throw. I'm helping to keep the ball aloft, just like we all are. We need think tanks, a catchy jingle, slogans, we need the equivalent of marketing teams.

I know we are brilliant enough to have our cake and eat it too. I have a dear friend who spends her whole life trying to have less impact, carpooling, making sustainable decisions; but if we all started taking shorter showers, that still wouldn't make the difference that we need. Huge corporations pulling water are the ones who need to change. The big players can make small changes and they will have a huge impact. It probably will take the laypeople questioning, demanding change, and working with the corporations and the scientists to neutralize this topic so that it is not so divisive. We need to take politics out of it. Stop fighting about it and ask what we can all give up a little bit. Put caps on corporate greed. The Tribe finally has some platform and voice, and we have to say something of value.

The sustainable economic resources that we had here, like the buffalo in the middle of the country, don't exist anymore in a truly sustainable way. Those resources from Creator would always be there for the tribes; people would always be there. We used to have such abundant elk, deer, salmon and fresh water. Now, there is not a single stream or river that you can drink from freely. They are all polluted with something. Bad air coming from the Central Valley and the cities tends to pocket over our foothill location. During the gold rush, if you got tuberculosis but you were rich, you could move to a different climate. Now, people can move to a place without climate impacts if they have enough resources. The resources that were extracted – gold and other minerals – those were all removed and sent elsewhere. But what is the cost of everything that they destroyed? We were to have the salmon here forever. Now that that is gone, and the planet has been overheated and everything has been extracted, the Nisenan are left here living on diggins and tailings piles. Most folks are getting their water from wells. Who knows what toxins are in your water, in the soil your kids are riding their bikes on. We have to go to the store to buy food and meat. There are no other options anymore. We have bad air quality because the big trees are all gone and the forests were not



managed. It is an ecological mess.

All of this has a dollar amount for mitigation. What would be our dollar amount for the air, water, soil, elk, and fish? When I was learning about tribal monitoring... and this is very difficult to talk about... I learned that there is even a dollar amount for our bodies. If there was a body found in a burial ground, and they wanted to put their highway over that burial ground, there was a dollar amount for each body that would be offered to the Tribe to move it. The modern understanding is that we need roads; but at what cost? If we could collectively go back in time and look at the impact of all those resources being gone, if we developed a formula to figure out the cost of what was lost over all those years, it would be staggering. It was important to them to get the gold. It was funneled out of the area and the people were left behind to deal with the environmental destruction and the atrocities that were enacted, the shattering of people with violence and sexual assault. How would we frame that question? What resources were taken and what kind of economy would we have today if we still had them? What has been the collective loss from tribal economies, and how much would it cost if we wanted to re-establish them?

This area used to have a lot of ring-tailed cats. I once saw a traditional cloak of a Nisenan Headman, and it was made of dozens and dozens of ring tails. There were enough to make a cloak out of them. They were abundant. I have never seen one. Back in the day, Tribal members were always collecting porcupine quills. My mom used to stop and look. She'd ask people, have you seen any porcupines? No one has. Have you seen any opossums? The speed of the change is multiplying.

We do have that memory.

Climatic indicators

The Tribe continues to be affected by the consequences of genocide and colonization on their people and their land to this day. In this context, the Tribe does not prefer the term “climate change” to describe changes observed in the local environment, as the term can shift the focus away from the primary causes of harm and destruction. The Tribe also does not prefer to isolate environmental data from their cultural and historical understanding of their Homelands. However, for the purposes of building bridges



between different perspectives, or as it is put above, “putting our ends together,” this report includes a few datasets illustrating changes in the physical system which relate to the Tribe’s experience to support a more holistic narrative. In addition to the topics included in the sub-sections that follow, there were others the Tribe wished to include to illustrate direct, local causes and effects, but which could not be found, including: the total acreage of forest cleared; the amount of water removed from the watershed by pumping or diversions; the change in fish populations due to dams, diversions, logging and mining; the total value of resources extracted from their Homelands; total length of barbed wire, fencing, and other constructed partitioning of landscapes and the impacts thereof; and the cumulative impact of the many holes dug by miners, from small to large, and movement of earthen materials in piles of all sizes across the landscape. Their hope is that through telling their story, western researchers are encouraged to expand the scope of their questioning and ways of seeing, and that additional datasets and topics will be explored and become available in the future.

For the following subsections, connections are drawn between individual datasets and the Nevada City Rancheria (NCR) Nisenan Tribe’s experience more broadly. These examples are not exhaustive and may not represent causality but rather serve to illustrate relationships and patterns observed across time.

Air temperatures

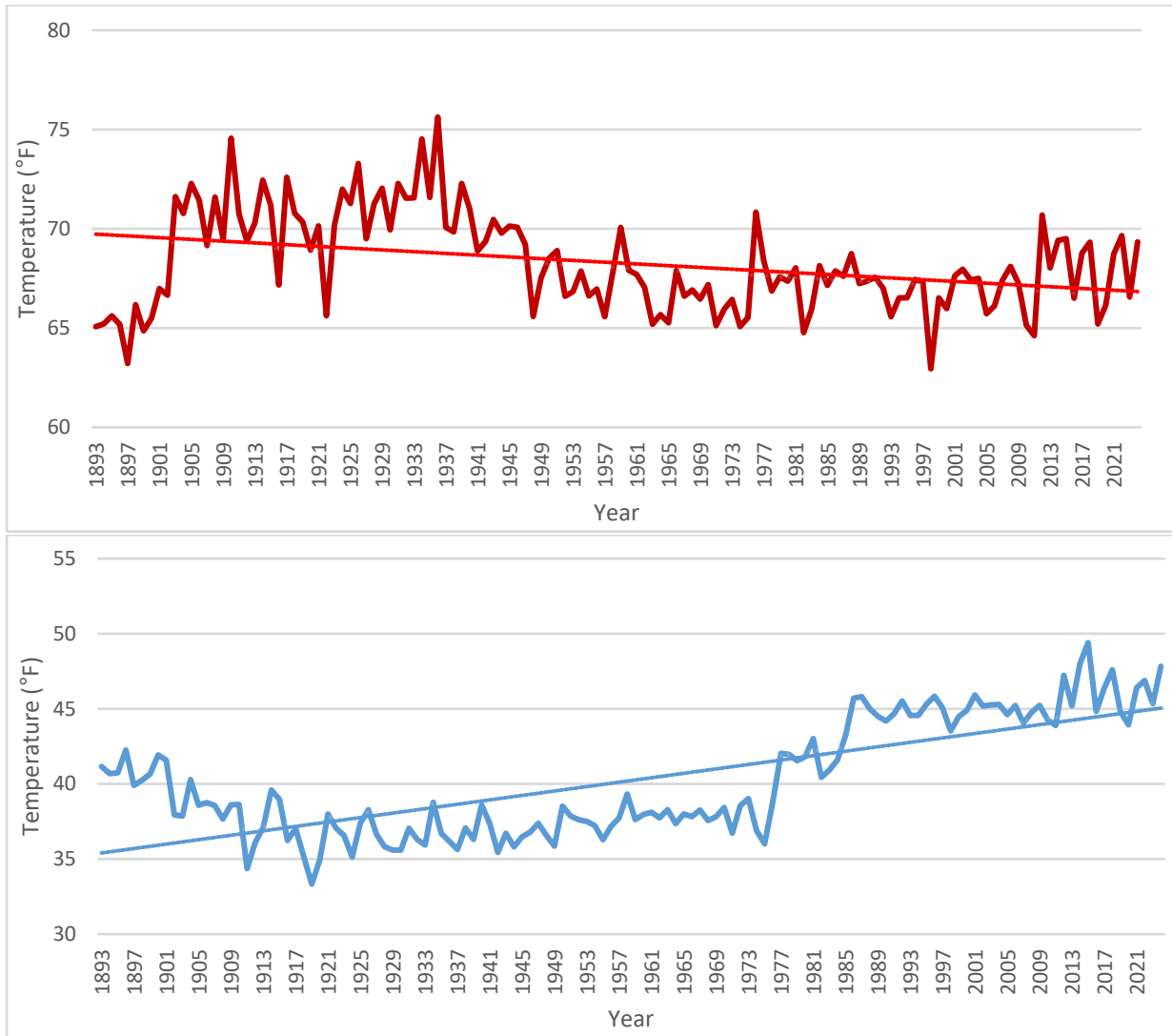
Annual average temperatures from a weather station located on Gracie Road in Nevada City, a few miles from where the former Rancheria was located, were retrieved for the period from 1893 to 2024. [Figure 6.6.2](#), below, shows annual average maximum (daytime) temperatures on the top graph and annual average minimum (nighttime) temperatures on the bottom graph, along with a dotted trendline for each. Daytime temperatures have decreased by 0.2 degrees Fahrenheit (°F) or 0.1 degrees Celsius (°C) per decade. Nighttime temperatures have increased by 0.7°F (0.4°C) per decade.

Nighttime warming may be associated with additional stress on plants, animals, and humans, especially during hotter periods of time when they cannot cool down sufficiently. It may present an additional threat to the health of elders and Tribal members who don’t have air conditioning, especially during heat waves or smoke days.



It may also contribute to factors such as drought and wildfire through increased evaporation and decreased persistence of snowmelt and streamflows during the dry season.

Figure 6.6.2. Daytime (Top) and Nighttime (Bottom) Temperatures in Nevada City from 1893 to 2024.

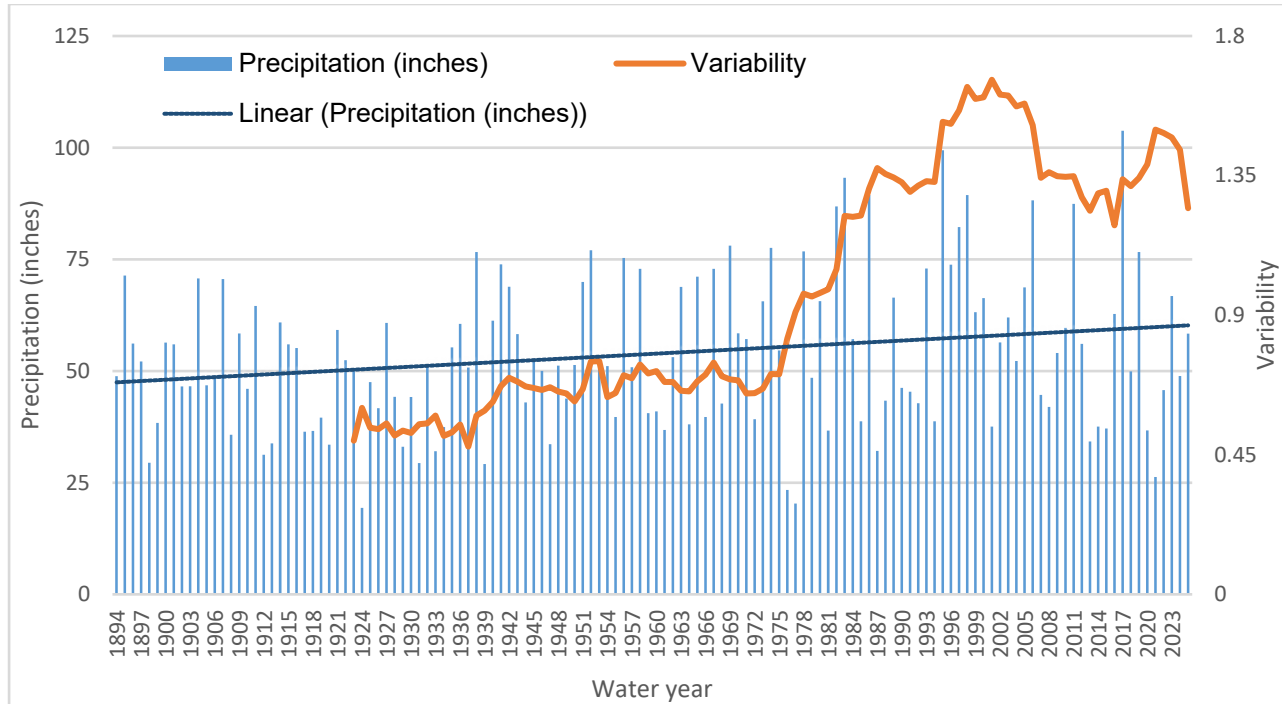


The dotted lines are the linear trend. Source: SCENIC (2025)



Precipitation

Figure 6.6.3. Precipitation in Nevada City from 1894 to 2024.



Blue bars represent precipitation (inches) for each water year (October 1st of the previous year through September 30th of the nominal year). The dotted blue line is the linear trend over time. The orange line shows precipitation variability: a ratio of 30-year variance divided by the total record variance. Values greater than 1 represent more fluctuation in rainfall totals, while values less than 1 represent more consistency. Source: SCENIC (2025)

Precipitation data shown in [Figure 6.6.3](#), above, were retrieved from the same station on Gracie Road and cover the same time as air temperature data in the previous section. Precipitation totals remained relatively stable before the 1970s, then became increasingly variable until approximately 2001. Precipitation has remained highly variable in recent decades, during which time the station recorded its highest rainfall on record (103.77 inches in 2017) as well as one of its lowest (26.28 inches in 2021).

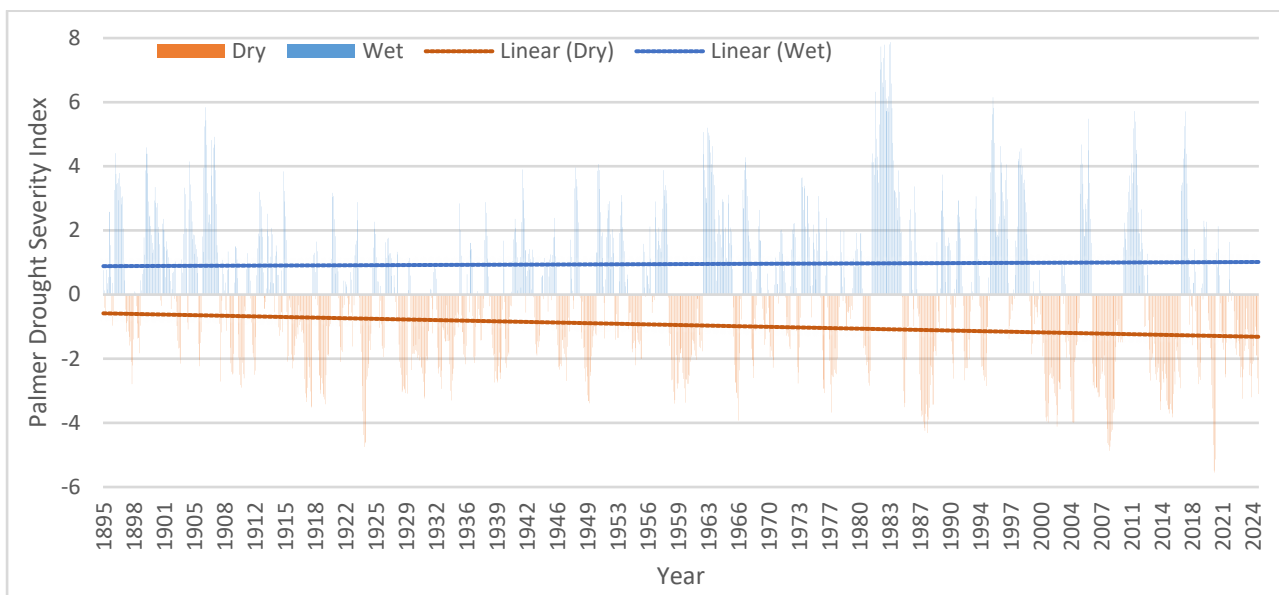
Variability in precipitation impacts habitats such as wetlands, riparian areas, and the availability and quality of surface water. Prolonged dry periods decrease the ability of soils to absorb water, increasing runoff and flood conditions during large precipitation or snowmelt events. They may also select for the survival of invasive plants with a higher



drought tolerance, crowding out native species. During wet years, invasive, fast-growing vegetation such as Himalayan blackberry and Scotch broom, proliferate. These plants act as ladder fuels, facilitating the spread of flames from the ground into the canopy during wildfires. Their proliferation can quicken the spread of wildfires during dry years.

Drought

Figure 6.6.4. Monthly Palmer Drought Severity Index for Nevada City from 1895 to 2025.



Source: Abatzoglou et al (2025)

Along with precipitation data, drought metric data also support the observation that there has been greater variability in the hydroclimate in Nevada City since 1970, with increasing severity and frequency of both wet and dry extremes. **Figure 6.6.4**, above, shows the monthly Palmer Drought Severity Index (PDSI) in Nevada City from January 1895 to June 2025. PDSI is a scale derived from air temperature, precipitation, and the moisture-holding capacity of the soil to represent the relative wetness (10 being the wettest) or dryness (-10 being the driest) of a place over a specific period. Values less than negative four (-4) are considered severe drought while numbers greater than four (4) are considered severe flood.

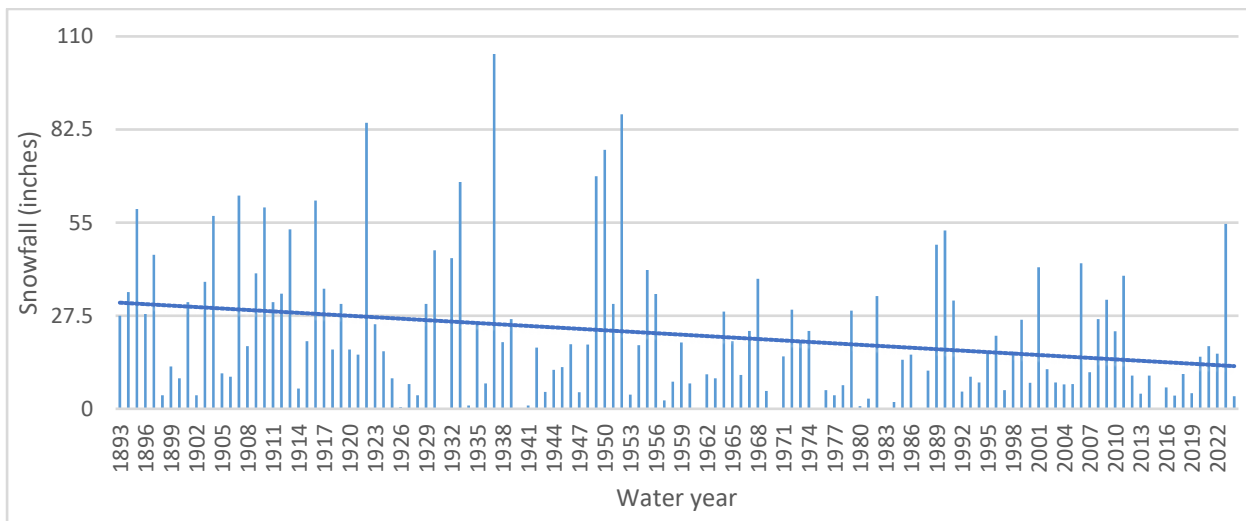


Nevada City has had 17 months of severe drought in the 55 years since 1970 compared to only four months of severe drought in the 75 years before 1970, a fourfold increase. The most severe drought in their region occurred in 2020. Comparing the same periods of time, there have been 57 months of severe flood since 1970 compared to only 24 months of severe flood prior.

Snowfall

Figure 6.6.5, below, shows the amount of snowfall at the weather station on Gracie Road in Nevada City from 1893 to 2024. As with the precipitation data presented above (**Figure 6.6.3**), this data is calculated on a water year basis. The dotted line is the linear trend over time. Total snowfall has decreased by 1.3 inches per decade over this period.

Figure 6.6.5. Snowfall Totals in Nevada City from 1893 to 2024.



Source: SCENIC (2025)

Considering decreasing snowfall alongside increasing nighttime air temperature (**Figure 6.6.2** bottom graph) and increasing, though highly variable, precipitation (**Figure 6.6.3**), it is possible that precipitation has fallen more as rain and less as snow over time. It is harder for the environment to absorb and retain water from heavy rains than it is from the time-delayed release of snowmelt. This may contribute to the cycle of fluctuating wet



and dry extremes, and to the drying of creeks and streams earlier in the season, as the Tribe has observed.

Wildfire

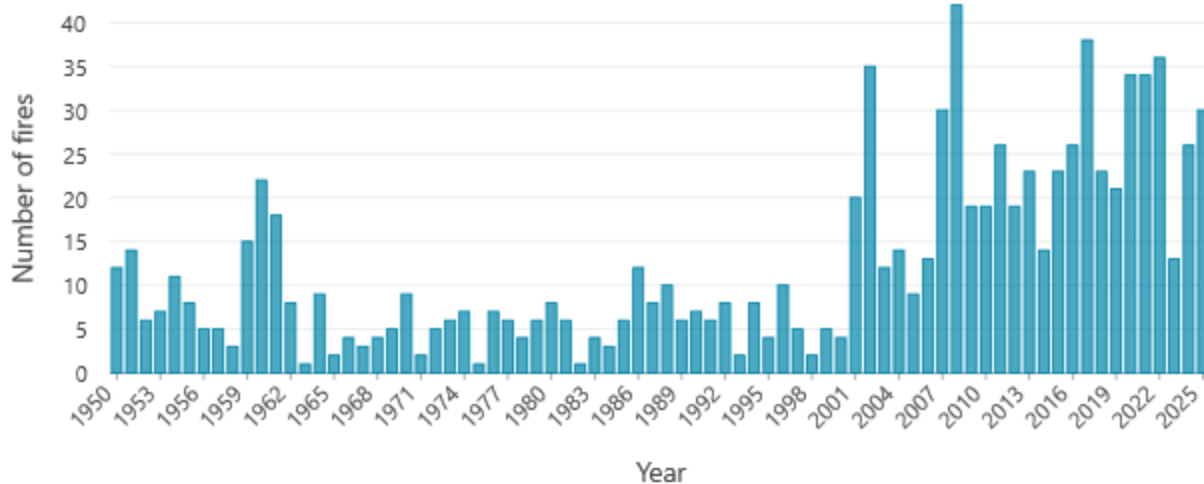
The NCR Nisenan have noticed an increase in fire severity and frequency that they attribute to the loss of Indigenous land stewardship, which included the practice of using frequent controlled fires. The NCR Nisenan regularly burned the duff and dead plant material from oak groves to enhance the production and quality of acorns by destroying oak weevil habitat. They burned meadows to enhance the production of seed-producing grasses and other native plants which were cultivated for food and medicine. They also burned large tracts of forest throughout their territory to maintain forest health and open areas for hunting game such as elk and deer. Their use of frequent, controlled fire decreased the overall fuel load and lowered the risk of large, catastrophic fires akin to what has occurred in the last decade. Maintaining meadows, wetlands, and healthy forests would have also increased the absorptive capacity of those habitats during wet years.

Below are two graphs derived from fire perimeter data from CAL FIRE. [Figure 6.6.6](#) shows the number of fires in Nisenan Homelands from 1950 to 2024. [Figure 6.6.7](#) shows the estimated acreage burned by fires which overlap Nisenan Homelands from 1950 to 2025. There is a noticeable increase in the number of fires around the year 2001, which also marks the beginning of some of the longest and most severe droughts on record for Nevada City ([Figure 6.6.4](#)). The year with the largest fires, 2020, was also the year of the most severe drought on record for the area.

The same CAL FIRE data is shown on a map in [Figure 6.6.8](#) on page 173. The map displays all wildfire perimeters from 1950 to 2025 which have burned in Nisenan Homelands in a brown color scale. Darker shades of brown represent more recent fires. NCR Nisenan Homelands, specifically, are shown in green.

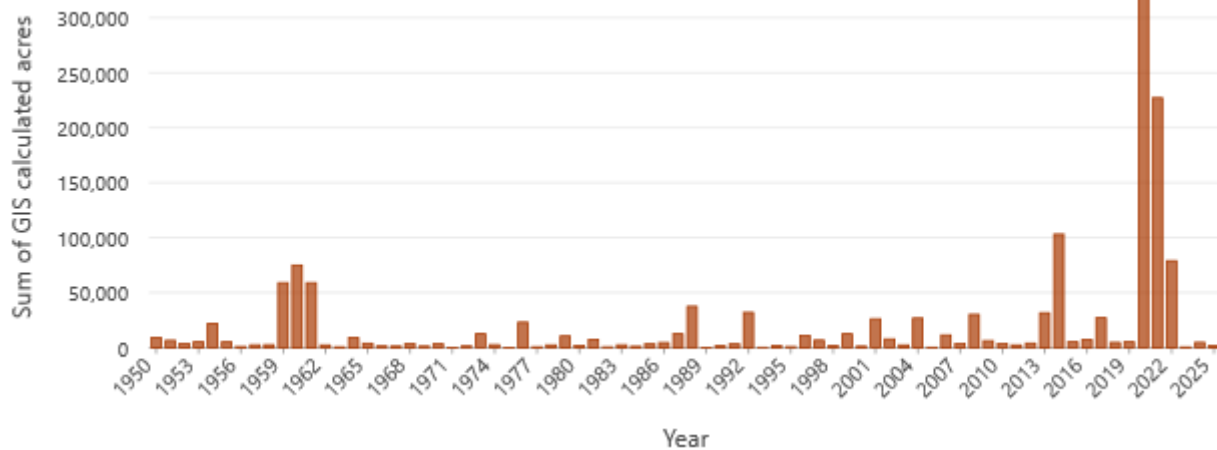


Figure 6.6.6. Number of Fires in Nisenan Homelands from 1950 to 2025.



Source: CAL FIRE (2026)

Figure 6.6.7. Estimated Area Burned by Fires Overlapping Nisenan Homelands from 1950 to 2025.

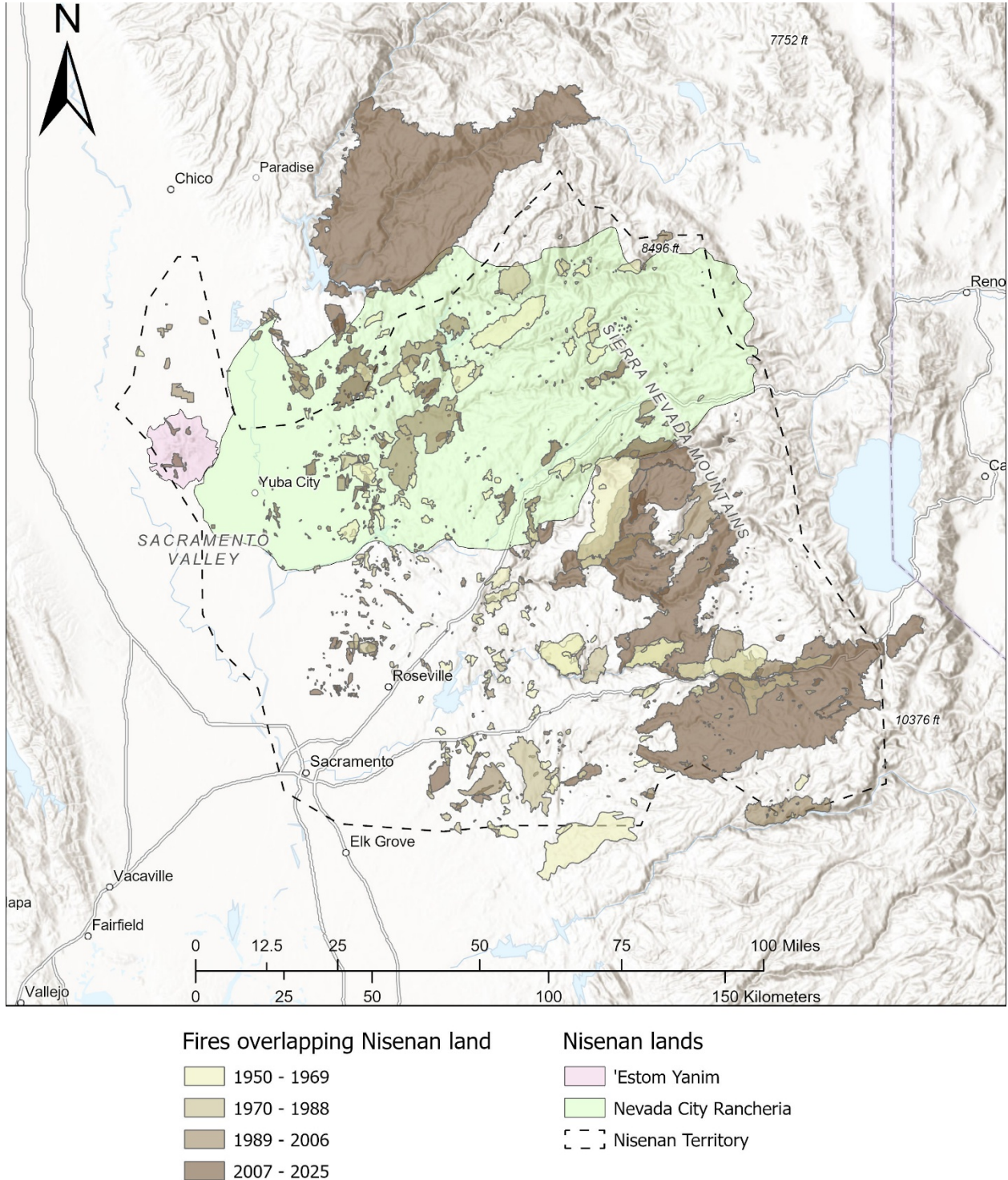


This number is estimated using ArcGIS Pro, and includes the total acreage burned by the fire which is both inside and outside of the rough boundary of the traditional Nisenan territory.

Source: CAL FIRE (2026)



Figure 6.6.8. Fires in Nisenan Homelands from 1950 to 2025.



Source: Fire perimeter data from CAL FIRE (2026); other map data from Esri, TomTom, Garmin, NOAA, USGS, © OpenStreetMap contributors and the GIS user community (2026)



Wildlife and vegetation

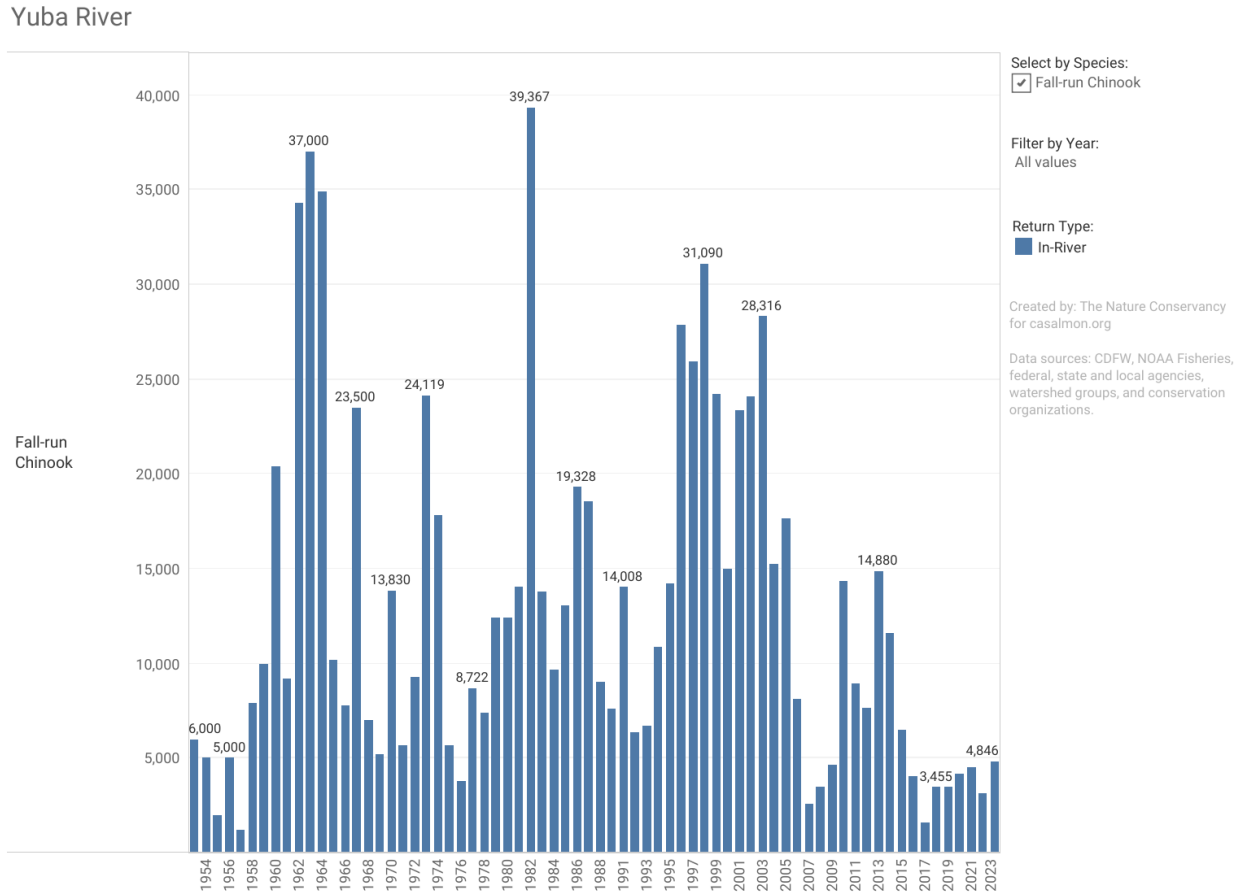
Megaafauna, especially the grizzly bear, are revered as Ancestors in NCR Nisenan Culture. Grizzlies, elk, and condors are three species of very high significance to the Nisenan which have been extirpated from their territory. The NCR Nisenan consider the impacts of climate change to be inter-related if not indistinguishable from the impacts of colonization and resource extraction in causing the loss of these and other important species. These species have prominent positions in NCR Nisenan oral histories and are considered to play a vital role in balancing the ecosystem.

Abundant runs of anadromous fish including salmon, steelhead and lamprey that once supported Nisenan people along the Yuba River are no longer available. Populations were drastically reduced by mining, dam construction, and overfishing throughout California's colonization and mining period, and now face additional threats from heat and drought. Chinook salmon, which are listed as threatened under the state and federal Endangered Species Act, have access to less than a third of their historic spawning range in the Yuba River (The Nature Conservancy, 2025). The accessible portion is in the lowest and hottest part of the watershed and suffers from ongoing gravel loss and poor water quality. The numbers of Chinook returning to the Yuba River continue to decline ([Figure 6.6.9](#), below).

Along with the loss of important animals, the NCR Nisenan report the widespread loss of habitat for plant species which they rely on for food and medicine. Meadow and wetland habitats are significantly degraded due to the cumulative impacts of logging, mining, grazing, development, groundwater pumping, and increasing frequency and severity of hot drought. The majority of gathering areas that had been tended by the Nisenan for centuries if not millennia were either destroyed or seized by colonizers.



Figure 6.6.9. Annual Counts of Fall-Run Chinook Salmon in the Yuba River from 1953 to 2023.



Annual in-river returns of fall-run Chinook salmon to the Yuba River show substantial interannual variability, with an overall decline in recent decades. Data represents the counts compiled from multiple monitoring sources and represents the portion of the run with access to currently available spawning habitat within the Lower Yuba River. Source: The Nature Conservancy (2025)

Human/Tribal health & well-being

Heart disease, diabetes, and everything else that Tribal members are suffering from can be tied to an environmental devastation. We have cancer because of the toxics that we live in. We are sick from the fake food we eat, instead of being able to eat our traditional food. We are dehydrated all the time because everyone is on bad water. There is nowhere you can look at Tribal membership and see something ailing them that existed



before all of this. The ailments were different before. There is no answer. We are all on pharmaceuticals now. This is not even getting into the deeper spiritual layers. Stress is the true killer. Trauma responses. Fear. Just like drought and flood, these are indicators of the imbalance on the Earth being expressed in the people. We live so deep in this harm that we can't even see it. It's daily life now.

Four NCR Nisenan Tribal Council members and one Tribal Health Worker were interviewed individually on the topic of climate change and tribal health. All five pointed to hydraulic mining as a major ongoing environmental and human health concern. In the **Climate change and the Nevada City Rancheria Nisenan** section, which begins on page 161, Covert uses the analogy of a long football throw to show how the NCR Nisenan connect their experience of climate change on a local scale to the colonization of California and genocide of its original people in the pursuit of natural resource extraction. Thus, from their perspective, the legacy of mining must be considered as a health impact as well.

The legacy of mining which continues to impact Nisenan land and people includes: toxic heavy metals in surface soils and water; shafts of abandoned mines as visible or invisible hazards; destruction of meadow and riparian habitats through multiple mechanisms, leading to worsening water quality, especially during the dry season, and reduction in freshwater fish that were critical to the Nisenan diet and lifeways; and the adjacent destruction of forests for timber needed by miners, impacting plant and animal communities important to the NCR Nisenan. The Tribe is concerned about breast cancer in Nevada County, where incidence rates were third highest in the state for women between age 15 and 40, and fourth highest in the state for women under 50 between 2013 and 2022 (California Cancer Registry, 2025). Research in Nevada County and elsewhere has explored how arsenic and cadmium, two heavy metals frequently found in mine tailings, may be related to breast cancer development (Divekar et al, 2020; Florez-Garcia et al, 2023; Huerta et al, 2023).



Summary

The Nevada City Rancheria Nisenan Tribe inhabits their traditional Homelands in Nevada City, California and surrounding areas of the Sierra Nevada foothills. Their health is inextricable from the health of the land, water, air, and living beings around them; and all have been severely impacted by the cumulative impacts of climate change seen as inseparable from the impacts of colonization, genocide, and mining in their region.

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