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.

The Ancestral Homelands of the Nevada City Rancheria (NCR) Nisenan encompass a broad region extending from the valley to the peaks of the Sierra Nevada mountains. The southern boundary of their territory is below the Cosumnes River, stretching east to Kyburz and west to encompass both banks of the Sacramento River. The northern boundary stretches from Gold Lake in the east to the South Fork of the Feather River in the west, including the Sacred Mountain, ‘Estom Yanim (Marysville Buttes).

Since time immemorial, the NCR Nisenan have tended their Homelands and lived sustainably through being in close relationship with the land, water and life around them. Prior to colonization and the California gold rush, they were able to propagate and harvest enough food, medicine, and materials to support a robust population of up to 20,000 people at a time. Fresh water, fish, and large mammals were abundant; the air and soil were healthy and clean. The NCR Nisenan employed beneficial burning to maintain a more open understory, supporting frequent, low-intensity burns rather than catastrophic wildfires.

The NCR Nisenan have observed significant changes in their environment since European-American settlers enacted genocide on their people and intensive resource extraction across their Homelands. Rivers, creeks and adjacent habitats suffer from degradation and destruction wrought by mining activities. There is widespread contamination by legacy metals. Droughts have become worse: having been sufficiently damaged, the land and its beings suffer more from dry periods and have less overall resiliency. Wildfires have become larger and more destructive, producing hazardous air pollution. The NCR Nisenan have observed the disappearance of large animals central to their culture and the local balance of life, such as the grizzly, and the disappearance of fish, plant species, wetlands, meadows, and populations of trees – all of which has threatened their survival as a culture.

For the NCR Nisenan, changes to climate in their region were not a foregone conclusion; they are the direct result of the forced removal of the original people, which shifted the relationship between people and land from one of reciprocal caretaking to one of extraction and destruction. The Tribe supports a broader shift toward—and is building—a human relationship with land predicated on respect, care, and collaboration to restore health and balance to the environment and the people.

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