

Chapter Seven: Native Los Angeles



Written by Nicholas Hummingbird
(Cahuilla and Apache) and
Bryce Lewis-Smith (Potawatomi)



Governor Gavin Newsom apologizes for California's history of oppression and violence against Native Americans in a meeting with Tribal Leaders.
(NYT Rich Pedroncelli/ Associated Press)

This chapter aims to ground Tree Ambassadors in acknowledgment, respect, and collaboration with the original nations on whose lands we live, learn, play, and work. As an environmental collaboration, we must first root ourselves in the historical and cultural context of the land we are working to restore.

Indigenous cultures worldwide have their intimate knowledge, transcending Western frameworks and informing our relationship with the earth. Our work as Tree Ambassadors is impossible without Indigenous leadership and collaboration with local tribal nations. To navigate and participate in these conversations, we must first understand the colonial history of California and our positionality as uninvited guests.



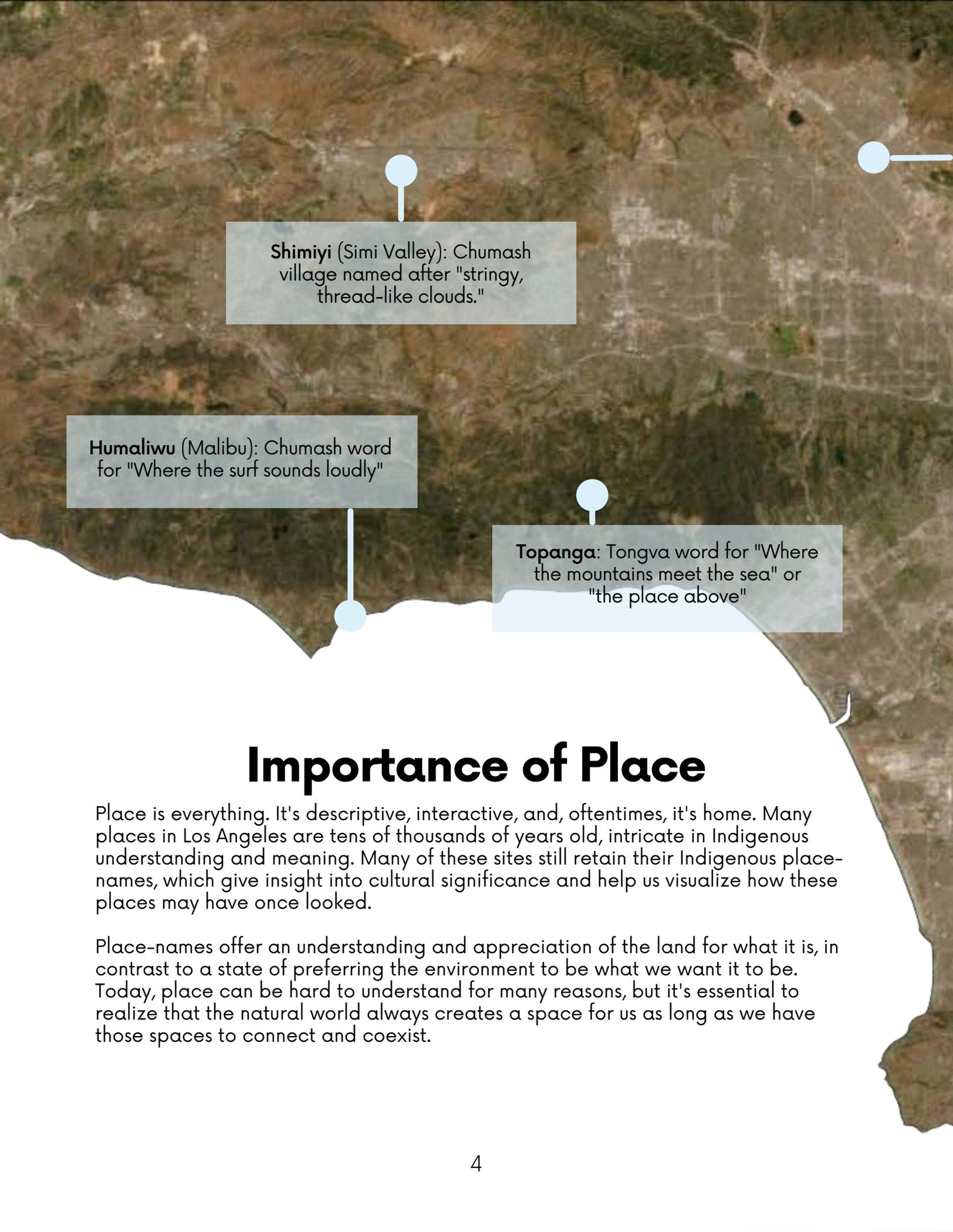
Kizh Gabrieleño tribal leaders planting trees in the Arts District



History of Southern California Natives

California has always been a cultural and biodiversity hotspot. Before colonization, the region was home to hundreds of thousands of Native peoples and at least 80 unique languages. Indigenous peoples have tended to the land for millennia, and the land cared for us. Through traditional harvesting practices and land management practices, like controlled burning, Indigenous peoples helped form the landscape of California.

Precolonial Tongvaar (known today as the Los Angeles Basin) was shaped by centuries of tribal intervention on the land - such as controlled burns, seed dispersals, and an immersive understanding of the ecosystem - not the untouched, pristine environment written about by white environmentalists such as John Muir. Since time immemorial, the Tongva, Kizh Gabrieleño, and Chumash have developed reciprocal relationships with the plant and animal relatives of the region, such as the Coast Live Oak, White Sage, and Poison Oak. Being Indigenous, our creation stories, culture, and histories ground us to the land and create a home.

An aerial photograph of the Los Angeles region, showing the coastline and inland areas. Three callout boxes with white text on a semi-transparent grey background are connected to the map by white lines. The first callout points to the Simi Valley area, the second to Malibu, and the third to the Topanga area.

Shimiya (Simi Valley): Chumash village named after "stringy, thread-like clouds."

Humaliwu (Malibu): Chumash word for "Where the surf sounds loudly"

Topanga: Tongva word for "Where the mountains meet the sea" or "the place above"

Importance of Place

Place is everything. It's descriptive, interactive, and, oftentimes, it's home. Many places in Los Angeles are tens of thousands of years old, intricate in Indigenous understanding and meaning. Many of these sites still retain their Indigenous place-names, which give insight into cultural significance and help us visualize how these places may have once looked.

Place-names offer an understanding and appreciation of the land for what it is, in contrast to a state of preferring the environment to be what we want it to be. Today, place can be hard to understand for many reasons, but it's essential to realize that the natural world always creates a space for us as long as we have those spaces to connect and coexist.



Pacoima: Tataviam word for "Running Water." The Tatviam translates to "People facing the Sun."

Hahamonga (Pasadena): Tongva settlement in the Verdugo Mountains meaning "Flowing waters, fruitful valley."

Yaangna (Los Angeles): Tongva word for "Poison Oak place." An important trading site for native peoples in the region.

Cerritos: Spanish word for "Little Hills" typifying the geographic features of the city.

Puvunga (Long Beach): Tongva ancient village and sacred site of emergence. Central to Tongva mythology and culture.



It can be hard to imagine what California or Los Angeles would have looked like without mass urbanization. Luckily, storytelling and place-names help us realize a world beneath the concrete and under the very roots of non-native and invasive plants. This story must be told for reference, integrity, and, most importantly, healing.



Early 20th Century, Cahuilla woman (Source: Edward S. Curtis)

Past, Present, and Future

“Indigenous peoples have and continue to be the first impacted — first to lose, first to hurt and first to die — and this story is ongoing for all Indigenous life forms in California.”

- Nicholas Hummingbird

Indigenous peoples throughout the Americas have survived and continue to survive waves of colonialism. Similar to how the federal government imposed redlining to fund racial segregation, policies of genocide, removal, and broken treaties to establish the United States on stolen Indigenous lands. In California, this history includes Catholic Missions, The Mexican Period, The Gold Rush, Urban Expansion, Residential Schools, Indian Relocation Act, Termination of Recognized Tribes, and Environmental Conservation.



A traditional healer from the Hupa tribe (Source: Edward S. Curtis)

When California became a state in 1850, the state and federal governments instilled policies to make room for white settlers and to lay claim to gold on traditional tribal lands. As a result of this systemic violence, it is estimated that the Native Californian population decreased from as many as 150,000 people in 1848 to just 30,000 in 1870. Entire nations, such as the Yahi of Northern California, were rendered extinct during this period.

Policies such as the 1850's California Act for the Government and Protection of Indians legalized the enslavement of Indigenous peoples while state and local governments funded militias to wage war against Indigenous peoples. Bounties were placed on Native American heads, and settlers were paid for stealing the horses of the people they killed.

“A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one. In a sense, I agree with this sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him and save the man.”

- US Army's Richard Henry Pratt 1892



The Sherman Indian High School - Perris Campus
(Source: Sherman Indian Museum)

In a shift away from exterminating the remaining population of Native Americans, the United States turned to the pacification of Indigenous peoples. In 1892 Richard Henry Pratt and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) founded residential schools to force Indigenous youth to conform to American culture. California's first residential school, the Sherman Indian School, was founded in 1892 in Riverside County, where it remains operational to this day.



A memorial to the children who died at the Kamloops Indian Residential School. The recent discovery of 215 unmarked graves sparked conversations about and investigations into the residential schools throughout the US and Canada.
(Source: Brian Morris/CBC)

Residential schools stripped children of their families, traditional homelands, languages, and cultures. Students were subject to corporal punishment, starvation, non-consensual nutritional studies, and sexual abuse - many died. To this day, unmarked mass graves are being discovered at residential schools throughout the United States and Canada. Survivors of this period are often called the lost generation.

In a 1928 study, residential schools were found to have disastrous impacts on Indigenous communities - physically and culturally. Despite the report's recommendations, forced enrollment in residential schools continued to rise until the 1970's (The Meriam Report 1982).

104TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

H. CON. RES. 108

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

OCTOBER 19 (legislative day, OCTOBER 18), 1995

Received

OCTOBER 23, 1995

Referred to the Committee on Labor and Human Resources

CONCURRENT RESOLUTION

To correct technical errors in the enrollment of the bill
H.R. 1594.

- 1 *Resolved by the House of Representatives (the Senate*
- 2 *concurring), That, in the enrollment of the bill (H.R.*
- 3 *1594) to place restrictions on the promotion by the De-*

House Concurrent Resolution 108 (source - Timetoast)

By the 1940s, Congress had grown tired of the slow assimilation process of residential schools and began implementing termination - the absolvment of federal treaty obligations to Indigenous nations. Termination was intended to strip Native peoples of their sovereignty by limiting their governmental authority.

In 1953, House Concurrent Resolution 108 made termination an official federal policy - declaring all recognized tribes in California, Florida, New York, and Texas terminated. This meant an immediate end to federal funding, social services, environmental governance, legal and law enforcement protection, and the recognition of tribes' rights to reservations despite being guaranteed by treaties. Throughout the state, settlers enacted land grabs of terminated reservations.

While some tribes have restored their status as being federally recognized, many remain federally unrecognized. Nations such as the Tongva and Kizh remain unrecognized and do not receive treaty rights - e.g., no reservation or social services from the federal government.

The Environmental Movement:

The environmental movement has a fraught history with Indian Country ranging from preservationist removal of Indigenous peoples to create National Parks to collaborating against big oil and environmental degradation. For us to be good guests on Indigenous lands, we must first understand the role of the environmental movement in the erasure and fetishization of native peoples.

Dating back to the beginning of the environmental movement, early environmentalists like Thoreau and Muir created an illusion of wilderness - an unpopulated, untended environment devoid of "civilized" life (Gilio-Whitaker 2019). These narratives erased Indigenous peoples from the sacred reciprocal relationships we have with the land. They set the stage for preservationism - the belief that nature must remain pristine and untouched by humans. This ideology influenced removing Indigenous peoples from National and State Parks and outlawed traditional land management practices.

Without our communities to uphold our end of the relationship with our plant and animal relatives, landscapes began to transform. For example, removing the Timbisha Shoshone from California's Death Valley National Monument in 1933 led to decades of landscape neglect. Without their land-based practices to care for the land, the honey mesquite and single-leaf piñon groves deteriorated under the mismanagement of the National Park Service (Gilio-Whitaker XX). Similar situations occurred in Yosemite Valley after the removal of the Yosemite and Mariposa Indians. Just as Native peoples need the land to survive, the land needs us to care for her.

Invasive Species:

Settlers introduced a multitude of foreign plants, animals, and diseases during colonization which has completely altered the landscape of our home and threatens our more than human relatives. These species, like brome grasses and eucalyptus trees, manipulate the surrounding ecosystem. They can choke out our native plants and disrupt the relationship of reciprocity that braids our native ecosystems. For example, eucalyptus trees (native to Australia) secrete a toxic oil from their leaves to prevent the growth of native plant species beneath them. They grow fast and are brittle, acting as the perfect tinder for wildfires.



While major divides remain between the environmental movement and Indigenous communities, there has been a recent social shift in recognizing the importance of traditional ecological knowledge and tribal environmental governance. The field of environmental justice further engages with Indigenous communities and uplifts our voices in the face of environmental racism and erasure.

These policies have devastating impacts on our cultures, our plant and animal relatives, the water we drink, and the air we breathe. We are all subjugated to a genocide that continues to this day with no end in sight. Yet we are still here fighting to ensure a habitable planet for our children's futures and the next seven generations to come.

Sustainability is made possible with the knowledge and connection of native plants within our ecosystems. Indigenous peoples are inseparable from this story as our existence is mirrored in the past, present and future. As Indigenous peoples we are the human story and translation of this environment.

Religious Freedoms:

In addition to termination policies and residential school, the US federal government used religious discrimination as a means for assimilation. Dating back to the early 1800's, Christianity was used as a tool to "civilize" Indigenous peoples. By 1883, the Department of Interior's Code of Indian Offenses outlawed our religious and cultural practices. Despite the First Amendment's guarantee of freedom of religion, Indigenous traditional religious practices were not protected until the passage of the American Indian Religious Act of 1978. For almost one hundred years, Native peoples were prohibited from accessing our sacred sites, dancing, possessing regalia (our sacred objects) and honoring and celebrating our relationship to the Land (Zotigh 2018).

Additional Resources

Recommended Books

- "As Long As Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice, From Colonization to Standing Rock" - **Dina Gilo-Whitaker**
- "Fresh Banana Leaves: Healing Indigenous Landscapes Through Indigenous Science" - **Jessica Hernandez**
- "A Drum in One Hand, A Sockeye in the Other: Stories of Indigenous Food Sovereignty from the Northwest Coast" - **Charlotte Coté**

Social Media

- Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary IG: **@chumashsanctuary**
- Santa Ynez Chumash Environmental Office IG: **@syceo**
- The Indigenous Foundation IG: **@theindigenousfoundation**
- Decolonize Myself **@decolonizemyself**
- Nicholas Hummingbird **@_native_hummingbird**

Plants as a Pathway to Healing

"We must protect the forests for our children, grandchildren and children yet to be born. We must protect the forests for those who can't speak for themselves such as the birds, animals, fish and trees."

- Qwatsinas (Nuxalk Nation)

In the face of genocide and erasure - Indigenous peoples have time and time again proven how resilient we are and continue to push back against colonialism. To this day, we are the first to stand up against big oil, advocate for the Land, and push for legislation to protect our plant and animal relatives. We have cared for these Lands for millennia and our traditional ecological knowledge teaches us how to walk in a good way. In order for environmental organizations and legislation to be successful - they must involve and prioritize Native voices and ecosystems.

Like Indigenous peoples, native plants have existed on these lands since immemorial. They have spent this time caring for our peoples.

In some native cultures, plants are our oldest relatives. As our elders, they guide us through lessons of reciprocity. Our livelihoods are mutually intertwined with the health of our plant relatives and the relations they maintain.

Native plants are a direct lifeline for environmental security and cultural integrity. Plants are capable of reestablishing "Place" by cleaning water, air, and soil. Healthy ecosystems mean healthy people. Think back to your right tree, right place, right reason training and consider opportunities in which you can prioritize native species over invasive or ornamental trees. We have provided additional information on some key native trees below but be sure to ask lots of questions and be fully engaged during our in-person training with Nicholas Hummingbird.



Coast Live Oak

Native Tree

Description: Large evergreen oaks with expanding and embracing branches. Rigid, grey bark.

Reasons to Plant: Beautiful, large tree that creates a habitat for native birds and animals. Nutritious acorns. Adapted to SoCal climate.



California Bay Laurel

Native Tree

Description: Fragrant medicinal and culinary plant. Native to coastal forests and the Sierra foothills.

Reasons to Plant: Avocado-like fruit which, when prepared correctly, tastes like dark chocolate. Leaf litter repels fleas and ticks.



Elderberry

Native Small Tree/Shrub

Description: Deciduous tree which can grow up to 30 ft. It has cream or yellow flowers in the spring and purple berries in the fall.

Reasons to Plant: Berries are one of the most important food sources for birds in California. Doesn't require much water and is resilient to harm.



Toyon

Native Shrub

Description: Perennial component of the coastal sage scrub, chaparral, and oak woodland habitats. Bright red berries.

Reasons to Plant: Berries can be made into beverage and are consumed by birds and larger mammals to be distributed. Beautiful, easy to grow plant.



Engelmann Oak

Native Tree

Description: Rare oak species native coastal Southern California. Suburban sprawl has encroached on native habitat.

Reasons to Plant: Beautiful but tricky oak to maintain. Drought tolerant and provides habitat to native birds and animals.



Western Sycamore

Native Tree

Description: Riparian species found in areas of abundant water (e.g. stream beds, near ponds)

Reasons to Plant: Deep tap root but will require a lot of water. Plant by a stream or a seep.

Being a Good Ally

Allyship is the recognition of the positions and privileges we occupy and using them responsibly to better the unequal society our privilege stems from. Privilege refers to the uneven distribution of power in society. Privilege is when an aspect of your identity or life is accepted without question or issue. These unearned attributes change the ease and influence you have within society. While privilege is a fact, it is not an absolute (there are multiple levels and positions one can occupy).

“Ally” is not a noun, but rather a verb, because it requires action. To be an ally is to make a concerted effort to self-educate, to better understand the struggle others are facing every single day and to stand up... even if you feel scared.

Levels of Allyship	
The Actor	The actions of an actor do not disrupt the status quo, much like a spectator at a game, both only have a nominal effect in shifting the overall outcome. The actions of an actor do not explicitly name or challenge the pillars of white supremacy.
The Ally	<p>An ally is a disrupter and educator in spaces dominated by Whiteness. Being an ally is about listening and constantly educating oneself - not occupying non-Indigenous spaces to lead, take over, or explain.</p> <p>One of the most important roles of an ally is to engage those who share your identity. Have conversations with others in your position of privilege and call them in if needed.</p> <p>The actions of an ally have greater likelihood to challenge settler colonialism, institutionalized racism and White supremacy.</p>
The Accomplice	The actions of an accomplice are meant to directly challenge institutional racism, colonization, and white supremacy by blocking or impeding racist people, policies, and structures. Actions are often coordinated with leaders who are Indigenous and People of Color. Accomplices actively listen with respect and build trust through consent and being accountable.

Pathways for Tree Ambassadors

1

Planting Native Trees

Advocate for the restoration of native plants that are both culturally and environmentally restorative in your neighborhoods. Speak to your community about the benefits of native trees, and encourage continued planting & stewardship of natives.

2

Contextualized Work

Remember whose land we are working to restore and plant. Learning the history of place can help us understand how to navigate the field of environmental work moving forward and which parties have a seat at the table.

3

Building Relationships

Our actions become meaningful when coupled with authentic relationship building and informed intentional actions. Enter community with respect and without extractive expectations.

Together, we can effect change beyond the Tree Ambassador program and beyond our internal communities, but it requires a brutally honest assessment of the history, reality and future of U.S. society.

Tools for Action

News Articles, Videos, Podcasts & Studies

Bridge Projects on Youtube

<https://tinyurl.com/5b2xvnjv>

What Is Ethnobotany? - US Forest Service

<https://tinyurl.com/538bs7jd>

Southern California Ethnobotany: Traditional Use of Native Plants

<https://tinyurl.com/mrd53zen>

Ethnobotany Specific to Southern California - Chumash Museum

<https://tinyurl.com/5n99h7z6>

Uses of Native Plants to Chumash Nation

<https://tinyurl.com/2s37bpv5>

The Aqueduct Between Us (Parts 1-5)

<https://tinyurl.com/3w5wuwve>

Native Plant Garden Tour: Brandy Williams, South Central LA

<https://youtu.be/X3bByNE9mEo>

California Indigenous Perspectives on Sacred Waters

<https://tinyurl.com/4rfcnrdw>

History of Indigenous People native to California - State of California Native American Heritage Commission

<https://tinyurl.com/mrwj4hw8>

Ethnobotany and Native Plant Resources - Cal Poly Pomona

<https://tinyurl.com/2m2un88u>

California Ethnobotany Pamphlet - UCSC

<https://tinyurl.com/mryzpvh8>

Tools for Action

Websites

Conversation with an Indigenous Herbalist - KCET/Autry Museum
<https://tinyurl.com/2w6vhw5k>

Bridge Projects on Youtube
<https://tinyurl.com/5b2xvnjv>

Native Conservation Practices - USFS/USDA
<https://tinyurl.com/rwbt8cyt>

CA native plant landscaper certificate program - Theodore Payne
<https://theodorepayne.org/learn/landscaper-certification/>

Guide of Native Plants - Be Water Wise
<https://tinyurl.com/mpbsmmw3>

Native Land Digital
<https://native-land.ca/>

Incentivize Native Plant Usage Through the Water Rebate Program - Metropolitan Water District
<https://tinyurl.com/njwke57v>

Native American Heritage Commission Digital Atlas
<https://tinyurl.com/2wfcvs29>



Your city. Your voice. Your urban forest.
Tu voz. Tu ciudad. Tu bosque urbano.