

Sage Advice

Rethinking land stewardship with the Muwekma Ohlone tribe BY AMANI HAMED



STEWARDS Muwekma Ohlone Vice Chairwoman Monica Arellano and her son, Youth Ambassador Lucas Tuyhešte Arellano, examine white sage at the Muwekma Four Directions Garden at Stanford Educational Farm.

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A POWWOW IS a joyous occasion, a gathering that celebrates intertribal relationships, Indigenous resilience and rich cultural heritage. At every powwow, the smell of one particular sacred and medicinal plant envelops the gathering, rising into the air with the sounds of drums: white sage.

The scent is sweet and pungent, heavy and comforting.

Local Indigenous tribes—in preparation for two upcoming powwows, May 5–6 at Santa Clara University and May 11–12 at Stanford University—are partnering with local horticulturists and university gardens to grow white sage and other medicinal plants and herbs.

The fruits and flowers of their efforts, part of a larger movement toward

Indigenous land and food sovereignty, can be seen throughout the Bay Area at local events, public gardens, protected open spaces and popular hiking trails laden with California native plants and wildflowers.

While white sage was carried to California from the American Southwest during a pan-American Indigenous cultural revival at the turn of the 20th century, many sages are native to California, and the use of smudging, or cleansing with the burning of medicinal herbs, is a practice common among many Native California tribes.

“The smoke rises up and carries our prayers up to Creator,” Amah Mutsun Chairman Val Lopez said at the recent Climate & Environmental Justice conference at Santa Clara University.

Also in attendance at the conference, held April 27–29, was Monica Arellano, vice chairwoman of the Muwekma Ohlone tribe. She says the abundance of white sage, California native sage and native mugwort are “such a blessing.”

Muwekma Ohlone chair Charlene Nijmeh has been a visible force in the tribe’s quest for federal recognition, and Arellano herself is notoriously busy, working long hours and often traveling throughout the Bay Area. But Arellano emphasizes that the work is a group effort. “It’s not one person championing the cause,” she insists. “Our tribal council has done so much work over the years.”

Arellano runs the tribe’s cultural resource management firm, posts frequently to their social media channels and co-chairs the Muwekma language committee, reviving their Chochenyo language. She also revamped the tribe’s website. She speaks at local events and coordinates with people like Patrick Archie, director of the Stanford Educational Farm, to bring back Native planting practices.

At a meeting with Archie at the Stanford farm, Arellano and son Lucas Tuyhešte Arellano, a Muwekma Youth Ambassador, rub the leaves of mugwort and sage between their fingers and breathe in their scent. They examine the small name markers in front of each plant, several of which bear the plant’s Chochenyo names above their Latin scientific names.

“There are many plant names in the [Chochenyo] language that we can offer and share their traditional uses,” Arellano says. “It’s important to be able to share some things with the public, so they understand our deeply rooted connection to mak warep—our land—and that we are still here practicing our traditional ways. However, there is information that we do not share and keep that within our people.”

The Muwekma Four Directions Garden and the larger Stanford farm are open to the public Monday through Friday from 8am to 6pm, and on

Saturdays from 9am to 5pm. They're also working in collaboration with CSU East Bay and Santa Clara University on the creation of native gardens.

The several gardens, planting projects and ecological programs are part of a larger effort to heal not only the relationships between the tribes and those who benefit from a legacy of ongoing colonization, but also to heal California's natural landscape.

"It feels wonderful. It's healing, it's part of the whole healing process," Arellano says. "And it actually stems from working with great people at Santa Clara University, who are culturally sensitive, and who have that understanding, and want to make that bridge."

At their meeting, Archie points out a patch of land he hopes will one day be a Muwekma food and medicine forest.

"This partnership has been wonderful for us too," Archie says. "We just want to give back to the original stewards of this land."

Arellano says their quest for federal recognition, which will be discussed at the upcoming Inaugural Native American Symposium at Santa Clara University ahead of the powwow, is tied directly to their need for land. They plan to develop their Indigenous farming practices and provide a space for food sovereignty, ceremony, and the care of elders and children in the tribe.

She hopes the tribe will someday be able to create a Native village in the Bay Area, their ancestral homeland.

The tribes are relearning their Indigenous stewardship practices and bringing back California's rich pre-colonization biodiversity.

While early Spanish and American missionaries and colonists thought they were taking over a wild and untended landscape, they were actually inheriting a vast network of carefully managed ecosystems like coastal wetlands and meadows, oak forests, and scrublands.

"It was a beautiful mosaic. Very different plants have different colors and it was beautiful," says Chairman Val Lopez. "They didn't realize that the indigenous people were intentionally managing it and shaping and forming and stewarding it."

Ultimately, he says, the renewal of Native stewardship is the first great step in the fight against climate change, and must be led by Indigenous peoples.

"Our creation story tells us we have the responsibility to take care of Mother Earth and all living things and our people take that very, very, very

seriously,” he says.

Working in partnership with the Amah Mutsun Land Trust, naturalist and UC Santa Cruz guest lecturer Rick Flores serves as steward of the Amah Mutsun Cultural Relearning Program at UCSC’s arboretum.

Flores says there are many California native plant species people can look out for and spend time with on the trails that are currently open, many of which had cultural or culinary significance to local tribes.

The Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority also has worked with the Muwekma Ohlone tribe on a land preservation project. Matt Freeman, assistant general manager of the Open Space Authority, talks about the collaboration on the Coyote Ridge Open Space Preserve.

“We realized there might be nothing more respectful that we could do to honor their desire to keep the Chochenyo language alive and well than to rename the preserve Máyyan 'Ooyákma,” Freeman says.

Though the preserve is currently under construction, it has already seen the resurgence of plant and animal species essential to the survival of the Muwekma Ohlone.

Freeman says the authority hopes to have a soft opening in early July.

As chair of the planning committee, Claire Alford is gearing up for Santa Clara University’s third annual powwow. The SCU senior and public health major says, “I’m really trying to curate a space where college students, especially if they haven’t been connected to their culture, can learn more about it and come on this journey.”

Descended from the Shawnee of Oklahoma, Alford grew up in the central-coast town of Santa Maria and says food security and protection of native flora and fauna are important to health.

As for medicinal plants like sage, Alford says the smell reminds her of the gathering of community during a powwow.

“It’s just a joyful moment. Smelling smudge, the sage in the air, it brings you back to that powwow moment,” Alford says. “It’s really awesome and really empowering.”

On May 5, Santa Clara University will host the Native American Symposium on Challenges of the Federal Recognition Process at Mayer Theater. The same day, a vigil for missing and murdered indigenous women will be held 6:15– 8:15pm at San Jose City Hall. The Santa Clara University Powwow takes place May 6, 11am–6pm, at SCU Mission Gardens. And the 52nd annual Stanford Powwow will be held May 12–14.