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Esselen Tribe of Monterey County and Western Rivers Conservancy Conserve Second Stretch of Little Sur River Through Land Back

The Pico Blanco property follows Eagle Peak Rancheria (formerly Adler Ranch), adding 327 acres, including old-growth redwoods and 1.3 miles of Little Sur River, to tribal ownership



Jana Nason, Esselen Tribe descendant, visits a stretch of the Little Sur River that flows through the Pico Blanco property that Western Rivers Conservancy has conserved and conveyed to the tribe.

Photo: Kodiak Greenwood/Western Rivers Conservancy

BIG SUR, Calif. (January 15, 2025) — In the heart of California’s magnificent Big Sur coast, [Western Rivers Conservancy](#) (WRC) has conveyed the 327-acre Pico Blanco property on the Little Sur River to the [Esselen Tribe of Monterey County](#) for permanent conservation and stewardship.

This property holds significant sacred and cultural meaning for the Tribe, as it is located at the base of a white limestone-topped mountain they call *Pixchi* (or Pico Blanco), which the Esselen Tribe considers the “Center of the Esselen World” and is where the Tribe’s creation story began. Ecologically, the land features 1.3 miles of the Little Sur River, which provides critical habitat for



numerous imperiled species, as well as one of the largest stands of old-growth redwoods on the Central Coast. The [Wildlife Conservation Board](#) (WCB) provided funding for the purchase of the property. *See property map below.*

Pico Blanco is the second important tract of ancestral land that WRC has conveyed to the Tribe. In July 2020, they completed a landmark conservation project that placed the [1,199-acre Adler Ranch](#) (now renamed Eagle Peak), located roughly 20 miles south of Monterey and just a mile downstream from Pico Blanco, into Tribal ownership.

“The Pico Blanco area, defined by the Little Sur River, is the spiritual, cultural and geographical center for the Esselen Tribe,” said Tribal Chairman and President **Tom Little Bear Nason**. “To have the opportunity for our tribal members to reconnect with more of the river and these ancient redwoods fulfills a deeply meaningful part of our mission. We appreciate the spirit of partnership from Western Rivers Conservancy and California’s Wildlife Conservation Board that has made this possible.”

“Western Rivers’ years-long partnership with the Esselen Tribe has delivered tremendous conservation wins for the Little Sur River with its majestic redwoods, threatened fish and endangered wildlife, while returning it to its original stewards, the Esselen people,” said **Nelson Mathews**, WRC’s interim president. “We are honored once again to work with a Tribal partner to achieve our shared goals of permanently protecting the West’s precious waterways.”

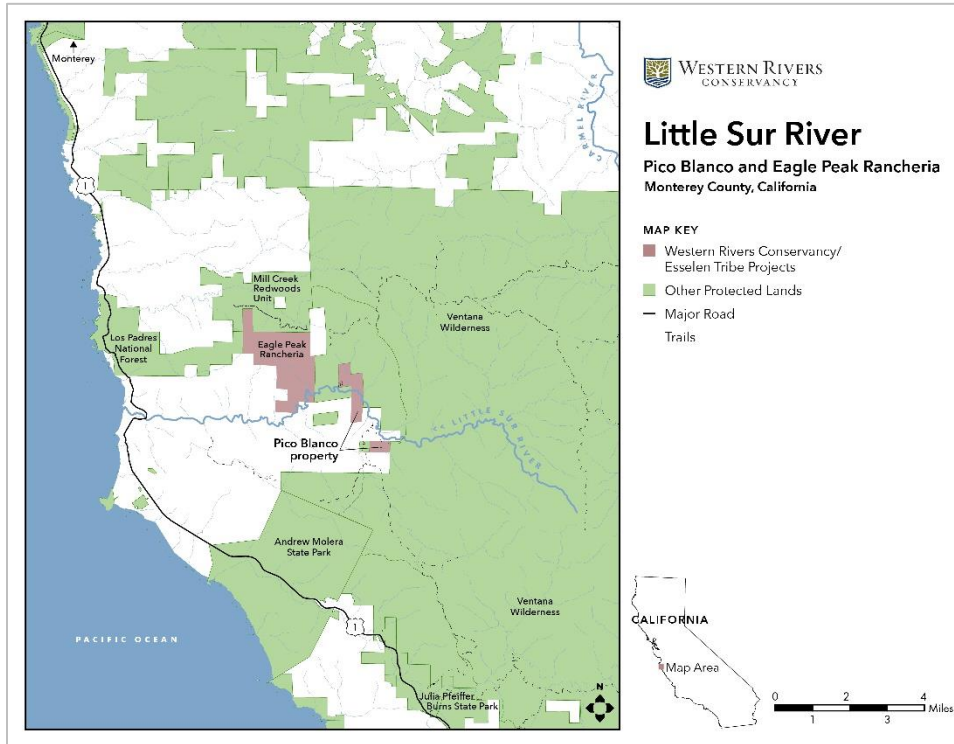
Western Rivers Conservancy worked with the Silicon Valley Monterey Bay Council of Boy Scouts of America and the Esselen Tribe since 2019 to acquire the property and secured funding from the Wildlife Conservation Board to purchase and convey the property to the Tribe. Individual donors provided support to WRC for costs that were critical to the project.

Jennifer Norris, executive director of Wildlife Conservation Board said, “WCB is proud to contribute funding for the acquisition of the Pico Blanco property, ensuring the permanent protection of critical biodiversity along California’s Central Coast.”

The Environmental Riches of Little Sur River and Pico Blanco

The Little Sur River flows just over 25 miles from its headwaters in the Santa Lucia Mountains, within the Ventana Wilderness, down into a deep, redwood-shaded valley and into the Pacific, just north of Andrew Molera State Park. The river provides excellent habitat for imperiled fish and wildlife, including endangered California condor, threatened California red-legged frog, California spotted owl and numerous other species. The Little Sur is considered the Central Coast’s most important and pristine spawning stream for threatened South-Central California Coast steelhead. Combined, the Pico Blanco and Eagle Peak conveyances to the Esselen Tribe conserve 2.3 miles of vitally important habitat for these precious species.

The Pico Blanco property is made up of two parcels of undeveloped land that was formerly part of a Boy Scouts camp and was once owned by newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst, who donated the land to the Boy Scouts in the 1950s.



Esselen Tribe descendent **Jana Nason** added, “The Creator and Great Spirit has guided us on this journey to be reconnected with this sacred area of our Ancestral lands. Visiting the land is deeply humbling, as it is so pure and wild. Our more-than-human kin – the redwoods, foxes, steelhead and tanoaks – welcome us back home with

unexplainable embraces when we return. We know we have returned home when we see the areas where our ancestors processed acorns, and we sit and reflect on the deep reciprocity with the Earth we have inherited from them. It feels good to come full circle again.”

Peter Lemon, vice president of Silicon Valley Monterey Bay Council, Scouting America, said, “The Pico Blanco property is a special place for generations of Scouting America youth and their families. We are honored that we could work with the Esselen Tribe of Monterey County and Western Rivers Conservancy to preserve the wild and inspiring place it has always been and will continue to be under the Tribe’s stewardship.”

Western Rivers Conservancy – A Leader in Land Back

For more than 30 years, WRC has taken the lead in marrying conservation and Tribal land return outcomes, working with Tribal nations around the West to permanently protect rivers and the lands around them. WRC and Tribal Nations, who are often the original stewards of riverlands across the West, make natural conservation partners, given Tribal Nations often possess the resources, foresight, expertise and commitment to restore and conserve these vital places in perpetuity. Most recently, WRC [conveyed 466 acres](#) of land along the Estero de San



Antonio to the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, in Marin County, north of San Francisco. A complete list and history of WRC's Tribal Nation partnerships are available [here](#).

Hi-res images are available [here](#).

About the Esselen Tribe of Monterey County

The Mission of the ETMC is to preserve and to protect our cultural heritage and ancestral sacred sites. The efforts of the organization are not solely dedicated to the Esselen Tribe, but encompass protection and preservation of the Esselen, Rumsen, Chalone, Sureño, Chunchunes and Guatcharrone people, which includes but is not limited to the villages of Achasta, Chalon, Echilat, Ensen, Excelen, Esslenajan, Ixchenta, Jojopan, Kuchun, Pachepas, Sargenta-Ruc, Soccoronda and Tucutnut, all which are located within sacred prehistoric and historic tribal lands of Monterey County, California. The Esselen Tribe of Monterey County is first and foremost a tribal group. It also formed a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization with the goal of continuing cultural traditions and preserving the cultural heritage of the historic tribes that are located within Monterey County, along with protecting and preserving the recognized and unrecognized sacred lands and archeological sites. For more information, please visit www.esselentribe.org.

About Western Rivers Conservancy

Western Rivers Conservancy's motto is, "Sometimes to save a river, you have to buy it." WRC purchases land along the West's finest rivers and streams to conserve habitat for fish and wildlife, protect key sources of cold water and create public access for all to enjoy. To ensure the lands it acquires are protected in perpetuity, WRC transfers them to long-term stewards including the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, state parks and Tribal Nations. WRC has created sanctuaries for fish and wildlife and secured recreational access along 250 rivers and streams around the West. It has protected more than 440 river miles and over 220,000 acres of land in nine western states. Its approach to river conservation is effective, tangible and permanent. More information at westernrivers.org.

About Wildlife Conservation Board

The Wildlife Conservation Board protects, restores and enhances California's spectacular natural resources for wildlife and for the public's use and enjoyment in partnership with conservation groups, government agencies and the people of California. Originally created within the California Department of Natural Resources, and later placed with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, WCB is a separate and independent Board with authority and funding to carry out an acquisition and development program for wildlife conservation. More information at wcb.ca.gov.

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