

A long-awaited healing of land, its people

[Stolen land, from A1] henge, the pyramids of Egypt or the temples of Greece.

It's a major achievement for the LandBack movement in Southern California, a branch of the nationwide campaign by tribes to reclaim and protect ancestral territories that were encroached upon and seized by the United States — California included.

The acquisition announcement came as Native American leaders prepared to gather for the two-day White House Tribal Nations Summit, which kicked off on Wednesday with President Biden promising to usher in a new era of cooperation with Native Americans by giving them greater authority over their homelands.

A delegation from California pressed administration officials to grant federal monument status to hundreds of thousands of acres, including areas that are important to Indigenous people in the San Gabriel Mountains, adjacent to Joshua Tree National Park and in the Medicine Lake Highlands near Mt. Shasta.

The Orange County parcel, which lies at the city limits of Huntington Beach, is minuscule by comparison but is deeply personal to two of the tribal leaders who will help lead the restoration of the oceanfront site: Dustin Murphey, who is Acjachemen, and Tina Calderon, who is of Tongva as well as Chumash, Mexican and Yome descent.

They are the president and treasurer respectively of the nonprofit Acjachemen Tongva Land Conservancy, a coalition dedicated to acquiring, preserving and protecting the tribes' shared homelands in Southern California.

A fierce ocean breeze rustles the trees and hawks circle low overhead as Calderon and Murphey make their way down a dirt path at the site. They wind through an expanse of crackling stands of arid brush, shaggy palms and tall, yellowing grass that's surrounded by beach homes, apartments and a wetland reserve.

They say that to understand what it means for tribes to reclaim a piece of California, you have to understand that "land" means something different to their communities.

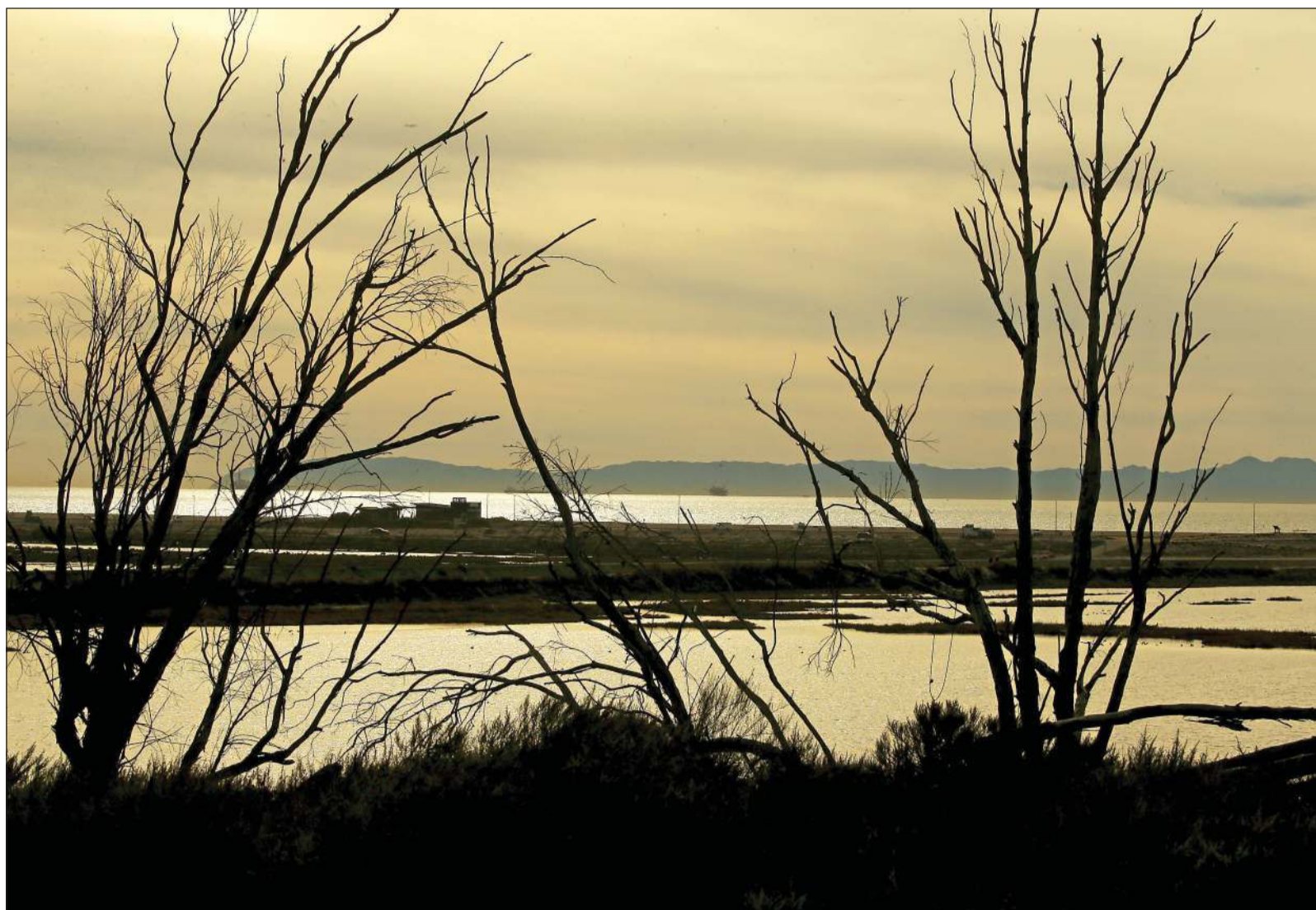
"We hold title — that's a huge thing," Calderon says.

But tribal members didn't just get land back. Given many attempts over centuries to displace Indigenous Californians and erase their culture, gaining territory is tantamount to reclaiming a part of themselves, Calderon and Murphey say.

To be Tongva or Acjachemen means to live as one with an ecosystem that your creator placed you on Earth to safeguard. Land isn't merely property to be delineated, appraised, bought and sold for personal gain.

Private property "is a foreign concept for our people," says Calderon, whose Tongva tribe has roughly 3,000 members. "We didn't own land."

The ground beneath your feet has a soul. It's your kin. It doesn't belong to you as an individual, but



Photographs by LUIS SINCO Los Angeles Times

BOLSA CHICA'S wetlands form a backdrop to land reclaimed by the Acjachemen and Tongva people for conservation and ceremonial use.



FOR MURPHEY and Calderon, their efforts are less about owning land than regaining part of themselves.

you belong to it. That ancient belief system is embedded in the name of Calderon's tribe: Tongva translates loosely as "people of the Earth."

"For most Native Americans in Southern California, we've always thought of ourselves as stewards, even though we didn't hold title to the land," Murphey says. "It's even more important now that we do."

Calderon recalls awkward encounters with those who come to the adjacent nature reserve, with its 200 bird species, where some walk along trails built over the saltwater and freshwater wetlands and others lose themselves in the roar of the surf.

She relays one experience last year during an annual procession in which tribal members stopped at several sacred sites in the area.

When the group reached Bolsa Chica Mesa, they were greeted with stares from non-Native people who had set up picnic chairs at the edge of the property to watch planes performing maneuvers at a nearby air show.

"We couldn't even have our songs and our prayers without them looking at us like we're bothering them," says Calderon, 62, who lives in the San Fernando Valley.

The cultural significance of this place isn't evident to many, even though the mesa, which is about 12 acres, has long been mired in land-use battles.

Prehistoric skull and other bone fragments were unearthed by a residential construction crew in 1992, prompting calls from Indigenous groups and environmentalists to halt bulldozing at the site. One anthropologist assessed the archaeological find, which was dated to about 8,000 years ago, as "one of the very few we have from that time period."

Controversy also arose in 1999 after a work crew discovered cranial bone fragments and a tooth. The excavated remains of an estimated 160 Acjachemen and Tongva ancestors were reburied as efforts to prevent further damage to the site continued.

In 2016, the Bolsa Chica Land Trust, a conservation

group, reached an agreement with Huntington Beach and state officials and private property owners to donate most of the mesa so that it could be kept as open space. That was a key step toward transferring the 6.2-acre parcel, once owned by the Goodell Family Trust, to the tribes.

Calderon and Murphey are dismayed by dirt-bike tracks and moguls made of mud flecked with seashells that mar the mesa. Riding is no longer allowed.

The two can't say whether the desecration was done purposely or out of ignorance. What's important for them is that their people have more of an ability to restrict activities that threaten the grounds.

In addition to the ancestral graves, researchers have also excavated house foundations, hearths, beads, charmstones and rare, hand-carved cog stones. Theories abound about what the villagers who lived here did with the disks, but Calderon embraces the belief that they were used to read the stars.

Calderon's yellow-and-gray striped shawl billows in the wind as she gazes toward the ocean. The land reclamation is still sinking in, but she is excited about the possibilities.

In addition to holding ceremonial gatherings here, the tribes have plans to clear out the dirt-biking structures, remove invasive plants and restore the land as a habitat for native flora and wildlife that can be sustained even as climate change and sea-level rise imperil vulnerable ecosystems such as these coastal lowlands.

"Imagine being able to harvest our medicines here and know that they're safe and nobody's spraying them," she says.

For Murphey, 45, of Costa Mesa, receiving the 6 acres represents a steppingstone in the long campaign waged by Southern California tribes to achieve justice for all that was taken from them, starting with the Spanish colonization.

His Acjachemen tribe has about 1,900 members and its ancestral territory extends for about 65 miles from southern Los Angeles County and Riverside County south to what is now Camp Pendleton in San Diego County. With the transfer of title from the family that had owned Bolsa Chica Mesa to his tribe and the Tongva, in combination with other recent land returns, Indigenous activists have another reason to believe that perseverance can yield results, he says.

"It's just an amazing thing to have happen," Murphey says.

More than anything, Murphey says, he feels thankful for the hard work that successive generations of Acjachemen and Tongva people have done to raise awareness of the need for land returns.

"This happened because of them," he says of earlier advocates. "We are standing on their shoulders."

Dark sunglasses protect Murphey's eyes from the sunlight glinting off the ocean. He avoids displays of emotion, but his words convey the sorrow that stirs inside of him.

Though Murphey grew up in Lake County in Northern California, his family would come to visit Acjachemen relatives and take part in tribal events in and around San Juan Capistrano in Orange County.

Elders didn't talk much

about the pain of losing control over a territory that their people were the first to inhabit. The general attitude seemed to focus on the future rather than dwell on the past. Some of the family members he visited on those childhood trips have died — taking their memories with them.

Calderon says that long-term plans for a land rehabilitation project — led by the tribes and guided by input from their members — can help descendants old and young process and move on from their shared trauma.

"Healing of the land means that we can heal the people," she says.

The Tongva and Acjachemen may have been deprived of their stewardship of the mesa, but Calderon and Murphey say the souls of the ancestors, plants and animals — and even the spirit flowing through the soil itself — never stopped watching over this place.

Calderon came prepared to give thanks to them all.

She unzips a cloth pouch of ground tobacco leaf mixed with sage and cedar.

"Tobacco is sacred to us — something we pray with," she says.

"When I started visiting here several years ago, it always felt like it belonged to us but it didn't belong to us, so when I would go through the gate, I always offered tobacco and I asked for permission to come onto the land," Calderon says.

Her offering on this day held a different meaning, she says.

"I feel like at this point, I can stand here and if anyone said I can't be here, I could say, 'Yes, I can. ... It belongs to us, the people of the land.'"

Inmate exonerated after nearly 50 years

Convicted of murder in Oklahoma, he is the longest-serving U.S. prisoner to be declared innocent.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

OKLAHOMA CITY — An Oklahoma judge has exonerated a man who spent nearly 50 years in prison on a murder conviction, the longest-serving inmate to be declared innocent of a crime.

Glynn Simmons, 71, who was released in July after prosecutors agreed that key evidence in his case was not turned over to his defense lawyers, was ruled innocent Tuesday.

"This court finds by clear and convincing evidence that the offense for which Mr. Simmons was convicted, sentenced and imprisoned... was not committed by Mr. Simmons," according to the ruling by Oklahoma County District Judge Amy Pa-



DOUG HOKE The Oklahoman

"IT'S A lesson in resilience and tenacity," said Glynn Simmons, 71, who was released in July.

lumbo.

Simmons served 48 years, one month and 18 days since his conviction, making him the longest imprisoned U.S. inmate to be exonerated, according to data kept by the National Registry of Exonerations.

He said afterward that he feels vindicated after his time in prison, which included initially being sentenced to death row.

"It's a lesson in resilience and tenacity," Simmons said

during a brief news conference after the ruling. "Don't let nobody tell you that it [exoneration] can't happen, because it really can."

Simmons has maintained his innocence, saying he was in Louisiana at the time of the 1974 slaying of Carolyn Sue Rogers inside an Edmond liquor store.

He and co-defendant Don Roberts were convicted in 1975 of the murder and initially sentenced to death. Their sentences were reduced to life in prison in 1977 after U.S. Supreme Court rulings related to capital punishment. Roberts was released on parole in 2008.

Palumbo in July ordered a new trial for Simmons after Dist. Atty. Vicki Behenna said prosecutors had failed to turn over evidence in the case, including a police report that showed an eyewitness might have identified other suspects in the case.

Behenna in September said there is no longer physical evidence in the case against Simmons and an-

nounced she would not retry him, though she opposed declaring him actually innocent.

A spokesperson for Behenna declined immediate comment on Wednesday.

The ruling makes Simmons eligible for up to \$175,000 in compensation from the state for wrongful conviction and opens the door for a federal lawsuit against Oklahoma City and law enforcement involved in his arrest and conviction, defense attorney Joe Norwood said Wednesday.

Compensation, though, is probably years away, Norwood said, and Simmons is living on donations while undergoing treatment for cancer that was detected after his release from prison.

"Glynn is having to live off of GoFundMe. That's literally how the man is surviving right now, paying rent, buying food," Norwood said.

"Getting him compensation, and getting compensation is not for sure, is in the future and he has to sustain himself now."

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE



Jia Jia Ye

HEALTHCARE

Jia Jia Ye, Sollis Health

Sollis Health, the first and only concierge urgent and emergency care provider, has named Jia Jia Ye as Chief Operating Officer, effective immediately. As the company's COO, Ye will ensure that Sollis Health delivers unparalleled clinical quality and member experience, with the brand's continued national expansion and growth.



Monique Davis

NON-PROFIT

Monique Davis, WORKS

WORKS, a prominent nonprofit in LA County specializing in affordable housing, proudly appoints Monique Davis as CEO, effective December 11, 2023. Davis, former President of Habitat for Humanity Orange County, joins WORKS after an extensive search led by Envision Consulting. Her expertise will further WORKS' mission of building sustainable communities.

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