Native Ohlone of San Francisco-Monterey Bay Area Resist Destruction of Sacred Site

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
23 August 2011

Who were the inhabitants of what we now call San Francisco, Berkeley, Oakland, Santa Cruz and Monterey, and of the little open land left around these cities? They are the Ohlone.

For thousands of years the Ohlone culture, consisting of several related languages, was sustainable, as the people were part of the land and waters. Less is known about them than other tribes or groupings that were not almost entirely obliterated. The Ohlone don't have monuments or other forms of respect, such as dedicated lands, in this valuable real-estate market of the San Francisco-Monterey Bay area.

Since their land was stolen, first by the Spanish and their oppressive Catholic missions, and then by U.S. invaders who put a bounty on the actual heads of California Indians, are not the Ohlones finally due some respect and recognition? By saving a village site and burial ground? You and I might say "Yes!"

But KB Home, a huge national builder, and the City of Santa Cruz, don't think so. They believe that more housing development and profit come first -- natural habitats and Ohlone ancestral lands be damned. The clash between the Ohlone and their supporters and KB and the City of Santa Cruz has now begun at Branciforte Creek (locally known as the late Market Street Field), up toward the redwood forested hills from downtown Santa Cruz on the Monterey Bay.

As shown by the photographs here I took yesterday from over the security fence, massive destruction of a former meadow by the creek has obliterated a gathering place of the community. It was not just used by today's locals, but for six thousand years. This virtual theft is an insult to locals, the Ohlone, and an injury to nature that is a part of all of us.

The high ground in the background is the knoll where two ancient skeletons were unearthed this month. Although the officially designated Ohlone descendant, Ann-Marie Sayers, was contacted and required to be heard by law, KB and Santa Cruz City Hall refuse to pull the plug on destroying the rest of the tract of land. She and local activists are now demanding that the Knoll be saved.

Strong resistance is building. A march from downtown went to a city park near the site on August 14. The builder and the City are getting significant pressure, so they are signaling reactive responses -- whether tactics to stall and deceive, or actually wake up and save face, is not known at this writing. Another rally took place at the park on August 21 (see photo), where tobacco prayer sacks were strung together by volunteers, after instruction from the Ohlone as to intent, for placing them at the Branciforte Creek site. Earth First! activists are part of the new movement, and they are getting a good education from Ohlone elders and their sons and nephews who sing traditional songs for the gatherings.

No doubt many in the progressive, tolerant town of Santa Cruz are shocked or disappointed at the callous disregard going on in their lovely, politically correct town. In some cases the City shows its typical compromise-politics side that prevails across the nation, and simply allows destruction. Recently the mayor referred my citizen complaint on a large pollution project to a state agency, saying he had no jurisdiction. It was regarding a huge astroturf project in town, whose present earth-moving and polluting activities -- even before the toxic plastic causes off-gassing and toxic run-off to the marine sanctuary -- is unopposed except by upset, disempowered disorganized citizens.

To save the knoll and help authorities improve their future behavior, write a letter or phone KB Home. Tell them what you think of their destroying an ancient Indian village and burial ground, and urge them to back off as a smart PR move. (I tried getting through today by telephone as a journalist, but the gatekeepers were tough; I doubt I'll get a return call). Inundate the gatekeepers with messages for the President and for the CEO if you can't get through. One can feel like a mere flea biting in vain. But enough fleas biting can drive KB out of Branciforte Creek.

The letter below was hand-delivered by activists from Santa Cruz's native and non-native community on August 19, 2011, to KB Home [telephone numbers and website added by Culture Change]:

Attn: Chris Apostolopoulos, President

KB Home Northern California / South Bay Division

6700 Koll Center Parkway, Ste. 200

Pleasanton, CA 94566

website: kbhome.com

Tel: 1.877.587.4663

Attn: Jeffrey T. Mezger, Chief Executive Officer

KB Home Corporate Offices

10990 Wilshire Blvd.

Los Angeles, CA 90024

website: kbhome.com

Tel: 1.310.231.4000 Fax: 1.310.231.4222

Dear KB Home,

As you are undoubtedly aware, a portion of your company’s Branciforte Creek subdivision project in Santa Cruz is slated to be built on top of a highly sensitive 6,000-year old cultural and archeological site. Earlier this month, human remains of two Native American individuals, a young child and an adult, were discovered on a knoll in the northern reaches of the property.

Ann Marie Sayers, an Ohlone woman who has been designated by the California Native American Heritage Commission as the Most Likely Descendant of the unearthed individuals, has been on-site over the past two weeks as a Native American monitor. Sayers has been in communication with Mike Miller and other representatives of KB Home, and she has requested that the sacredness of the culturally sensitive area be respected.

Specifically, Ann Marie Sayers has requested that no additional earth movement or development take place within the boundaries of the culturally sensitive area. Seven proposed homes with driveways and a portion of the planned private road (Creekside Lane) are within the boundaries of the documented cultural site (SCR-276), as defined in Gary S. Breschini's 2006 archeological report.

If grading and construction is undertaken in this area, the probability of unearthing more Native American burials and cultural artifacts is very high. Ann Marie Sayers and other Ohlone descendants consider the planned development to be an offensive desecration of a place that represents the legacy and memory of their ancestors. They also feel it is of the utmost importance that their ancestors' final resting places are not further disturbed.

We believe it would be in your company's best interest to revise your construction plans and work alongside Ann Marie Sayers to establish permanent protection for the cultural area through a cultural easement under SB-18 or similar agreement. This is a unique opportunity for KB Home to demonstrate leadership and sensitivity in respecting the rights of indigenous people.

The Santa Cruz public has been made aware of the recently discovered burials and Ann Marie Sayer's requests to KB Home. A large demonstration calling for protection of the cultural area was held in Santa Cruz on August 14th, resulting in two front-page articles in the local newspaper. We have witnessed an overwhelming amount of concern from Santa Cruz residents, including Branciforte neighbors, who feel that the knoll deserves to be preserved and respected.

To continue with planned construction would be a grave form of disrespect towards the Ohlone people and their ancestors. It would also invite a drawn-out public controversy that would reflect very poorly on KB Home's reputation and would likely result in difficulties marketing any homes that may be constructed on the knoll.

We represent a very large group of native and non-native people who are committed to doing what is necessary to protect the knoll at Branciforte Creek. If your company does not honor Ann Marie Sayer's request and instead continues with planned construction that would desecrate and destroy the cultural site, we will have no choice but to take further action.

Thank you for your consideration,

Save the Knoll Coalition

SaveTheKnoll.org

info@savetheknoll.org

Santa Cruz Solidarity Network

SCSolidarity.blogspot.com

scsolidarity@gmail.com

How the City of Santa Cruz continues to allow this development and destruction of ancient Ohlone remains, is to claim it (the City) has a legal obligation to follow through on an agreement. As with many developments today, "green" aspects make the projects somewhat palatable, although virtually every one of these -- such as Berkeley's David Brower Center ("David Brower Memorial Parking Garage") -- involve lots of parking for cars. As for LEED certification for these "greenest" buildings, PVC piping is allowed, thus tainting the water of unsuspecting people who drink or wash their hands with toxified water.

Contact the City Council of Santa Cruz, the mayor, and the Director of Planning and Development:

citycouncil@cityofsantacruz.com Tel. 1-831-420-5020

Ryan Coonerty, Mayor Tel. 1-831-420-5027 or 1-831-423-8939 email: rcoonerty@cityofsantacruz.com

Juliana Rebagliati - Director of Planning and Development, Tel. 1-831-420-5103 email: jrebagliati@cityofsantacruz.com

There is hope for resisting business-as-usual. Additional actions have included volunteers picketing at the front gate of the Branciforte Creek construction site, holding signs, handing out flyers and engaging passers by. Residents in the area have been very supportive, visiting and joining in with demonstrators, signing petitions, donating cash and offering to place signs in their front yards.

The Ohlone are not a nation, due to so much genocide, land theft, and disease from colonialization. But the Ohlone Confederacy, that includes non-native people, and the current Save The Knoll campaign in Santa Cruz, might lead to more Ohlone recognition and protected land where nature is loved instead of "developed" or "renovated."

On a happier note, Indian Canyon, a beautiful Ohlone village site south of Hollister, California, had a rousing 15th annual storytelling festival on August 20. Master of Ceremonies and caretaker Ann-Marie Sayers was well supported by many dozens of visitors, including this writer, who took part in Indian dances besides enjoying stories and songs. Visit her website indiancanyon.org.

* * * * *

Text of a flier in wide circulation in and around Santa Cruz:

Stop The Descration!

Market Street Field is a beautiful place, one of few remaining wild enclaves within the City of Santa Cruz. [1] For as long as anyone can remember, people have been visiting the meadow, admiring wildflowers, sitting under oak trees, walking

their dogs, playing in Branciforte Creek and gathering medicinal plants at the creekside. As it turns out, Native Americans have a relationship with this place that dates back much further than most people can really comprehend. Archeologists have estimated through radiocarbon dating that the site is in excess of 6,000 years old.

The City of Santa Cruz first approved the Branciforte Creek Subdivision project in 2007 despite widespread opposition from local residents, environmentalists, archeologists and historic preservationists. KB Home, a Fortune 500 company headquartered in Los Angeles, bought the property from a previous developer in 2010 and in 2011 the city approved their revised plan for a 32 unit residential subdivision they are marketing as “Branciforte Creek – The Comfort of Green Living”.

A Place to be Honored and Protected

Both the City and KB Home are well aware of the cultural significance of the site. A 2006 developer-commissioned archeological study states that despite disturbance from historic house and road construction, “SCR-276 is possibly one of the sites least impacted by existing urban development within the City of Santa Cruz”. [1] Former City Planning Commissioner Judy Warner stated just before voting to approve the Branciforte Creek development that “this is the oldest and most significant cultural area in the city” [2] Despite this, the City has permitted KB Home to conduct digging, grading, and construction within the boundaries of the known culturally sensitive area.

Noting “significant impacts to the integrity of a recorded archaeological resource”, the Environmental Impact Report defines mitigation measures that are outrageously inadequate. The report reads, “Subsurface work within the boundaries of CA-SCR-276 will be conducted with the appropriate equipment and speed to allow for the recovery of archaeological materials.” [3] Contractors are to be be given a “sensitivity training” and homes built on the cultural site will be constructed with a “special foundation” rather than a concrete slab.

In July, Archeologist Sarah Brewer wrote a letter to the City of Santa Cruz expressing concerns about the adequacy of the mitigation measures and the damage being done to the site by construction activities. She was subsequently fired from her position as an archeological monitor at the site by Michael Brandman Associates, a consulting firm contracted by KB Home.

Native American Remains Found

On or around August 2nd, the travesty of destroying a beautiful, ancient place sunk to another level when the skeletal remains of a young Native American child were dug up during initial work in the northern part of the site, known as “the knoll”. In compliance with California law, a stop-work order was then issued for this northern area, and the Native American Heritage Commission was notified, which in turn designated an Ohlone woman, Ann Marie Sayers, as the “Most Likely Descendant” (MLD) for the site.

An MLD makes recommendations to a property owner or developer regarding the treatment of their ancestors’ remains and the nature of any future development on a given site. In the case of the Branciforte Creek Subdivision, Ann Marie Sayer’s recommendations are that the unearthed individual be reinterred ceremonially, and that there be no more earth movement or development within the known culturally sensitive area (the knoll).

Unfortunately, although the law allows an MLD to make a recommendation, it does not give them the power to enforce it or to stop a development project from proceeding. It is up to us–all those in the local community who respect the rights of indigenous people–to hold developers accountable for their decisions and actions.

Protecting Ohlone Sacred and Burial Places – An Ongoing Struggle

The Ohlone are the original inhabitants of the Santa Cruz area, who over thousands of years developed complex cultures that were sustained through a deep relationship with the wildlife and natural resources of the land. The Ohlone people and their ways of life were decimated first by the Spanish invasion and establishment of Mission Santa Cruz in 1791, and later by American settlement and genocidal Gold Rush-era policies toward Indians.

Contrary to popular belief, Ohlone people are very much still alive today, as is their deep relationship with the land of their ancestors. Hard fought battles have been waged and continue to be waged throughout Ohlone territory, to prevent the further destruction of Ohlone sacred places and burial grounds by developers and local governments.

In March of 1975, Ohlone people and other Native Americans carried out an armed occupation of a burial ground in Watsonville, successfully preserving half of the site that had not already been destroyed for the construction of a new warehouse. [4] In April of this year (2011), Ohlone and Miwok elders led a 109-day unarmed occupation of a sacred burial ground in Vallejo, stopping the city from constructing bathrooms, a parking lot, and paved trails on top of their ancestors as part of a “park improvement” [5]

Many Ohlone people today consider the widespread desecration and destruction of their burial grounds and sacred places to be a form of modern-day colonialism. In the words of Corrina Gould, a Chochenyo Ohlone woman who has been very active in protecting Shellmound burial grounds, “What I say about this development that happens all over the Bay Area, is that it’s a cultural genocide. They’re trying to wipe us out, in a different kind of a way. There’s no more monuments of the ancient people, of my ancestors, here in the Bay Area. When people go around to those places to try to find out, who were the native people here, what did they live like? There’s nothing here.” [6]

No More Earth Movement

Not only is this development irreparably destroying our ability to know and connect with the past, it is yet another blow to our collective future, to the world that our children will inhabit. People have been coming for over 6,000 years to this knoll above Branciforte Creek for a reason. They gathered and lived there, because it has always been a place that nourishes living things. KB Home is now in the process of destroying this place to the point of it being unrecognizable.

The good news is that we still have an opportunity to prevent further desecration and disturbance at Market Street. While the southern part of the property has been obliterated and is currently a massive 25-foot deep pit, the northern part of the land, known as “the knoll”, remains largely intact. Many trees have been removed from the knoll and an old house has

been razed, however, planned grading and construction of seven new homes within the known cultural site has not occurred.

Ann Marie Sayers states that, “…my mother believed, and I believe, that when a burial is disturbed, the spirit of that individual is left wandering.” Her recommendation to KB Home and the City of Santa Cruz is very clear: no more earth movement in the known culturally sensitive area. To honor this recommendation, KB Home will have to abandon their planned construction activities on the knoll.

Given the amount of money involved, it seems very possible that KB Home will disregard Ann Marie Sayer’s recommendation and continue with construction that is likely to further disturb Ohlone ancestors. As human beings, it is our responsibility to not allow this to happen. Together, we must demand that the rights and dignity of the indigenous people of this land be respected.

1. Final Archaeological Report and Archaeological Mitigation Plan for Portions of CA-SCR-276; Gary S. Breschini, February 2006.

2. Minutes from 4/19/07 Planning Commission Meeting; City of Santa Cruz, Page 4. cityofsantacruz.com

3. EIR Addendum; Branciforte Creek Residential Subdivision, February 10, 2011. Page 82.

4. “I’m an Indian, But Who Am I?” by Patrick Orozco, a story about “Wounded Lee” from A Gathering of Voices: The Native Peoples of the Central California Coast, Santa Cruz History Journal, Issue #5.

5. See Protect Glen Cove website; protectglencove.org

6. Audio recording of Corrina Gould speaking at the Oakland Intertribal Friendship House, 7/08/11. – protectglencove.org

from savetheknoll.org/about

Further Photos and Reading:

Rally article and photo spread by Alex Darocy, indybay.org

The Ohlone Way: Indian Life in the San Francisco–Monterey Bay Area, book by Malcolm Margolin, 1978, Heyday books