

This ridge is considered a California 'jewel.' Here's how tribes are trying to protect it

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At first glance, the undulating brown wrinkles of Molok Luyuk make it seem like a banal California mountain ridge. Most visitors ride ATVs up and down hillsides and litter them with shell casings from makeshift shooting ranges.

Ryan Henson was one of those visitors as a kid, dumping an old refrigerator and spending an afternoon shooting at it with family. But today he's optimistic that more people are beginning to appreciate this land and treat it like the gem he knows it is.

"You hear the botanists freaking out about this place? It's a mecca for them," said Henson, a policy director for the California Wilderness Coalition. "It's not just a bunch of brush that catches on fire every now and then or a speed bump for motorcycles."

If California conservationists, geologists, botanists and a Yolo County Native American tribe have anything in common, it's a belief that this earthen backbone is a natural phenomenon deserving of federal protection and stewardship by its indigenous inhabitants.

In recent months, this diverse group has begun to push for President Joe Biden to incorporate Molok Luyuk into the adjacent national monument. A bill in Congress would do the same, recognizing it as a geological and biodiversity rarity for permanent protection.

When President Barack Obama established the Berryessa Snow

Mountain National Monument with the federal Antiquities Act in 2015, he protected 300,780 acres that extend 100 miles from Mendocino County to mountains on either side of Lake Berryessa.

But the western-most ridge of the area, Molok Luyuk, was left out. Companies sought to develop wind turbine projects on the land in the years since, which have been denied by the Bureau of Land Management who deemed the area unsuitable for wind development.

Now, conservationists want to finish the job and incorporate these 13,753-acres into the monument for co-management with the tribe. Californians, they hope, will soon come not to trample rare flora but to admire it and to camp alongside rare geologic history.

Molok Luyuk, 'Condor Ridge'

Longtime conservationist Bob Schneider believes if you give a place a name, people want to protect it. He wrote an entire book on the Berryessa region but didn't know why hills sandwiched between Clear Lake and Colusa County were called "Walker Ridge."

About a year ago, the idea came to him in the shower: Why not ask the people whose ancestors lived in the region for thousands of years to name it? He did, and leaders of the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation quickly came back with Molok Luyuk.

Pronounced Mah-lock loo-yuck, the name means "condor ridge" in the tribe's Patwin language. Half a century ago the ridge was a corridor for California condors, magnificent native vultures that are slowly make a comeback from extinction.

Tribal leaders hope to someday see them flying over their culturally significant lands once again.

"This area is very important to our tribe, a lot of resources and really special areas for us going back millennia. There's a lot of things to protect up there." said Leland Kinter, treasurer of the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation. "To hear people say the name, it's a good feeling."

Until arrival of European missionaries, the tribe's Patwin ancestors lived in villages that stretched across today's Colusa to Solano counties. After decimation from the missions and the Gold Rush, plus forced relocation, they were able to return to the Capay Valley in 1940.

Today the federally recognized tribe with around 50 members operates Cache Creek Casino Resort and several other successful enterprises, including a golf club and acres of olive tree cultivation for the tribe's own olive oil production company.

When Yocha Dehe leaders first met with local conservationists from Woodland organization Tuleyome, Yocha Dehe treasurer Kinter said things just clicked. The Bureau of Land Management simply didn't have enough enforcement resources on the ridge, they agreed.

"We had a two hour meeting," he said. "It was like we didn't want to stop talking. There was just so much to share because everybody has an intimate knowledge of the area in a different way... we just saw that we have a lot to learn from each other."

A Californian jewel

Molok Luyuk has only one hiking trail and a single campground, making public access limited. But geologists know it well, pointing out each place a visitor can traverse a hundred million of years in geological history.

Both the ridge and monument next door are part of a geological and

biodiversity melting pot of northern, coastal, and Central Valley parts of California. It's often lovingly called "the best place in the world to see plate tectonics."

That's because the area lies along the Coast Range Fault, an ancient boundary between the upper North American plate and the descending lower plate. The upper Pacific plate includes outcroppings of ancient oceanic crust called serpentine soils.

California's state rock, serpentinite, is formed deep in the ocean and gets its namesake from having a texture similar to a snake's skin. In this case, it was uplifted and exposed after an ancient epic subduction event.

The rock contains rare minerals that have a greenish hue, earning it the moniker 'blue goo' for its color and fragility. Yet the key part of this special rock is the barren and sparsely vegetated soil that accompanies it.

That landscape might sound unappealing, but botanists marvel at the rare plants this ecological hostility creates. In fact, it has preserved one of California's few remaining plant ecosystems.

Molok Luyuk has exceptional plant diversity for an area of its size, home to 7% of the state's native flora and around 490 [rare plants](#). They include the fuchsia petals of adobe lily, dark burgundy clusters of Hoover's lomatium, grey pines and mauve jepson ceanothus.

"If the soils didn't have such challenging chemistry and physical conditions, there likely would be so many non-native plants here," said Nick Jenson, conservation program director of the California Native Plant Society. "By any standard you're looking at a place that is super special. It should be managed like the jewel that it is."

From the ridge's peak, visitors can catch views of Mount Lassen, Mount

Shasta, the Trinity Alps, the Snow Mountain Wilderness and Mount Diablo. That's not to mention fields of wildfires in the adjacent Bear Valley and breathtaking scenes of nearby Cache Creek.

After devastating fires in 2018 and 2020, conservationist Bob Schneider hopes monument status will translate to a surge in improvements. He wants to see application of more modern fire science in the region, such as prescribed burns.

"We used to call this area the undiscovered landscape and it still largely is," Schneider said. "We need more accessibility. There should be a viewing platform, interpretive signs. I want to see a handicap parking area."

Protection for who?

The coalition of activists have allies in California Senators Dianne Feinstein and Alex Padilla, who reintroduced legislation this year to expand the monument and require tribal co-management. A similar effort last year failed without Republican support in the House Natural Resources Committee.

Lacking optimism about their chances in Congress, they called on President Biden to do it himself.

"To establish the monument the administration wants certain things, and you're trying to show them there's sufficient support among local officials, on the ground and among tribal communities," said Sandra Schubert, executive director of Tuleyome. "We're building up that record now."

When it comes to how different types of Californians enjoy local nature, there are clear fault lines and potential conflicts. What conservationists

want may not sit well with tribes, and a refuge for hikers and mountain bikers doesn't look like an ATV paradise.

Tuleyome and other conservationists are reaching out to other California tribes with ancestral land nearby, including Middletown Rancheria and the Koi Nation. Co-management means they'll have a meaningful seat at the table on decisions, but not veto power.

"I think it's one of those things that keep you up at night," said Kinter of Yocha Dehe when asked about increasing visitors. "Places like this are safer when people are educated about them and care about those places, so there's a balance that has to happen.... I think there's enough room for everybody."

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the area saw a rapid jump in visits and steep decline in government capacity for rules enforcement. As long as the next phase of Molok Luyok comes with more resources, Ryan Henson with the California Wilderness Coalition is optimistic those divides can be bridged.

"We see the new addition to the monument as an opportunity for there to be an investment in this land and in forming a management plan that incorporates knowledge and wishes of our Native American partners," Henson said. "Someday this place is gonna be really cool."

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