

Who Gets to Care for the Land —and Who Gets to Decide?

California is opening new routes for Tribal stewardship. But access, a shared work plan, and the power to make decisions are not the same thing.

By Christopher Knorr October 16, 2026 Independent public-interest briefing

7.5
million acres

A statewide stewardship goal. Not 7.5 million acres of completed land transfers. The policy covers different pathways, including access, collaboration, and ancestral land return.

Being allowed to care for a place is important. Being able to decide what happens there is a different question. This briefing follows both—and asks what it would take to sustain that work beyond the first grant or announcement.

California has adopted a statewide goal to expand Tribal stewardship across **at least 7.5 million acres of lands and coastal waters**. The policy supports three routes: better access to ancestral places, agreements to work together, and return of ancestral lands to Tribal ownership.

It does not mean that all 7.5 million acres have been returned or placed under Tribal government authority. [California Natural Resources Agency, March 17, 2026.](#)

The question for the public is not only how many acres are counted. It is **who can enter and care for a place, who decides what happens there, and who has the resources to keep doing that work.**

What changed in California?

In **2019**, Governor Gavin Newsom issued an apology for California's historical treatment of Native peoples and established the Truth and Healing Council. That action acknowledged a history of state violence, exclusion, and disruption of Tribal life. An apology, however, does not itself transfer land or decision-making authority. [CNRA convening background.](#)

In **2024**, California passed **AB 1284**, which defines co-governance and co-management and authorizes the California Natural Resources Agency to enter into agreements with federally recognized Tribes. The provisions took effect **January 1, 2025**. The law encourages negotiations, but it does not create an agreement for every Tribe or cover land outside the Agency's jurisdiction. [AB 1284 legislative text.](#)

On **March 17, 2026**, the California Natural Resources Agency launched its **Tribal Stewardship Policy and Toolkit** and the 7.5-million-acre goal.

At a **June 30–July 1, 2026** convening, Tribal leaders and public and nonprofit partners examined agreements, access, funding, and the practical barriers that can keep promised partnerships from working. The state now has a policy and tools; the results will depend on what is carried out in specific places. [Policy](#) · [Convening materials](#).

Four different ways land relationships can change

Access means a Tribe or its people can enter a place for agreed purposes, such as gathering, ceremony, education, or cultural work. Access may be limited by permits, schedules, or the terms of an agreement. It is not the same as ownership.

Co-management means governments negotiate how to share particular management tasks and responsibilities. The agreement should say what each party can do, fund, or enforce. Under AB 1284, shared functions are negotiated rather than assumed.

Co-governance involves shared government-to-government decision-making. It raises a distinct question: which decisions are actually made together, and which remain with the state?

Ancestral land return changes who owns the land. It can make a lasting difference, but ownership also comes with practical questions about care, funding, staffing, legal duties, and access for community members.

These routes can overlap. **The label alone does not establish the level of Tribal authority.** A public description should point readers to the particular agreement, deed, or decision that defines it. [California Government Code § 11019.82](#).

What does this look like closer to home?

Pit River: a documented State Parks agreement

On **November 1, 2024**, the **Pit River Tribe** and **California State Parks** signed a **five-year memorandum of understanding**. State Parks describes it as a framework for coordination on natural and cultural resources and interpretation in parks within Pit River ancestral homelands.

A March 2026 State Parks district report identifies **McArthur-Burney Falls Memorial State Park** and **Ahjumawi Lava Springs State Park** among the covered places. [State Parks announcement](#) · [State Parks district report \(PDF\)](#).

That is a documented relationship, not evidence that title to those parks changed hands. The public summaries do not, by themselves, establish a Tribal veto over every park decision. A useful next step is to read the agreement's actual terms and any publicly reported work under it.

Coastal work—and land actually returned

The **Tribal Marine Stewards Network** began with Tribal planning and pilot work before its public launch in **2022**. Its member Tribes carry out coastal and marine monitoring, cultural education, and shared training.

California's Ocean Protection Council approved **\$3.6 million in 2022** for work with founding member Tribes over three years. That establishes a funded, Tribal-led network; specific ecological outcomes require their own evidence. [Network history](#) · [Ocean Protection Council](#).

Also in **2022**, the **Wiyot Tribe** celebrated the acquisition of **46 acres** of coastal wetland and upland at **Mouralherwaqh**, with support from the Ocean Protection Council and partners. Unlike a coordination agreement, this is an example of land being acquired for the Tribe. [Ocean Protection Council](#).

What Canada and Australia are trying

Canada: Indigenous Guardians

Canada's **Indigenous Guardians** initiatives support First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people who monitor ecosystems, care for cultural places, undertake training, and work on traditional territories. Canada's federal government reports funding for **more than 240 initiatives since 2018**, supporting approximately **1,500 employment opportunities**.

The programs use different structures for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis rather than treating all Indigenous peoples as one organization. [Environment and Climate Change Canada](#).

One important design choice concerns **control over funding**. In **2024**, Canada's **First Nations National Guardians Network** began independently administering a federal allocation supporting 80 First Nations initiatives. This moves an important part of grant decision-making closer to a First Nations-led institution.

It does **not** mean all Guardians have the same land title, enforcement powers, or legally delegated authority. [Canadian government announcement](#).

What California can examine: Who selects projects? Who holds and distributes the money? Can stewardship institutions survive a change in government or a short grant cycle? Canada's model provides one answer for funding administration, while legal authority still depends on the territory and governing arrangements.

Australia: Indigenous Rangers and Indigenous Protected Areas

Australia's **Indigenous Rangers Program** funds Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to care for land, rivers, and sea Country through work such as cultural fire management, habitat monitoring, invasive-species control, cultural protection, and teaching younger generations.

The federal government reports **more than AU\$1.3 billion committed for 2021–2028**, with **320 ranger groups** supported following expansion rounds. Current funding agreements run to **June 30, 2028**. [National Indigenous Australians Agency](#).

The related **Indigenous Protected Areas** program supports places that Traditional Owners voluntarily agree to manage for biodiversity and cultural values. Australia reported **96 dedicated Indigenous Protected Areas** covering more than **115 million hectares** as of April 2026.

Protected Area agreements and ranger employment are connected but **distinct programs**. Neither should be mistaken for an automatic transfer of title across all participating land and sea. [Australian environment department](#) · [April 2026 program update](#).

What California can examine: A dedicated workforce, recurring training, support for cultural work, and conservation agreements directed by Traditional Owners. But the 2028 funding horizon also shows that a large public investment is not the same as permanent funding.

What makes an agreement last?

A public announcement can sound complete even when the practical arrangements are still being negotiated. Five questions help readers assess the difference:

1. **Authority:** Which decisions does the Tribe make, share, or only advise on? Who can change the agreement?
2. **Access:** Who can gather, teach, visit, or conduct stewardship work, and under what conditions?
3. **Support:** Who pays for staff, equipment, travel, insurance, maintenance, and long-term care?
4. **Knowledge:** Who decides what cultural or ecological knowledge may be recorded, published, or withheld?
5. **Accountability:** Is there a public work plan, review date, dispute process, and way to report what actually happened?

These are questions for any agreement—not demands that Tribes disclose protected cultural information. Public accountability should not require making sensitive knowledge public.

What should we look for next?

The 7.5-million-acre goal is now a **policy commitment**, not a completed land-return tally. Watch for signed agreements and deeds, clear descriptions of who holds authority, funding that survives initial grants, and evidence about work actually completed.

Any claim that an agreement covers federal, county, or private land needs to identify the separate authority for that land; the California Natural Resources Agency policy cannot itself settle those jurisdictions.

For Pit River readers, the **2024 State Parks MOU** is a useful starting point. The next factual questions are the scope of access, who participates in decisions, what work is funded, and when the five-year agreement will be reviewed. Those questions can be asked without presuming to speak for the Tribe or assigning work to any band, family, or office.

The public measure should be more than acres announced: it should include authority exercised, access made usable, care sustained, and what can be shown to have changed.

It does not represent the Pit River Tribe, any band, or any stewardship organization; it does not determine Tribal priorities. Legal rights and agreement terms should be checked against the underlying documents. Prepared October 16, 2026. Corrections and later developments should be dated rather than silently incorporated into the historical record.

Sources and checking record

Official government documents and materials published by the stewardship organizations are prioritized. This list records the evidence used for the October 16 edition; it is not a live legal-status feed.

[Download the dated source-checking ledger \(CSV\)](#)

TS-01

[CNRA — State policy announcement · 17 March 2026](#)

Statewide stewardship goal and access/collaboration/land-return pathways

TS-02

[CNRA — Tribal Stewardship Policy and Toolkit · 2026](#)

Policy aims and supporting tools

TS-03

[CNRA — 2026 Tribal Stewardship Convening · 30 June–1 July](#)

Public agenda, session material, and barriers to implementation

TS-04

[California Legislature — AB 1284 · enacted 2024, effective January 2025](#)

Legal basis and jurisdictional scope for state–Tribal agreements

TS-05

[California State Parks — Pit River MOU announcement · 22 November 2024](#)

Five-year memorandum signed November 1, 2024

TS-06

[California State Parks — Northern Buttes District staff report · 5 March 2026](#)

Burney Falls and Ahjumawi Lava Springs included in MOU

TS-07

[Tribal Marine Stewards Network — Network history and projects](#)

Tribal-led program origins, activities and 2022 public launch

TS-08

[Ocean Protection Council — Council meeting record · 6 October 2022](#)

Three-year TMSN funding authorization

TS-09

[Ocean Protection Council — Wiyot land acquisition release · 22 August 2022](#)

46-acre purchase at Mouralherwaqh

TS-10

[Environment and Climate Change Canada — Indigenous Guardians program · updated 4 September 2026](#)

Activities, initiative counts, distinctions-based governance

TS-11

[Environment and Climate Change Canada — National Guardians Network funding · 27 September 2024](#)

Independent First Nations administration of initiative funding

TS-12

[National Indigenous Australians Agency — Indigenous Rangers Program · checked 16 October 2026](#)

Ranger groups, investments and 2028 funding horizon

TS-13

[Australian Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water — Indigenous Protected Areas · checked 16 October 2026](#)

Protected area management and agreements

TS-14

[Australian Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water — IPA administration update · 1 April 2026](#)

96 dedicated IPAs and April 2026 management transition

TS-15

[Pew Charitable Trusts — Bobby Hayden · 30 September 2026](#)

Independent article prompting comparative briefing; secondary synthesis

Independent briefing; it does not speak for any Tribal Nation. The source trail distinguishes published policies, legal text, signed agreements reported by agencies, Tribal-led activity descriptions, and comparative analysis. Where no agreement text or independent outcome evaluation was examined, this briefing does not treat the missing detail as established.