

# Tribal Engagement Research Report

# Land Acknowledgement

**The land along the Lower Los Angeles River in Long Beach City in Los Angeles County is located in the traditional ancestral land of the Tongva/Gabrieleño Nation who have lived and continue to live here.**

## **Official Los Angeles County Land Acknowledgement (Adopted Nov 1st, 2022):**

The County of Los Angeles recognizes that we occupy land originally and still inhabited and cared for by the Tongva, Tataviam, Serrano, Kizh, and Chumash Peoples. We honor and pay respect to their elders and descendants – past, present, and emerging – as they continue their stewardship of these lands and waters. We acknowledge that settler colonization resulted in land seizure, disease, subjugation, slavery, relocation, broken promises, genocide, and multigenerational trauma. This acknowledgment demonstrates our responsibility and commitment to truth, healing, and reconciliation and to elevating the stories, culture, and community of the original inhabitants of Los Angeles County. We are grateful to have the opportunity to live and work on these ancestral lands. We are dedicated to growing and sustaining relationships with Native peoples and local tribal governments, including (in no particular order) the:

- Fernandeño Tataviam Band of Mission Indians
- Gabrielino Tongva Indians of California Tribal Council
- Gabrieleno/Tongva San Gabriel Band of Mission Indians
- Gabrieleño Band of Mission Indians – Kizh Nation
- San Manuel Band of Mission Indians
- San Fernando Band of Mission Indians

To learn more about the First Peoples of Los Angeles County, please visit the Los Angeles City/County Native American Indian Commission website at [lanaic.lacounty.gov](http://lanaic.lacounty.gov).

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# Introduction

This report documents how three Rivers and Mountains Conservancy (RMC) Grant-funded projects in the Lower Los Angeles River (LLAR) corridor have approached Tribal engagement. The goal is to describe the processes and frameworks these projects have used – not to evaluate them as successes or failures, but to offer project leads a window into how engagement has been practiced in the LLAR context.

Tribal engagement is complex, evolving, and deeply context-specific. Processes that appear well-structured at one point may encounter challenges, disagreements, or shifting dynamics over time. No approach documented here should be treated as a model to replicate in its entirety. Each engagement process must be tailored to the specific project, the Tribes involved, and the relationships at hand. These project examples (alongside insights from existing publications and subject matter experts) are offered as reference points for consideration, not as a checklist or prescriptive guide.

## Projects Covered:

- **Project Example A:** Los Cerritos Wetlands Habitat Restoration
- **Project Example B:** Sleepy Lagoon Memorial at Maywood Riverfront Park
- **Project Example C:** Urban Orchard Park, City of South Gate



## Intended Use of This Document

This document is intended as a descriptive research resource for RMC staff, project leads, and interested members of the public seeking to understand how Tribal engagement has been approached in selected LLAR corridor projects.

It does not establish RMC policy, prescribe engagement standards, or evaluate the adequacy of any project's consultation process. Rather, it documents publicly available information to support institutional learning, transparency, and reflection.

Nothing in this report replaces or modifies legal consultation obligations under AB 52, SB 18, Section 106, or other applicable laws. Nor does this document represent Tribal endorsement, consensus, or approval of any specific approach. Engagement relationships are dynamic and continue to evolve over time.

Readers are encouraged to treat these case studies as context-specific examples, not templates.

## Key Terms & Framing

**“California Native American tribes”** includes both federally recognized and non-federally recognized Tribes as defined in California law (Section 21073 of the Public Resources Code, pursuant to AB 52).

**Engagement processes can be parallel:** formal consultation (e.g., CEQA/AB 52) may occur in addition to community-driven engagement, advisory groups, cultural resource monitoring, or interpretive co-design. These tracks serve different purposes and audiences.

**Confidentiality and data sovereignty are paramount.** Documentation in this report reflects only information available in public sources or provided for public dissemination.

## Method & Sources

This document synthesizes publicly available city and agency records (including IS/MNDs, Environmental Assessments, workplans), organizational project pages, stakeholder interviews, and state guidance websites. Links are provided for applicants to review primary materials. No confidential information is included. Where possible, phrasing mirrors source language to avoid over-interpretation. Information reflects sources available as of early 2026.

## Relevant Policies

The following laws and statutes establish the regulatory baseline for Tribal consultation in California. Project leads should understand these requirements as a floor, not a ceiling, for engagement.

Law / Statute	Abbreviation / Code	Purpose / What It Covers
Assembly Bill 52	AB 52 - Public Resources Code §§ 21080.3.1, 21080.3.2	Requires lead agencies under CEQA to consult with California Native American tribes about tribal cultural resources for projects that could significantly affect them, if the tribe has requested notification. Adds “tribal cultural resources” as a category to consider in CEQA.
Senate Bill 18	SB 18 - Government Code § 65352.3	Requires cities and counties to consult with Native American tribes before adopting or amending a general plan or specific plan that may affect tribal cultural places.
Section 106 (NHPA)	36 CFR Part 800	Federal requirement for agencies to consider the effects of their undertakings on historic properties, including those of cultural significance to tribes. Applies to federally funded or permitted projects (e.g., LWCF).
<b>Rivers and Mountains Conservancy (RMC) Tribal Consultation Policy</b>	CNRA Tribal Consultation Policy (Exec. Order B-10-11, 2012)	Requires RMC and its grant applicants to promote early, often, and meaningful consultation with California Native American Tribes with the goal of building collaborative partnerships and ensuring tribal priorities and interests meaningfully shape projects. Consistency with this policy is a condition of all RMC grant agreements, and applicants must describe their tribal engagement approach as part of the Concept Proposal.



# Project Example A: The Los Cerritos Wetlands Habitat Restoration Project



## Project Overview

The Los Cerritos Wetlands Authority (LCWA) is a joint powers authority with the Rivers and Mountains Conservancy (RMC), the State Coastal Conservancy, and the cities of Long Beach and Seal Beach. The LCWA's [Habitat Restoration Plan](#) commits to creating native tidal habitat, remediating contaminated soil, improving flood management, and constructing new public access features such as trails and a visitor center. The approved plan formally recognizes the land as "the motherland of the Tongva and Kizh/Gabrielino people, and a place of great significance to the Acjachemen/Juaneño people as well."

In keeping with this recognition, the LCWA committed to engaging Native American Tribes throughout planning and implementation, protecting and restoring the Tribal landscape and ensuring long-term Tribal access beyond the baseline requirements of AB 52.



## Engagement Approach

The LCWA's Tribal engagement process reflects an effort to move beyond minimum AB 52 requirements toward a more sustained, compensated advisory model. The approach included the formation of a standing Tribal Advisory Group (TAG) and the use of mechanisms intended to support longer-term Tribal access and input.

The LCWA invited local Tribes to join an advisory group to be consulted on an ongoing, quarterly basis. Seven leaders attended the first meeting, five of which expressed support and formed the Los Cerritos Wetlands Tribal Advisory Group (TAG). Meetings were initially facilitated by a third-party consultant given their expertise in Tribal engagement, supporting respectful, trust-based, and sustained dialogue. Following staffing changes, the RMC assumed these responsibilities through an in-house Tribal Liaison & Equity Coordinator, maintaining continuity and institutional knowledge.

Additional mechanisms used as part of this approach include:

- **Limiting disclosures:** Sharing only what is necessary and appropriate per Tribal guidance, even when recipients are fully qualified to receive sensitive cultural information.
- **Pursuing grants to sustain compensation:** Identifying and securing funding to compensate Tribal participants for their time and expertise, reducing barriers to participation.
- **Formalizing Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs):** Establishing written agreements intended to secure long-term access and involvement beyond any future staff turnover.
- **Reporting to state agencies:** High-level reports to the California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA) ensure transparency and accountability while maintaining confidentiality.
- **Field-based dialogue:** Site visits with Tribal representatives were used as a mechanism for incorporating input into design.



## Co-Created Design Elements

Quarterly dialogue and site visits informed several design choices, including:

- A boat launch ramp reflecting access needs identified by Tribal participants;
- Interpretive signage developed with Tribal input; and
- Additional features that remain confidential at Tribal request.



## Notable Elements of the Approach

The following elements are drawn from this project's process. They are offered as descriptive observations, not recommendations. Tribal engagement relationships are dynamic, and any process may evolve over time.

- **Standing advisory structure:** A recurring forum (quarterly) was intended to ensure continuity and ongoing relationship-building beyond one-off consultation.
- **Early and field-based engagement:** Conversations were initiated at earlier conceptual stages, with site visits used to ground discussions in specific places.
- **Compensation and fiscal infrastructure:** Tribal participant compensation was budgeted through a fiscal sponsor – an approach intended to signal respect and reduce participation barriers.
- **Dedicated liaison capacity:** An experienced third-party consultant was used initially, with responsibilities later transitioned in-house.
- **Confidentiality agreements:** Efforts were made to handle sensitive cultural information carefully and to allow Tribes to describe their own histories and relationships.
- **Documentation for the long term:** MOUs aim to “future-proof” access and roles despite staffing changes, while plain-language process reports to state agencies maintain accountability.



## References

- Website: [Los Cerritos Wetlands Authority](#).
- LCWA [2024 workplan](#) noting ongoing TAG meetings
- Fiscal sponsorship note regarding TAG formation: [Fiscal Sponsorships - Coastal Quest](#)



# Project Example B: Sleepy Lagoon Memorial at Maywood Riverfront Park



## Project Overview

The Sleepy Lagoon Memorial is a collaborative project between East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice (EYCEJ), TAWAW Architecture, and RMC. The project is located within Maywood Riverfront Park, in tandem with broader park improvements. It commemorates the 1940s Sleepy Lagoon history and its legacy for Pachuč youth and communities of color, while honoring the original peoples and caretakers of the land, the Gabrielino (Gabrieleno; Tongva; Kizh).

Concept plans include interpretive signage, meditative seating, and native riverine plantings. The multibeneficial project aims to serve simultaneously as a native vegetation and wildlife habitat, a historical education tool, a community recreation space, a memorial, and a stormwater management project.



## Engagement Approach

Community members drove much of the engagement process, including site selection. Residents were invited to choose among candidate locations, ultimately selecting Maywood Riverfront Park. Throughout planning, project participants took time to learn about Gabrielino history, culture, and the relationships between Indigenous peoples, land, and water.

### Key engagement activities included:

- **Community workshops and public events:** Hosted by project partners, including the Sacred Places Institute for Indigenous Peoples, these gatherings gathered community input on design, programming, and cultural elements.
- **1:1 engagement with Gabrielino members and scholars:** EYCEJ conducted direct outreach with Gabrielino community members and connected with academic contacts for cultural guidance during project scoping.
- **Procurement of Indigenous artists:** An Indigenous artist group was hired to develop art features, and Mapache Studios was engaged for interactive project renderings.
- **Architecture rooted in Indigenous design:** TAWAW Architecture incorporated Gabrielino architectural principles and Native gardening practices into the landscape design.

## Observed Practices

- **Narrative-centered design:** Interpretive components foreground community memory while acknowledging Indigenous stewardship, not as a secondary add-on, but as a core design driver.
- **Public co-creation:** Workshops and events captured stories, spatial preferences, and programming ideas. Community members played a meaningful role in shaping what the project would become.
- **Planting as pedagogy:** The selection of plant species serves both an ecological function and an interpretive one, connecting visitors to traditional Gabrielino land stewardship practices.
- **Early Tribal inclusion:** Tribal representatives were involved from the earliest planning stages, not brought in as reviewers after decisions had already been made.

### A Note on Input and Follow-Through

Indigenous input is often collected but not implemented, negating engagement efforts and possibly causing further harm by deepening distrust. This is an important tension for project leads to hold: the quality of an engagement process cannot be measured by whether input was gathered, but by whether it visibly shaped outcomes.

## References

- [About - The Sleepy Lagoon Memorial](#)
- [Project Details - The Sleepy Lagoon Memorial](#)



*Sleepy Lagoon Memorial,  
Maywood Riverfront Park.  
Photo by Rivers and  
Mountains Conservancy.*



# Project Example C: Urban Orchard Park (South Gate)



## Project Overview

The Urban Orchard is a 7-acre, multi-benefit park and green-infrastructure project along the LLAR in South Gate, developed by the Trust for Public Land (TPL) and the City of South Gate. Phase 1 opened on a former industrial site adjacent to the river and the I-710 freeway. The park features a grove of 200+ fruit trees, constructed wetlands, native landscaping, a nature-based playground, an educational garden, and community-driven designs that reflect the needs of residents and help preserve Indigenous Gabrielino (Gabrieleno; Tongva; Kizh) culture.



## Engagement Approach

Tribal engagement for the Urban Orchard followed formal environmental review processes, including consultation with California Native American Tribes through CEQA/AB 52 and Section 106 (for LWCF/NPS-related elements). Public-facing project communications also highlight community-led design, native planting palettes, and opportunities for interpretive programming tied to place history.

According to the Trust for Public Land's project team, consultation included notice and invitation to consult sent to relevant Tribes, followed by documented exchanges during the environmental review period. While details of individual Tribal responses are not reproduced here, the administrative record provides the full account.



## Observed Practices

- **Formal pathways:** Notice and invitation to consult sent to Tribes, followed by documented exchanges during the environmental review. This establishes a clear administrative record.
- **Design alignment:** Use of native species and riverine habitat restoration compatible with cultural stewardship practices, grounding the project in Indigenous land relationships.
- **Interpretive co-design potential:** Public-facing materials reference Gabrielino (Gabrieleno; Tongva; Kizh)-inspired design elements and opportunities for interpretive programming. As subsequent phases develop, these offer additional venues for Tribal input.
- **Public documentation:** The IS/MND (CEQA) and Environmental Assessment (NEPA/LWCF) list process steps, notices, and comment periods, providing a model for how to document formal engagement in the administrative record.



## References

- City of South Gate project page: [Urban Orchard Project City of South Gate](#)
- Trust for Public Land project summary: [Urban Orchard - Our Work in CA](#)



Urban Orchard Park,  
South Gate.  
Photo by Tara Dales.



# Cross-Project Observations

## Descriptive, Not Prescriptive

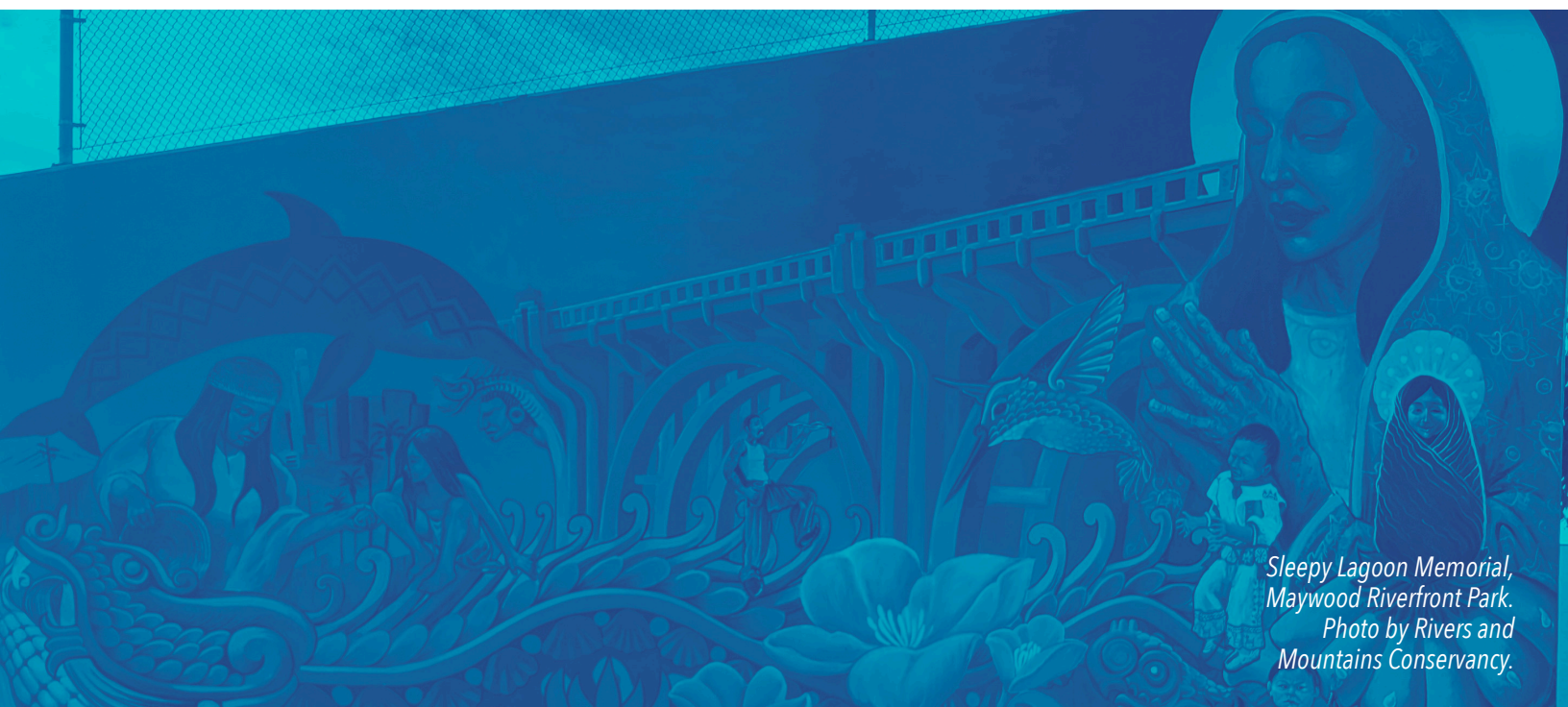
The three project examples above reflect varied approaches to Tribal engagement, shaped by project type, Tribal relationships, timing, and available resources. The following observations are drawn from public documents and stakeholder conversations. They describe patterns across the three projects. They are not recommendations, and they may not apply in other contexts.

Category	Considerations for Project Leads
<b>Parallel tracks</b>	Formal consultation (AB 52/SB 18/Section 106) and community-driven engagement often coexist and serve different purposes. Both tracks may be relevant for a given project, and neither alone is sufficient.
<b>Documentation</b>	Engagement lives in the record: IS/MNDs, EIRs, federal EAs, staff reports, and workplans list notices, consultation letters, meetings, and outcomes. Begin documentation early and maintain it throughout.
<b>Resourcing</b>	Budget for Tribal participation from the outset: compensation for time and expertise, as well as dedicated facilitation (via a liaison, consultant, or staff role) to coordinate meetings and monitoring.
<b>Confidentiality</b>	Cultural stewardship information may be sensitive. Use confidentiality agreements, limit disclosures to what is necessary, and allow Tribes to describe their own histories and relationships on their own terms.
<b>Design Alignment</b>	Native plant palettes, interpretive signage, and access features can reflect Indigenous stewardship practices without disclosing sensitive site information.
<b>Accountability</b>	Documenting how Tribal input shaped design decisions and sharing that documentation with Tribal participants is an important element of an accountable process. Engagement without visible follow-through can erode trust over time.

# ▶ Insights from Existing Publications

The following themes emerge from published guidance on Tribal engagement in California, particularly in the context of open space and green infrastructure projects with non-federally recognized Tribes. These are offered as considerations to help project leads think through their approach, not as a formula for guaranteed outcomes.

- **Start early and stay engaged.** Engagement is most effective when initiated at the earliest conceptual stages, before decisions have been made about scope or design. The California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA) emphasizes “early, often, and meaningful” consultation as a core principle.
- **Compensate Tribal representatives.** Recognizing Tribal expertise as a professional contribution (and resourcing it accordingly) is a practical expression of respect and helps sustain meaningful participation.
- **Recognize the limits of formal consultation.** AB 52 and SB 18 establish legal minimums. Effective engagement goes further: building trust-based relationships over time that are not contingent on project timelines or regulatory triggers.
- **Expect variability.** Governance structures, lineage relationships, and inter-Tribal dynamics vary significantly. There is no single pathway to engagement. What works in one project may not work in another.
- **Practice reciprocity.** As subject matter experts consistently noted, collecting input without acting on it causes harm and erodes the trust needed for future engagement. Tribal input should visibly and documentably shape project outcomes.



*Sleepy Lagoon Memorial,  
Maywood Riverfront Park.  
Photo by Rivers and  
Mountains Conservancy.*

# References & Resources for Project Leads



## California Consultation Frameworks & Guidance

- [Draft California Natural Resource Agency Tribal Grant Administration Guidelines](#)
- California Natural Resources Agency's [Tribal Consultation Best Practices \(2025 DRAFT\)](#)
- [AB-52 Native Americans: California Environmental Quality Act \(CEQA\) bill text](#)



## Context Reports & Analyses

- LA County's ["We Are Still Here." Report on past, present, and ongoing harms against local Tribes.](#)
- Environmental Law Institute's [Analysis of Tribal Consultation Under California SB 18 and AB 52](#)



## Contact pathways & tools

- California Native American Heritage Commission (NAHC) [Sacred Lands File search & Tribal Contact List request form](#)
- The [Los Angeles City/County Native American Indian Commission](#)
- [CNRA Tribal Affairs Office](#)



## Prompts for Future Project Documentation

Thorough documentation is one way project leads can demonstrate accountability to the Tribes they engage and create a record that supports continuity across staff transitions. The prompts below offer a flexible starting point for capturing key elements of a project's Tribal engagement process in a way that can be tailored to the specific relationships and agreements involved.

- **Administrative chronology:** Dates of notices, invitations to consult, meetings, and correspondence.
- **Engagement log:** Public workshops/advisory meetings, attendance, topics covered, and summary-level outcomes.
- **Interpretive elements catalog:** Planting palettes, signage themes, and co-authored text, with Tribal approvals documented.
- **Compensation and roles ledger:** How Tribal partners' time and knowledge were resourced.



# Notes on Connecting with Non-Federally Recognized Tribes

The NAHC Contact List includes Tribes eligible for AB 52/SB 18 processes. However, community-based relationships with non-federally recognized Tribes may also be reflected through local cultural organizations, educational partnerships, and place-based stewardship groups. Public agency examples, such as UCLA-Tongva agreements, illustrate varied engagement pathways outside of CEQA contexts.

Public meeting records (city councils/commissions), project workplans, and advisory-group rosters can document additional Indigenous partners involved in design, interpretation, or monitoring. Names and affiliations often appear in agendas and staff reports.

## Confidentiality Reminder

Sacred Lands information and culturally sensitive locations are protected under California law. Public references in this document are intentionally general. Project leads should never disclose specific site information without explicit Tribal authorization.



Urban Orchard Park,  
South Gate.  
Photo by Angélica García.