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When “new” crops are not really new: California Indigenous communities and research and commercialization of elderberry

The relationships of Indigenous people with the land and its plants need to be considered by non-Indigenous researchers and farmers working with native species that hold cultural significance for Indigenous communities.

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In this issue, the article “Native blue elderberry in hedgerows bridges revenue and conservation goals” (Brodt et al. 2024) focuses on the commercial potential of western blue elderberry (*Sambucus nigra* ssp. *cerulea*) plantings, primarily on private farmland in California. While blue elderberry is little known as a commercial agricultural crop, it is anything but new to the Indigenous people of this place. Many of the nearly 200 tribes that live in California have been in relationship with elderberry, and the land it grows on, since time immemorial, seeing all living beings as their own kin, rather than merely utilitarian resources. For non-Indigenous farmers and researchers working with elderberry, it is important to be aware of our state’s history of land dispossession and non-Native

land management practices, which have often diminished California Native peoples’ access to and sovereignty over traditional foods, medicines and cultural materials.

This history of stolen land and resource appropriation by non-Indigenous settlers raises important questions about the implications of elderberry commercialization for Indigenous people’s cultural and food sovereignty. Here, two of the European-descended, University of California authors of the elderberry hedgerows article join with Sabine Talaugon, who is S^hamala Chumash and serves as Program Officer with the First Nations Development Institute, to grapple with these implications, with the intent of prompting further discussions and actions.



Clipping blue elderberry clusters from a shrub. In this article, the authors pose questions for non-Indigenous farmers and researchers to consider regarding the potential impacts of elderberry commercialization on Indigenous people. Photo: Evett Kilmartin.

Significance of elderberry to Indigenous people

California Native people have been in relationship with blue elderberry and have incorporated it into their medicinal, utilitarian and cultural practices for thousands of years. Its lasting significance can be seen in the presence of elderberry shrubs at old village and burial sites (Anderson 2005). Today, elderberry flowers, berries and roots are used as medicine for various ailments throughout California and beyond. Berries are used for black dye for basketry by tribes, including the Cahuilla, Kumeyaay and Payómkawichum (Luiseno) (Merrill 1923). Many tribes use elderberry branches to create flutes and clapper sticks, which are long, straight sticks that are split and hollowed out for three-fourths their length and struck against the hand or shaken in the air with the wrist to make slapping sounds during songs and dances. Tribes also used the wood for various implements such as bows and drills to start fires.

California tribal communities still maintain ecological knowledge about elderberry. They know that elderberry will grow longer between leaf nodes after it is burned or coppiced, which makes better flutes and clapper sticks. Anderson (2005) has recorded interviews with many contemporary Native people, such as Lalo Franco (Yokut), who shared that fire stops elderberry bushes from becoming “congested”. Without fire, sunlight to the fruiting structures would decrease as density of branching increases. After fire, people can reach in for berries more easily. Fire also reduces insect activity by removing old wood. Most importantly, alongside a myriad of uses, elderberry is seen as kin, as deeply embedded in traditional lifeways, as is a family member.

Indigenous people’s relationship to the land

Native people’s words, metaphors and expressions demonstrate their long-standing relationships with their homelands (Romero-Briones et al. 2020). California boasts at least 300 dialects of 100 different traditional languages that encapsulate Indigenous knowledges and center local landscapes, thereby demonstrating California’s biodiversity (Romero-Briones et al. 2020). Prior to colonization, Indigenous people of California stewarded their homelands to ensure the health of food, medicine and utilitarian plant materials through intercropping, pruning, coppicing and low-intensity fire regimes (Anderson 2005). Native people conducted burns to increase the health and productivity not only of elderberry, but also of many different species of edible plants and mushrooms, as well as species that provide material for basketry and cordage. On a landscape scale, burning also maintained specific plant community types, such as forage for wildlife (Anderson 2005). At present, cultural protocols around harvesting still restrict the collection of resources to specific times



Sage LaPena (Nomtipom and Tunai Wintu) carries a crate of elderberries at a UC Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program workshop on food safety practices for elderberry. Photo: Evett Kilmartin.

of the year or month and take into consideration a species’ or ecosystem’s ability to restore itself (Baldy 2013).

Indigenous worldviews

Indigenous worldviews do not create separation between human and non-human worlds. Rather, it is felt that humans are related to all life in the landscape. This perspective, that all life is interconnected and relative, is called “kincentric ecology” (Romero-Briones et al. 2020). Because kincentric ecology is foundational to all Indigenous land stewardship and food production, Indigenous people’s functional use of elderberry should not be decontextualized. Without the wisdom of kincentric ecology and cultural context, the healing effect of elderberry on the land and people is minimized.

Kincentric ecology is evident in oral traditions, song and ceremony, which demonstrate the intimacy that Native people have with their land and the inhabitants, cycles, memories and values that it carries. These cultural practices are imbued with moral lessons and cultural norms that support understanding and purposeful management of collective resources. The traditional ecological knowledge and practices shared across generations are acts of bio-cultural sovereignty, a form of biological and cultural resistance that maintains and reinforces sovereignty (Baldy 2013).

It is important to recognize that pre-colonial economic or trade systems were integral to thriving Indigenous communities. Sharing with families and the broader community has always reinforced inter-dependency between food, land and familial



Syrup is one of the most common commercial elderberry products sold in California. Photo: Evett Kilmartin.

relationships (Romero-Briones et al. 2020). From there, the surplus is traded with external communities, which is why obsidian from Yosemite can be found on the coast and shell beads from Chumash communities can be found in Pueblo communities in New Mexico.

Historical context and land dispossession

Being mindful of history when researching and promoting native plants with Indigenous cultural significance is important because European-American settlers' economic interests

in agriculture and natural resource exploitation have historically been used to justify Indigenous land dispossession and destruction. In fact, many agricultural areas in California today occupy the same areas that were previously intimately stewarded by Native people. Systematic efforts to remove Native people from their lands dating back to the 1700s eventually led to the erasure of their presence in the memory of the land (Baldy 2013). Starting in 1769, forced labor and imported diseases at Spanish missions drastically increased mortality rates of Native people. Livestock brought by missionaries destroyed native plants, damaged soil, and brought invasive plant species from Europe.

During the Mexican Period, which began in 1821, hundreds of land grants were distributed to individuals who were loyal to the Spanish crown or Mexican government, further displacing California Native people from their land and solidifying a legacy of non-Native land management practices. The Gold Rush Era,

starting in 1848, introduced hydraulic mining, which washed sediment into rivers and lakes and discharged 10 to 13 million pounds of mercury, which continues to contaminate water bodies and fish today (California State Assembly Natural Resources Committee 2014).

In 1850, California became a state and passed the Act for the Government and Protection of Indians,

which facilitated the killing and indentured servitude of thousands of California Native people and further removed them from their traditional lands. During this era, treaties were negotiated with and signed by California tribal people, setting aside approximately 8 million acres of land. These treaties were never ratified, which has translated to diminished land bases for federally recognized California tribes and a lack of enforceable treaty rights related to gathering, fishing and hunting (Akins and Bauer 2021).

In addition, California has the highest number of non-federally recognized tribes, most of which do not hold any land bases. Even for tribes that have land, it is often in parcels that are cut off in large part, and sometimes almost entirely, from the ecosystems that are important for practicing tribal lifeways. Moreover, the tribal members may live far away, for historical and economic reasons, and their access and ability to steward land is often dependent on the cooperation of private landowners and public land managers. For example, most members of the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band currently live in the Central Valley, many hours' drive from their ancestral homelands on the Central Coast. To build up their land trust, they have been dependent on other landowners to provide access to plots of land for their restoration and use (Amah Mutsun Land Trust 2024).

Contemporary land management practices continue to impact California Native cultural practices today. Much commercial farmland occupies land that California Native people once stewarded for materials. Massive water projects, dams and other infrastructure created opportunities for agriculture in other areas where it was once limited. Prohibition of controlled burns at the federal, state and local level has compromised ecosystem health and quality of materials for basket making and harvesting.

Suggestions for researchers

Today, tribes steward more than 511,000 acres of land in California. While some tribal communities use traditional stewardship practices to produce food, medicine and traditional materials for their own use, others sell products in mainstream markets (e.g., [American Indian Foods](#)). Many tribes are working to assert more authority over ancestral lands through cultural easements on lands owned by private and public entities, facilitating the return of gathering, fishing and hunting practices. In addition, as more settler landowners become interested in planting species like elderberry on private land for commercial production, the resulting increase in supply may help to reduce the pressure of non-Native wildcrafters harvesting elderberry on public lands, which can reduce availability for Native people. However, even with such small steps in positive directions, a large scope for potential negative impacts on Native people from research and commercialization of culturally important species still exists.

Being mindful of history when researching and promoting native plants with Indigenous cultural significance is important because European-American settlers' economic interests in agriculture and natural resource exploitation have historically been used to justify Indigenous land dispossession and destruction.

To account for such potential negative impacts, we recommend that researchers who plan to study culturally significant native species consider the following before embarking on research:

- Are individuals from Native tribes in the study area actively included in formulating the research aims and advising on cultural acceptability of proposed methods?
- How might Native people benefit from the research?
- Is appropriate compensation needed and available to honor the time and expertise of Native advisers and project participants?
- Is enough time allowed in the research timeline to provide Native collaborators an opportunity for meaningful, rather than rushed or token, engagement?
- Does the research framework allow space for a larger cultural context and kincentric worldview?
- How will Indigenous intellectual property be safeguarded and acknowledged?

For further guidance on conducting research on culturally significant plants, see the International Society of Ethnobiology Code of Ethics (2006), or, more broadly, Tuhiwai Smith (2021).

Suggestions for non-Indigenous landowners and farmers

Private landowners and commercial farmers can consider and improve potential impacts of their economic activities on Native people by asking themselves the following:

- Do their land management systems leave physical and mental space for non-extractive relationships with the land, such as by maintaining wildlife habitat and other “non-cropped” areas?
- Are they aware of which Native tribes’ homelands their farmland is occupying? Online resources such as [Native Land Digital](#) are useful tools for identifying Native homelands.

- If producing native plants such as elderberry for commercial sale, do they know whether Native people in their region get enough of these plants to meet their own needs?
- Is there an option for local Indigenous communities to access a portion of the land for traditional gathering and other cultural activities? We acknowledge that being granted access to land is not the same as having sovereignty over land and maintains Indigenous people’s dependence on non-tribal landowners for culturally important resources. We also acknowledge that giving any people access to private land may present potential safety and liability concerns for landowners. Formal, documented agreements between Native tribes and public sector landholders that permit access to land, such as the Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2023 by the Hopland Band of Pomo Indians and the University of California Hopland Research and Extension Center (Merenlender and Middleton 2024), can potentially serve as a model for other, similar arrangements.
- Are settler landowners supporting efforts to increase tribal sovereignty and co-management of public lands?

We have offered some thoughts on strategies to mitigate or counter the extractive tendencies that can accompany commercial engagement with elderberry, and ways this might be balanced with more relational or responsible approaches. However, California Native tribes and individuals are not homogeneous in their approaches and attitudes toward commercialization of culturally significant plants — some may welcome such work while others will not. As elderberry gains more attention on California store shelves and farm edges, efforts towards commercialization may benefit from attunement to elderberry’s unmodified role in the landscape: as a biodiverse food source for human and non-human creatures alike, a medicine for land and people, and a widely adapted plant that is *of* this place rather than outside of it. [CA](#)

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