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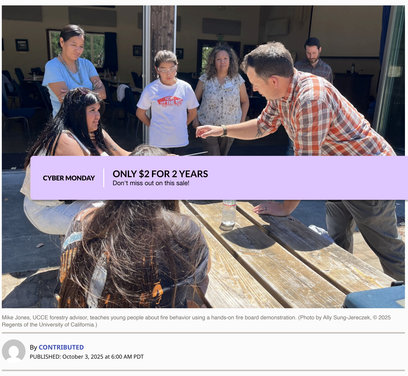
Science program for Tribal youth hosted in Hopland



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Mike Jones, UCCE forestry advisor, teaches young people about fire behavior using a hands-on fire board demonstration. (Photo by Ally Sung-Jereczek, © 2025 Regents of the University of California.)

By CONTRIBUTED
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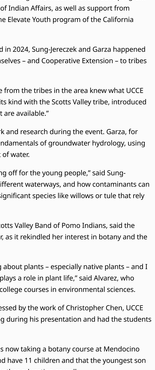
Editor's Note: This story was written and submitted by Michael (Mike) Hsu, Senior Public Information Representative for the University of California's Agriculture and Natural Resources Department.

Introducing Native young people to STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and potential careers was just one goal of the Scotts Valley Tribal Youth Exchange program held this July at the University of California Hopland Research and Extension Center.



Tribal youth participants visit a Pomo archeological site and explore the Hopland Research and Extension Center landscape previously and currently tended by the Shóqowa peoples. (Photo by Ally Sung-Jereczek, © 2025 Regents of the University of California.)

The center in Mendocino County is located on the ancestral territory of the Shóqowa People (also known as the Hopland Band of Pomo Indians). But for almost all the Native participants, the program represented their first chance to visit those lands.

"We gave them a broad overview of what the university has to offer, but it was also about their connection with the land and having time to explore the area and reconnect," said Ally Sung-Jereczek, a program organizer and UC Cooperative Extension fire advisor and tribal land stewardship liaison for Lake and Mendocino counties. "I know a lot of the students were really thankful to be there."

Twenty-five young people – members of the Scotts Valley tribe (with a few from the Hopland Band) ranging in age from 10 to 25 – gathered for the two-day program. Blending presentations by UCCE advisors and other UC personnel with talks by teachers and practitioners of traditional ecological knowledge, the program highlighted STEM fields and resources to pursue further studies.

The entire program came together quickly after a serendipitous meeting in March: During an event hosted by the Robinson Rancheria of Pomo Indians, Patty Franklin, the Scotts Valley tribal member and Environmental Protection Agency director, met Sung-Jereczek and her colleague Laura Garza, UCCE water resources management advisor for Lake and Mendocino counties.

Franklin mentioned she wanted to put together a program to provide tribal youth more exposure to STEM careers and the possibilities of higher education. She had funds from a California Department of Fish and Wildlife grant through the Tribal Youth Initiative program of the U.S. Department of the Interior Bureau of Indian Affairs, as well as support from the First Nations Development Institute and the Elevate Youth program of the California Department of Health Care Services.

Coincidentally, as both advisors were just hired in 2024, Sung-Jereczek and Garza happened to be seeking opportunities to introduce themselves – and Cooperative Extension – to tribes in the region.

"It was really eye-opening that very few people from the tribes in the area knew what UCCE is," Garza said. "This collaboration, the first of its kind with the Scotts Valley tribe, introduced the advisors to them and all the resources that are available."

A variety of UCCE advisors discussed their work and research during the event. Garza, for example, introduced the participants to the fundamentals of groundwater hydrology, using an interactive model to explain the movement of water.

"Sitting in the back, I could see light bulbs going off for the young people," said Sung-Jereczek. "They could see the connections of different waterways, and how contaminants can impact different riparian areas and culturally significant species like willows or tule that rely on those waterways."

Marie Alvarez, a 20-year-old member of the Scotts Valley Band of Pomo Indians, said the water demonstration left an impression on her, as it rekindled her interest in botany and the natural world.

"I really like plant identification and everything about plants – especially native plants – and I like learning about how the whole ecosystem plays a role in plant life," said Alvarez, who added she is contemplating taking additional college courses in environmental sciences.

Franklin's 19-year-old son was especially impressed by the work of Christopher Chen, UCCE viticulture advisor, who led a grape juice tasting during his presentation and had the students compare flavors and characteristics.

Inspired by Chen's career path, Franklin's son is now taking a botany course at Mendocino College. Franklin said that she and her husband have 11 children and that the youngest son could encourage his older siblings to pursue further education as well.

"I feel like a lot of our Native youth don't get the opportunity to visit somewhere where they can see so many successful people and just be inspired and know that they can do it too," Franklin said. "And they can see that there are resources available that will help them do that."

Hands-on experiences were another focus of the day. Sung-Jereczek had the students simulate, through a miniature fire demonstration, how changing factors like topography, vegetation cover and weather conditions affect fire behavior. Clebson Gonçalves, UCCE diversified agriculture advisor, brought live plants for the young people to identify common agricultural weeds. Helaine Berris, UCCE water and soil advisor, discussed surface water interactions and led a hands-on exploration along Parsons Creek.

Mike Jones, UCCE forestry advisor, guided the students on a hike through Hopland REC's oak woodlands and showed participants how to identify insects such as the acorn weevil (Curculio glandium). As acorns are a culturally significant food source for local Native communities, learning more about acorn weevil infestations is a priority for several tribes in the region.

Exploring how the interests and knowledge of UC scientists and tribal members intersect was a major goal of the program. Franklin said she appreciated that the UCCE advisors were eager to have the tribe lead and guide the program's development.

"A lot of times when we go into these partnership programs, we have to educate people about our tribal beliefs and we have to fight for our perspective to be acknowledged," Franklin said. "But in this case, we didn't have to do all that – they came in with that respect and were like, 'We're going to get this program together, but you guys will be the ones to decide what you really want.'"

Organizers also introduced the Institute for Tribal Environmental Professionals (ITEP) program. Two ITEP interns discussed how the program has supported their projects – alongside UC scientists – that incorporate science, art and Native values.

Laylalanai Gocobachi, a member of the Pascua Yaqui Tribe and a freshman at the University of Arizona, talked about her internship experience with Garza. Together, they worked with the Middletown Rancheria of Pomo Indians to develop a climate change and natural resources needs assessment.

"The project not only built capacity for the tribe to plan for climate impacts, but also strengthened collaborations between Lake County, UCCE and the tribe to ensure that traditional knowledge and community voices are included in future resilience efforts," Garza explained.

Camila Buitrago, an ITEP intern who is a graduate student at the Yale School of the Environment, shared some of her artwork alongside Sung-Jereczek and UC Davis professor Emily Schlickman exploring fire through different mediums of art such as ceramics, painting, and weaving.

Sung-Jereczek emphasized that the two days clearly left an impact for her and many of the participants – and she hopes to continue cultivating partnerships and programs with tribes in the region.

"Just having the opportunity to laugh and share and be in those spaces was just really great for the young people," she explained. "That type of programming is not always available for them."

Alvarez wholeheartedly agreed, calling her two days at Hopland REC "beautiful days."

"I think it's important for young people to get out of their bubble and see that life is not just everything that they're used to, day to day," she said. "There are other things out there for them."

Read the full story, and others by Hsu, here: https://ucanr.edu/blog/green-blog/article/tribal-teachers-ucce-advisors-open-doors-next-native-scientists

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