



Volunteers work to preserve historical Heart K Ranch

Samantha P. Hawthorne
Staff Writer
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Volunteers and organizations throughout Plumas and Lassen counties are working together to create a healthy forest and riparian habitat on the Heart K Ranch.

Feather River Land Trust and the Feather River Resource Conservation District partnered to protect the historical property, rich in diversity, natural resources and cultural values.

In 2006 FRLT was able to purchase Heart K from The Nature Conservancy and has since been working hard toward conservation.



Since the trust purchased the property and publically declared its intent to create a healthy forest for people, plants and animals, the following organizations have also partnered with FRLT to help restore the land:

California Indian Environmental Alliance, California State University Chico, Feather River College, Maidu Summit Consortium, Natural Resource Conservation Service, Plumas Audubon Society, Plumas National Forest and the Greenville and Susanville rancherias.

Through their collaborative use of traditional land management practices and the Mountain Maidu's traditional ecological knowledge, the nearly 1000-acre forest property is being preserved to protect the variety of habitats that support a diverse animal and plant population.

The goals behind the project are threefold: to improve water quality and riparian habitat by

planting cottonwood and willow along Indian Creek; reduce wildfire risk by hand thinning 100 – 120 forested acres and removing conifers that are no more than 10 inches in diameter; and to employ local indigenous people.

In the six months prior to its project update in July, FRLT focused on planning and permitting, public outreach, riparian restoration and forest health.

During the current six-month period volunteers are focusing on riparian and forest restoration.

About Heart K

The ranch is home to 884 acres of oak woodlands, old-growth conifer forests, riparian woodlands and mountain meadow habitats, as well as Taylor Lake — a serene escape encompassing 80 acres of the ranch.

Indian Creek flows through the Heart K, and although most of the area is dry due to lack of moisture, a large patch of meadow remains hydrated and green thanks to the creek running into it.

As one of the only areas currently blossoming, the meadow attracts a variety of butterfly and bee species, as well as other insects.

River otters, black bears, beavers, mountain lions, golden eagles and the endangered willow flycatcher, along with other special-status species, have made their homes in the Heart K forest.

In the Heart K forest alone, there are nearly 100 different bird species recorded.

Not only do these animals make permanent homes in the area, others have been observed using it as a migratory corridor.

The Maidu were the original settlers of the ranch. To this day, Maidu families still use the grounds as a gathering place and to gather acorns — a staple in their diet and a natural resource that is abundant in the forest.

Although the ranch is private property, it is FRLT's goal to maintain the Heart K for public use and recreation.

Its clean drinking water, carbon sequestration and diverse recreational activities are only a few of the hidden secrets of Heart K.

Ecological health

According to project leader Darrel Jury, past management actions have led to unhealthy forests within the Heart K Ranch.

Logging in the 1990s throughout the forest caused the growth of new trees, all of the same age

and struggling to stay alive. Rather than removing trees of an assortment of ages, loggers cut only large trees. This resulted in an even-aged, high-density forest composed of small trees, said Jury.

Instead of being used as a tool, fire has been avoided for over 100 years.

Jury said the current forest condition is unhealthy and prone to insect outbreaks and uncontrolled fire.

Trees compete for sunlight, water and nutrients; and many older trees never get the chance to grow big and strong because of it. Drought has also increased stress and mortality.

By thinning the forest, the land trust and other volunteers say they are improving watershed health and forest resilience.

Volunteers have been thinning the forest by hand, removing small trees that are unable to thrive in their current environment. A reduction in the amount of biomass in the forest also means wildfire potential has been reduced. Fewer trees in the forest means more water for other plants, wildlife and people, said Jury.

He said rather than avoiding fire, the land trust is embracing it. Volunteers are using underburning practices to improve the forest ecological health.

Sierra Nevada mixed conifer forests evolved with fire and Native Californians used fire to increase ecosystem biodiversity and productivity, said Jury.

He said using frequent, low-intensity fire is a least-cost method for clearing vegetation and is much less expensive than mechanical thinning or fire suppression.

As of June, approximately 50 acres of biomass piles have been burned and 70 acres have been thinned.

Maidu and TEK

The Mountain Maidu were pushed off land like the Heart K during the Gold Rush and subsequently their language and traditions have faded away.

Without their connection to the land, the Maidu suffered poor health due to a loss of traditional foods and practices.

The restoration of the Heart K will allow the Maidu to reconnect with their ancestral land. The Maidu are working with the land trust in using traditional ecological knowledge to help restore the land to its once-pristine condition. Through the Greenville and Susanville rancheria fire crews, the Maidu are being employed to assist with underburning and other work.

In 2012 and earlier this year, Maidu elders and FRLT land managers came together at the Heart

K Ranch to discuss traditional ecological knowledge and how to apply it in today's world.

Final decisions on how to best care for the forest are being made based on science and periodic monitoring.

Funding

Before the land trust purchased the Heart K, it was at risk of being divided up and sold into private ownership.

The nonprofit was able to secure a \$2.6 million bridge loan from the David & Lucile Packard Foundation. The loan was paid off in May 2011 with help from hundreds of individual supporters, the National Conservation Board and the Northern Sierra Partnership.

To help in its restoration and conservation efforts, the Sierra Nevada Conservancy donated \$232,750, Toyota Together Green donated \$63,206, the National Resource Conservation Service donated \$46,287, the National Forest Foundation donated \$23,438, the Morgan Family Foundation donated \$5,000 and Pacific Gas and Electric Co. donated \$1,000.

Over 800 volunteer hours have been spent in the field, valued at nearly \$20,000.

Play day

Guests are invited to visit the Heart K on Oct. 11 for a day of volunteer work, tours, fun and socializing.

The annual Heart K Play Day will feature several informative tours, bike rides, volunteer work projects and a big barbecue.

Events start at 9 a.m. and run through 4 p.m. A barbecue lunch will be served from 12:30 to 1:30 p.m. Volunteers eat free. Adults who RSVP before Oct. 7 pay \$20. After Oct. 7 the price increases by \$5. Kids 10 and under are free and students are \$10.

Proceeds benefit the Heart K restoration projects.

To reserve tickets call 283-5758 or email kkleven@frlt.org. For directions to the Heart K Ranch visit frlt.org.