



Informational Item

December 9, 2025

Item 7b

Informational Item:
OPC Tribal Engagement Strategy Implementation Update

Hallie Brown, Biodiversity Sea Grant Fellow

Location: Statewide

Strategic Plan Goals and Objectives: Goal 2: Advance Equity Across Ocean and Coastal Policies and Action; Objective 2.1: Enhance Engagement with Tribes

Executive Summary:

OPC adopted its first-ever [Tribal Engagement Strategy](#) in January 2023, which serves as a framework for enhanced communication and partnership between OPC and California Native American tribes on ocean and coastal issues. As the Tribal Engagement Strategy is intended to complement OPC's [Equity Plan](#) (adopted in 2022), in alignment with OPC's [Equity Plan Assessment](#) (Item 7a), this item provides an update on the ongoing implementation of OPC's Tribal Engagement Strategy and highlights progress and key milestones, with particular focus on OPC's efforts to 1) institutionalize meaningful tribal engagement, 2) provide funding to support tribal priorities, and 3) develop policy to advance tribal stewardship of the coast and ocean.

Background:

Since time immemorial, California Native American tribes have lived in and stewarded the lands and coastal waters of what is now known as California. Tribes share deep connections to, and knowledge of, the lands and waters in their ancestral territories. Tribes also hold unique responsibilities and reciprocity with their members and homelands. Despite a history of violence, exploitation, and dispossession perpetrated by the State of California, tribes have never ceded their obligations to steward their ancestral territories, and the coastal and marine ecosystems within them.

In January 2023, OPC adopted its first-ever [Tribal Engagement Strategy](#), which serves as a framework for enhanced communication and partnership between OPC and California Native

American tribes. The Tribal Engagement Strategy was crafted in close collaboration with tribes, including multiple rounds of consultations and listening sessions throughout 2021 and 2022. It directly advances OPC's commitment to strengthen partnerships with tribes and ensure tribes are meaningfully included in all aspects of OPC's work.

OPC's Tribal Engagement Strategy commitment is grounded in [Executive Order N-15-19](#), which provides a formal acknowledgement and apology for the State of California's historic wrongs and commits to truth and healing between tribes and state government, Governor Newsom's [Statement of Administrative Policy on Native American Ancestral Lands](#), which encourages the State of California to support tribal access and co-management, and Objective 2.1 of OPC's Strategic Plan, "Enhance Engagement with Tribes."

The Tribal Engagement Strategy was developed to be complementary to OPC's [Equity Plan](#), which was adopted in 2022 and provides a framework for embedding equity, environmental justice, and tribal priorities across California's coast and ocean policies and programs. While the Equity Plan includes recommendations to support tribal governments and Native American communities, the Tribal Engagement Strategy is specifically focused on government-to-government relationships and direct engagement between OPC and California Native American tribes.

The Tribal Engagement Strategy includes:

- **Tribal priorities for the coast and ocean** that emerged during listening sessions and consultation on the Strategy.
- **Guiding principles and best practices** for respectful and effective engagement and communication with tribes.
- **Specific actions** to strengthen partnerships with tribes and ensure tribal priorities are reflected in all aspects of OPC's work.
- **Approaches to improve communications and relations** with tribes in addition to the government-to-government consultation process, to ensure engagement is effective, meaningful, inclusive, and mutually respectful.

Since its adoption, the Tribal Engagement Strategy has provided a framework for OPC's engagement with tribes in all aspects of its work, and it has guided OPC's support for tribal science, stewardship, land return, and access to the coast and ocean. Though the Tribal Engagement Strategy intentionally includes a wide array of actions and priorities expressed by tribes during listening sessions and consultations, in implementing the Strategy over the last three years, OPC has focused mainly on 1) institutionalizing meaningful tribal engagement, 2) providing funding to support tribal priorities, and 3) developing policy to advance tribal stewardship of the coast and ocean.

Implementation Progress & Updates:

Institutionalizing Meaningful Tribal Engagement

Institutionalizing meaningful, respectful, and effective tribal engagement is key to creating strong and lasting partnerships with tribes. Over the last three years, OPC has worked to embed the principles, best practices, and approaches outlined in the Strategy into OPC processes and programs. This has included increasing internal staff capacity to work on tribal affairs, as well as ensuring that early, often, and meaningful engagement – including both formal consultation and informal collaboration – is an essential part of all OPC initiatives.

Increased Staff Capacity

OPC has made significant progress in increasing staff capacity to engage with tribes:

- **Dedicated Tribal Affairs Personnel:** In addition to OPC’s Tribal Liaison, one of two limited-term 30x30 Program Managers focused on tribal affairs and community engagement. Though this temporary two-year position ended in June 2025, OPC’s 2025 Biodiversity Sea Grant Fellow has been redirected to work part-time on tribal affairs, and OPC is now working to hire dedicated staff who will work at the intersection of OPC’s climate, biodiversity, and tribal affairs programs.
- **Regular Staff Trainings:** OPC staff have received cultural humility and tribal consultation training and now participate in annual tribal affairs trainings led by CNRA’s Tribal Affairs team.
- **Tribal Affairs Office Hours:** In mid-2025, OPC’s Tribal Liaison and Biodiversity Sea Grant Fellow began holding bi-weekly office hours to provide dedicated time for OPC staff to discuss topics, problem-solve, and ask questions related to tribal engagement for specific projects and programs. This time has reinforced concepts presented in annual trainings and is helping OPC staff better incorporate best practices for tribal engagement into their individual program areas.
- **Needs Assessment and Creation of Staff Resources:** This past year, OPC’s Biodiversity Sea Grant Fellow conducted interviews with OPC staff members in a “needs assessment” to gauge the biggest challenges OPC staff encounter in engaging with tribes and how the OPC Tribal Affairs team can better support staff. Results of this assessment informed the development of shared internal resources such as a guide for tribal outreach and relevant topics, such as understanding Traditional Knowledge and Indigenous Data Sovereignty.

Early, Often, Meaningful Consultation and Engagement

OPC has conducted tribal consultation on matters of relevance to California Native American tribes since Governor Edmund G. Brown, Jr. issued [EO-B-10-11](#) in September 2011, directing every state agency and department to “encourage communication and consultation” with tribes. However, one of the goals of OPC’s Tribal Engagement Strategy was to re-imagine and revitalize this directive by ensuring that tribal consultation is conducted earlier and more often across OPC programs, with more meaningful outcomes for tribes. Additionally, the Tribal Engagement Strategy recognizes that open, inclusive, and regular communication efforts between OPC and tribes must go beyond formal consultation. As such, OPC has adopted multiple pathways for both formal consultation and informal communication with tribes, such as:

- **Inviting earlier and more regular consultation on the development of new policies and programs** such as the initiative to conserve 30 percent of state coastal waters by 2030 (30x30), OPC’s 2026-2030 Strategic Plan, and the Senate Bill 1 Sea Level Rise Tribal Cultural Resources Funding Program.
- **Disseminating formal consultation invitations and informal engagement opportunities through multiple pathways**, including physical mail, email, and social media as appropriate. Additionally, OPC has improved coordination with the Governor’s Office of Tribal Affairs and CNRA’s Deputy Secretary for Tribal Affairs to ensure opportunities for engagement with OPC are included in statewide communications to tribes.
- **Holding 1-2 tribal roundtable discussions during consultation periods**, and convening tribal roundtables virtually and, when possible, in person at locations and times that minimize burden on tribes, including outside of regular working hours.
- **Attending in-person events and meetings across the state** to hear tribal perspectives, needs, and priorities, and to build relationships with tribal leadership, staff, and members.
- **Maintaining current contact information for tribal representatives and partners**, including both leadership and staff, and updating tribal contact information regularly.

Funding to Support Tribal Priorities

Since the adoption of the Tribal Engagement Strategy, OPC has provided close to \$15 million in funding to California Native American tribes to support tribally-led science, tribal stewardship, land return, and access to the coast and ocean. Funding highlights include:

- **Tribal Marine Stewards Network:** In 2020, OPC invested \$1 million to establish the [Tribal Marine Stewards Network](#) (TMSN) pilot program, an alliance of four California Native American tribes (the Tolowa Dee-ni’ Nation, Pulikla Tribe of Yurok People, Kashia Band of Pomo Indians, and Amah Mutsun Tribal Band) working to return stewardship and

management of ocean and coastal territories to tribes. In 2023, OPC invested an additional \$3.6 million to continue and expand the TMSN's monitoring, outreach, and organizational development work, and to welcome a fifth tribe to the Network, the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians. The TMSN has since expanded to include a sixth tribe, the Cher-Ae Heights Indian Community of the Trinidad Rancheria, and is working with OPC and philanthropic partners to ensure ongoing financial support as this groundbreaking Network continues to expand.

- **Tribal Nature Based Solutions (TNBS) grants:** In 2023, OPC committed \$1 million to CNRA's [Nature Based Solutions Program](#) with the goal of restoring culturally important habitats and species, improving tribal access to the coast and ocean, and supporting tribally-led stewardship. Two projects were selected: One to support Kai Poma (a tribal nonprofit representing the Coyote Valley Tribe Band of Pomo Indians, Sherwood Valley Band of Pomo Indians, and Round Valley Indian Tribes) in developing a robust management plan and promoting tribally-led stewardship for the Blues Beach property, 136.2 acres of tribal ancestral land along the coast in Mendocino County; and, the other to support the yak tit'yu tit'yu yak tiłhini Northern Chumash Tribe in developing and implementing an estuarine and creek conservation plan and a tribally-led aquaculture development plan in San Luis Obispo County, including supporting capacity building and planning for future ancestral land return.
- **Senate Bill 1 Sea Level Rise Tribal Cultural Resources Funding Program:** In June 2025, OPC approved up to \$5 million for a [Sea Level Rise \(SLR\) Tribal Cultural Resources Funding Program](#) to support tribally-led vulnerability assessments and adaptation strategies to protect cultural resources, and capacity building for tribes to consult on local and regional land use plans. This program was created to provide greater flexibility and accessibility to state funding for SLR planning for tribes, including making funds accessible to non-federally recognized tribes and removing burdensome requirements of the SB1 SLR Adaptation Planning Grant Program Track 1 such as land ownership. To further promote equitable access to state funds, the SB 1 Grant Program offers a complementary Technical Assistance Program to support tribal applicants, offering a tiered range of services to address applicants' varying levels of need – from proposal development to advanced project scoping, budgeting, stakeholder engagement, and post-award work plan preparation.
- **Tribal and Environmental Justice Small grants 2025-2026 WHALE TAIL® Grant Program:** In September 2025, OPC provided up to \$2 million in funding to the California Coastal Commission for tribal and environmental justice small grants through their [2025-2026 WHALE TAIL® Grants program](#). WHALE TAIL® funds projects that connect people to the California coast and its watersheds through education, stewardship, and outdoor experiences. For the first time, the program now includes a dedicated \$1 million for projects led by, in partnership with, and/or directly serving California Native American

tribes and tribal communities, to support tribal stewardship, cultural practices, and access to the coast and ocean.

- **Wiyot Tribe Acquisition of Coastal Land:** In 2022, OPC provided \$1.2 million to support the return of one of the last pieces of undeveloped coastal wetland and upland near Humboldt Bay to the Wiyot Tribe. The 46 acres, known as Mouralherwaqh or “wolf’s house,” will be preserved for the cultural significance to the Wiyot Tribe and the environmental importance to the area.
- **Advancing 30x30 in Coastal Waters Solicitation – Revitalizing Tribally-led Stewardship:** In June 2025, OPC released a \$10 million [request for proposals to advance 30x30 in coastal waters](#) which included a \$4 million tribal set-aside dedicated to revitalizing tribally-led stewardship. These funds will support projects that restore and revitalize tribal stewardship of California’s coast and ocean through ancestral land return, tribally-led research, monitoring, and restoration, and other tribal priorities that support the state’s goal to conserve 30% of its coastal waters by 2030.

More broadly, OPC has worked to reduce barriers to accessing state funding for tribes, for example by dedicating more funds specifically to tribes (e.g. TNBS, SB 1 Tribal Cultural Resources, tribal set-aside in the WHALE TAIL Grant Program). This allows tribal governments and communities to secure funding to advance their priorities without having to compete against other highly-resourced institutions and organizations. OPC has also begun providing dedicated technical assistance to support tribes in navigating grant application processes, including by contracting with tribally-led technical assistance providers. Most recently, OPC has begun working to adopt [CNRA’s Tribal Grants Guidance Best Practices](#) (released September 2025) throughout its grantmaking processes.

Developing Policy to Advance Tribal Stewardship

As the original stewards of the lands and waters that are now known as California, tribes hold deep knowledge about how to care for the state’s coastal and ocean ecosystems. In fact, the forceful separation of tribes from their ancestral lands and waters has caused great harm to both people and nature. Tribal expertise is critical in addressing the environmental challenges we face and fulfilling OPC’s mission to protect and restore California’s coast and ocean. The Tribal Engagement Strategy commits to working in close collaboration with tribes to support tribal stewardship through OPC’s unique, overarching role as a state policy lead.

Recent policy achievements include:

- **Inclusion of Tribal Stewardship Areas as 30x30 Conservation Areas:** In 2025, OPC released a [*Roadmap to Achieving 30x30 in California's Coastal Waters*](#) that recognizes Tribal Stewardship Areas, or areas that are formally and collaboratively managed, stewarded, and cared for by California Native American tribes in ways that achieve significant biodiversity benefits, as 30x30 Conservation Areas. This inclusion aligns with global guidance to recognize and respect Indigenous Conserved Areas, as affirmed by IUCN, the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity, and international human rights law.
- **Support for the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary:** One notable example of a Tribal Stewardship Area in California's coastal waters is the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary off California's central coast. The designation of this Sanctuary in 2024 was led by Chumash tribes and protects highly productive, ecologically important waters to conserve both marine life and cultural heritage. In June 2025, OPC recognized the Chumash Sanctuary as a 30x30 Conservation Area and will directly participate in the collaborative management and stewardship of the Sanctuary through leadership-level participation on the Sanctuary Advisory Council and Intergovernmental Policy Council – both of which are part of the Sanctuary's explicit and binding framework for collaborative co-stewardship with tribes.
- **Development of Indigenous Marine Stewardship Areas:** Indigenous Marine Stewardship Areas (IMSAs), a new concept in California, are envisioned in CNRA's *Pathways to 30x30* Strategy as defined geographical areas within coastal waters that are conserved and stewarded by tribes. In 2023, three North Coast tribes (the Tolowa Dee-ni' Nation, Pulikla Tribe of Yurok People, and Cher-Ae Heights Indian Community of the Trinidad Rancheria) made history by designating the nation's first-ever IMSA through tribal resolution and an inter-tribal treaty. Now, OPC is working with these tribes, and others throughout the state interested in pursuing IMSAs, to explore administrative or regulatory mechanisms for the establishment, recognition, and co-stewardship of IMSAs.
- **Inclusion of tribal science and Traditional Knowledges on OPC advisory bodies:** In response to concerns voiced by tribes regarding expert advisory bodies that did not include tribal representation, OPC is working to support improved and long-overdue recognition of tribal scientists and knowledge holders on scientific working groups, policy-oriented leadership teams, and other advisory bodies. For example, OPC is currently recruiting tribal representatives for four primary and four alternate seats on the Marine Protected Area (MPA) Statewide Leadership Team, which advises the Secretary for Natural Resources on matters related to California's MPA network. OPC also worked to ensure that tribal knowledge holders were included on a recently launched social science working group, which will develop recommendations to elevate social science research and monitoring efforts related to MPAs.

Next Steps:

Over the last three years, OPC has made meaningful and focused progress on the commitments and actions outlined in the Tribal Engagement Strategy. However, much work remains to continue to strengthen partnerships between OPC and California Native American tribes and ensure tribes are meaningfully included in the development of policies, programs and activities that may affect them. Moving forward, OPC will work in close collaboration with tribes to build on the successes of the last three years. Key priorities include, but are not limited to:

- **Continue to strengthen internal capacity for tribal affairs work**, including institutionalizing best practices across OPC projects and program areas and expanding relationships between OPC staff and tribal leadership and staff.
- **Increase consideration of tribal science, knowledges, and perspectives in ocean and coastal management decisions**, including continuing to ensure diverse representation on science-policy advisory bodies, and developing appropriate pathways for the enhanced consideration of Traditional Knowledges in ocean and coastal management decisions.
- **Provide funding to support tribal stewardship, science, and access** to the coast and ocean, including expanding the Tribal Marine Stewards Network to include at least three additional tribes and supporting 500 acres of land return.
- **Advance policy** to expand tribal access and stewardship of the coast and ocean, including but not limited to supporting the development and implementation of strategies for the recognition and co-stewardship of IMSAs and pathways to collaborative management of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs).
- **Refine and regularly track key metrics** to track Tribal Engagement Strategy implementation and facilitate regular evaluation of implementation progress, in coordination with the Equity Plan Assessment.

Importantly, these priorities are reflected in OPC’s 2026-2030 Strategic Plan, which will be considered for adoption at this Council meeting (Item 4).

Continuing to strengthen OPC’s engagement with California Native American tribes is essential to protecting California’s coast and ocean. Improving our internal practices, investing in tribes and reducing barriers to OPC funding, and using our role as a policy lead to support and elevate tribes are all critical steps to address past harms and begin to heal historical wrongs. Supporting tribal priorities for stewarding the coast and ocean will also build climate resilience, protect biodiversity, and ultimately help people and nature thrive together. OPC is grateful for the trust and partnership of California Native American tribes and looks forward to the work ahead.