

Chapter Seven: Native Los Angeles

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Responsibility

The purpose of this chapter is to ground Tree Ambassadors in acknowledgment, respect, and collaboration with the original nations on whose lands we live, learn, play, and work on. As an environmental collaboration, we must first root ourselves in the historical and cultural context of the land we are working to restore.

Indigenous cultures all over the world have their own intimate knowledge which transcend western frameworks and inform our relationship to the earth. Our work as Tree Ambassadors is not possible without Indigenous leadership and collaboration with local tribal nations.

History of SoCal Indians

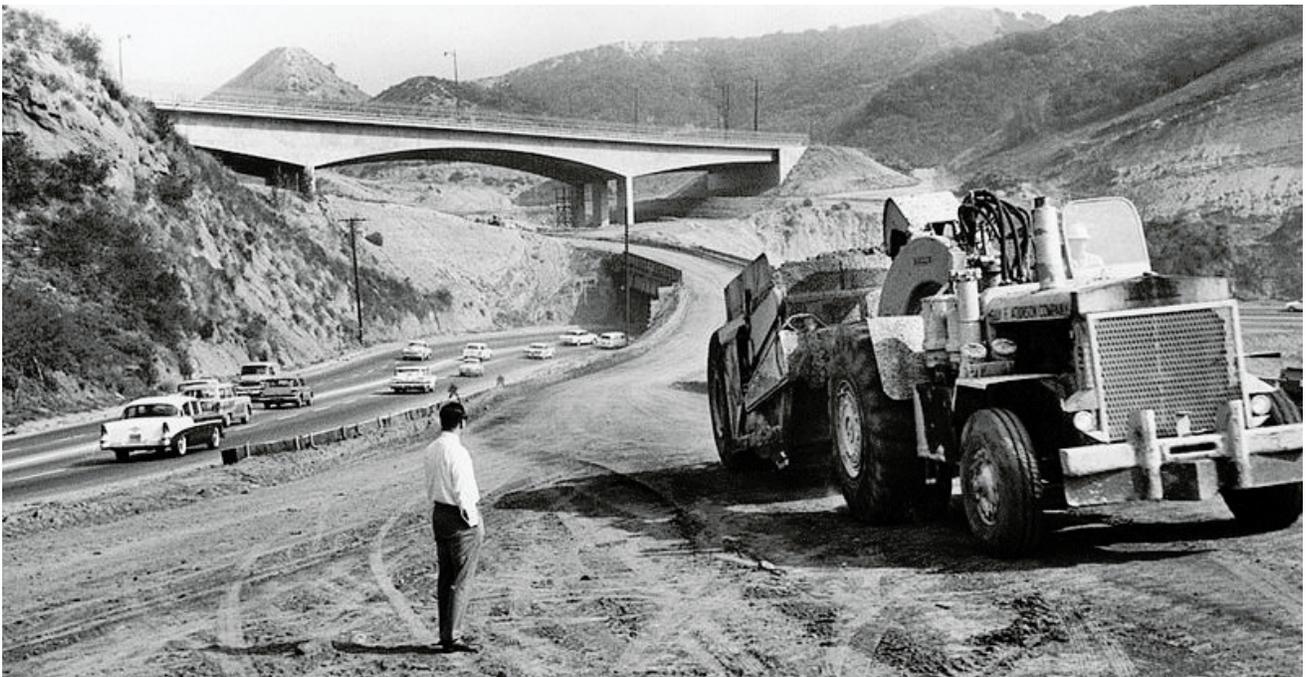
“Indigenous peoples have and continue to be the first impacted — first to lose, first to hurt and first to die — and this story is ongoing for all indigenous life forms in California.”

Nicholas Hummingbird

Precolonial Tongavaar (known today as the Los Angeles Basin) was a cultural landscape shaped by centuries of tribal intervention on the land - such as controlled burns, seed dispersals, and an immersive understanding of the ecosystem - not the untouched pristine environment written about by white environmentalists such as John Muir.

Southern California has always and continues to be a hotspot of biological and cultural diversity. The City of Los Angeles is home to many tribal nations, including the Tongva, Kizh Gabrieleno, and Chumash peoples.

Sustainability is made possible with the knowledge, use, and connection of native plants within our ecosystems. Indigenous peoples are inseparable from this story as our existence is mirrored in the past, present and future. As Indigenous peoples we are the human story and translation of this environment.



It can be hard to imagine what California or Los Angeles would have looked like without mass urbanization. Luckily, storytelling and place-names help us realize a world beneath the concrete and under the very roots of non native and invasive plants. This is a story that needs to be told, for reference, for integrity, and most importantly for healing.



Kizh Gabrieleño tribal leaders planting trees in the Arts District

Past, Present, and Future

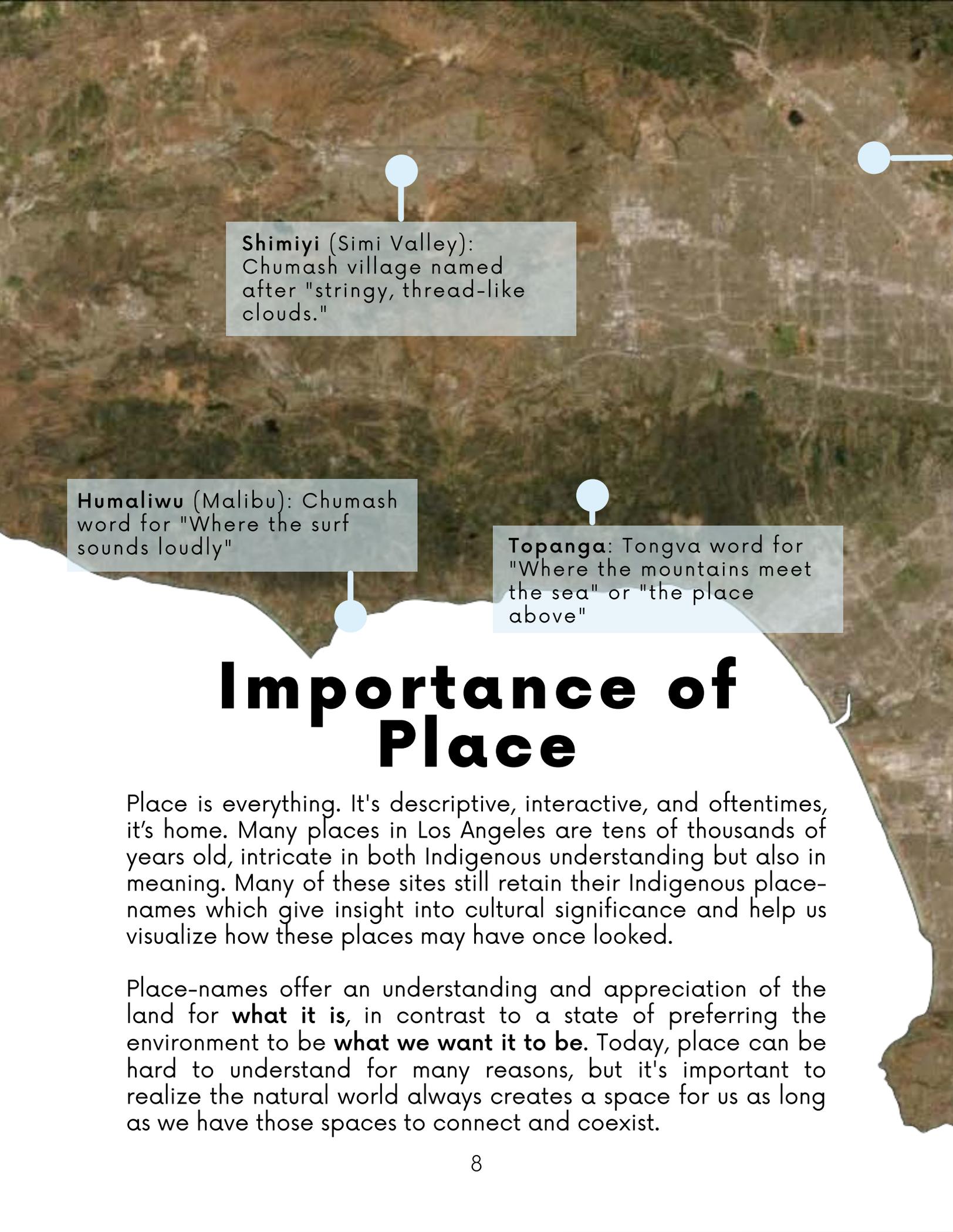
"We must protect the forests for our children, grandchildren and children yet to be born. We must protect the forests for those who can't speak for themselves such as the birds, animals, fish and trees."

Qwatsinas (Nuxalk Nation)

Los Angeles is home to the largest Urban Indian population in the United States and has a rich history of indigeneity, despite colonial attempts at erasure. California Indians have survived waves of colonial genocide (Catholic Missions, the Mexican period, the Gold Rush, and government sanctioned militias). Our peoples have survived land grabs, disease, boarding schools and indentured servitude.

These genocides have devastating impacts on our cultures, our plant and animal relatives, and the very water we drink and air we breathe.

We are all subjugated to a genocide that continues to this day with no end in sight. Yet we are still here fighting to insure an inhabitable planet for our children's futures and the next seven generations to come.

An aerial photograph of Los Angeles, California, with a white outline of the city's coastline overlaid. Three callout boxes with light blue circular markers point to specific locations: Shimiya (Simi Valley) in the north, Humaliwu (Malibu) on the west coast, and Topanga on the east coast.

Shimiya (Simi Valley): Chumash village named after "stringy, thread-like clouds."

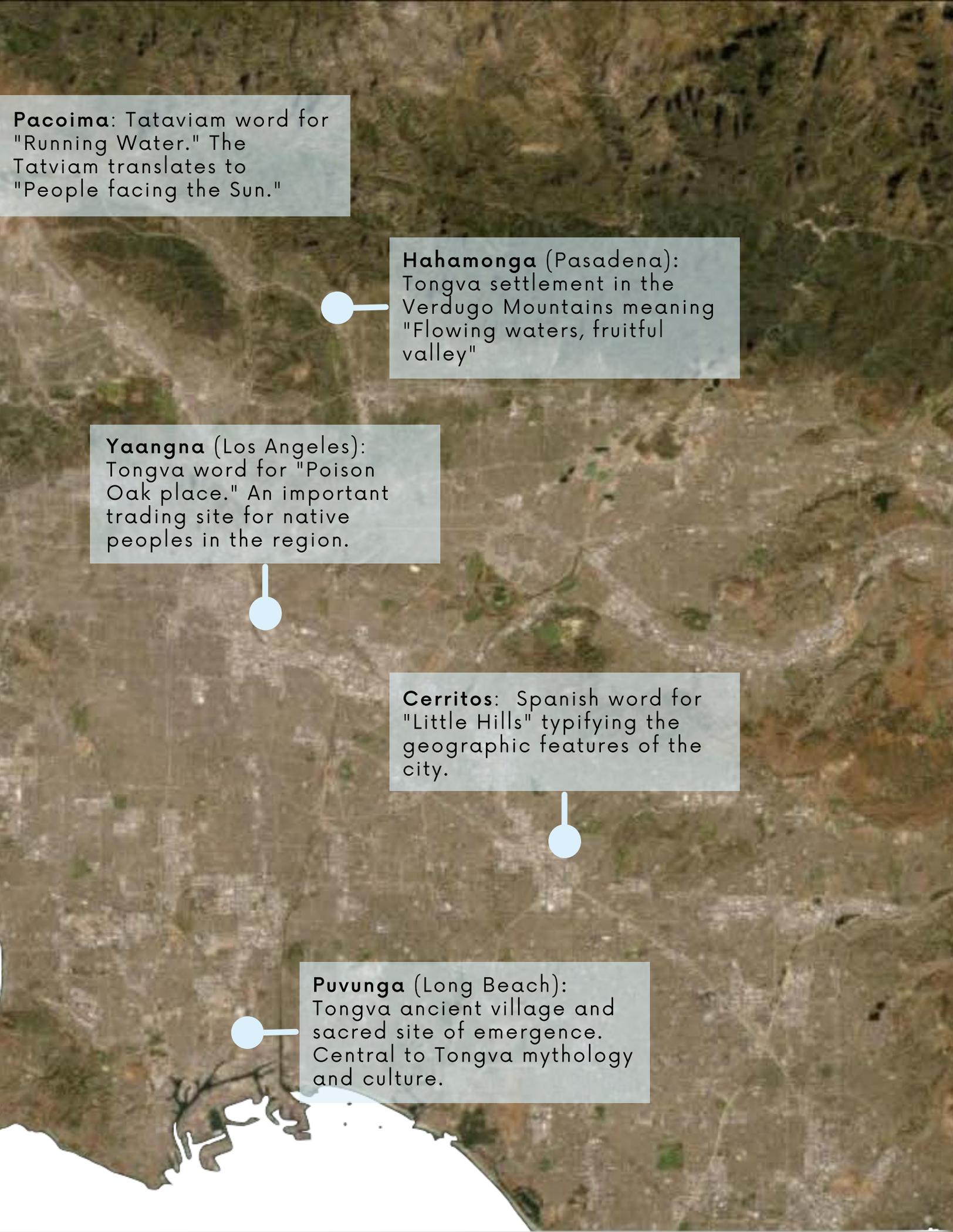
Humaliwu (Malibu): Chumash word for "Where the surf sounds loudly"

Topanga: Tongva word for "Where the mountains meet the sea" or "the place above"

Importance of Place

Place is everything. It's descriptive, interactive, and oftentimes, it's home. Many places in Los Angeles are tens of thousands of years old, intricate in both Indigenous understanding but also in meaning. Many of these sites still retain their Indigenous place-names which give insight into cultural significance and help us visualize how these places may have once looked.

Place-names offer an understanding and appreciation of the land for **what it is**, in contrast to a state of preferring the environment to be **what we want it to be**. Today, place can be hard to understand for many reasons, but it's important to realize the natural world always creates a space for us as long as we have those spaces to connect and coexist.



Pacoima: Tataviam word for "Running Water." The Tatviam translates to "People facing the Sun."

Hahamonga (Pasadena): Tongva settlement in the Verdugo Mountains meaning "Flowing waters, fruitful valley"

Yaangna (Los Angeles): Tongva word for "Poison Oak place." An important trading site for native peoples in the region.

Cerritos: Spanish word for "Little Hills" typifying the geographic features of the city.

Puvunga (Long Beach): Tongva ancient village and sacred site of emergence. Central to Tongva mythology and culture.

PLANTS AS A PATHWAY TO INDIGENIZATION

Similar to Indigenous peoples, native plants have existed on these lands since time immemorial. They have spent this time caring for our peoples and animal relatives.

In some native cultures, plants are our oldest relatives. As our elders, they guide us through lessons of reciprocity. Our livelihoods are mutually intertwined with the health of our plant relatives and the relations they maintain.

Native plants are a direct lifeline for environmental security and cultural integrity. Plants are capable of reestablishing "Place" by cleaning water, air and soil. Healthy ecosystems mean healthy people.



Coast Live Oak

Native Tree

Description: Large evergreen oaks with expanding and embracing branches. Rigid, grey bark.

Reasons to Plant: Beautiful, large tree that creates a habitat for native birds and animals. Nutritious acorns. Adapted to SoCal climate.



California Bay Laurel

Native Tree

Description: Fragrant medicinal and culinary plant. Native to coastal forests and the Sierra foothills.

Reasons to Plant: Avocado-like fruit which, when prepared correctly, tastes like dark chocolate. Leaf litter repels fleas and ticks.



Elderberry

Native Small Tree/Shrub

Description: Deciduous tree which can grow up to 30 ft. It has cream or yellow flowers in the spring and purple berries in the fall.

Reasons to Plant: Berries are one of the most important food sources for birds in California. Doesn't require much water and is resilient to harm.



Toyon

Native Shrub

Description: Perennial component of the coastal sage scrub, chaparral, and oak woodland habitats. Bright red berries.

Reasons to Plant: Berries can be made into beverage and are consumed by birds and larger mammals to be distributed. Beautiful, easy to grow plant.



Engelmann Oak

Native Tree

Description: Rare oak species native coastal Southern California. Suburban sprawl has encroached on native habitat.

Reasons to Plant: Beautiful but tricky oak to maintain. Drought tolerant and provides habitat to native birds and animals.



Western Sycamore

Native Tree

Description: Riparian species found in areas of abundant water (e.g. stream beds, near ponds)

Reasons to Plant: Deep tap root but will require a lot of water. Plant by a stream of a seep.



Being a Good Ally

Allyship is the recognition of the positions and privileges we occupy and using them responsibly to better the unequal society our privilege stems from. Privilege refers to the uneven distribution of power in society. Privilege is when an aspect of your identity or life is accepted without question or issue. These unearned attributes change the ease and influence you have within society. While privilege is a fact, it is not an absolute (there are multiple levels and positions one can occupy).

“Ally” is not a noun, but rather a verb, because it requires action. To be an ally is to make a concerted effort to self-educate, to better understand the struggle others are facing every single day and to stand up... even if you feel scared.

Levels of Allyship

The Actor	<p>The actions of an actor do not disrupt the status quo, much like a spectator at a game, both only have a nominal effect in shifting the overall outcome. The actions of an actor do not explicitly name or challenge the pillars of white supremacy.</p>
The Ally	<p>An ally is a disrupter and educator in spaces dominated by Whiteness. Being an ally is about listening and constantly educating oneself - not occupying non-Indigenous spaces to lead, take over, or explain.</p> <p>One of the most important roles of an ally is to engage those who share your identity. Have conversations with others in your position of privilege and call them in if needed.</p> <p>The actions of an ally have greater likelihood to challenge settler colonialism, institutionalized racism and White supremacy.</p>
The Accomplice	<p>The actions of an accomplice are meant to directly challenge institutional racism, colonization, and white supremacy by blocking or impeding racist people, policies, and structures. Actions are often coordinated with leaders who are Indigenous and People of Color. Accomplices actively listen with respect and build trust through consent and being accountable.</p>

Allyship is not a self-proclaimed title or identity. Beware of performative allyship, as allies do not get to be in the spotlight.

Pathways for Tree Ambassadors

1

Planting Native Trees:

Advocate for the restoration of native plants that are both culturally and environmentally restorative in your neighborhoods. Speak to your community about the benefits of native trees, and encourage continued planting & stewardship of natives.

2

Contextualized Work:

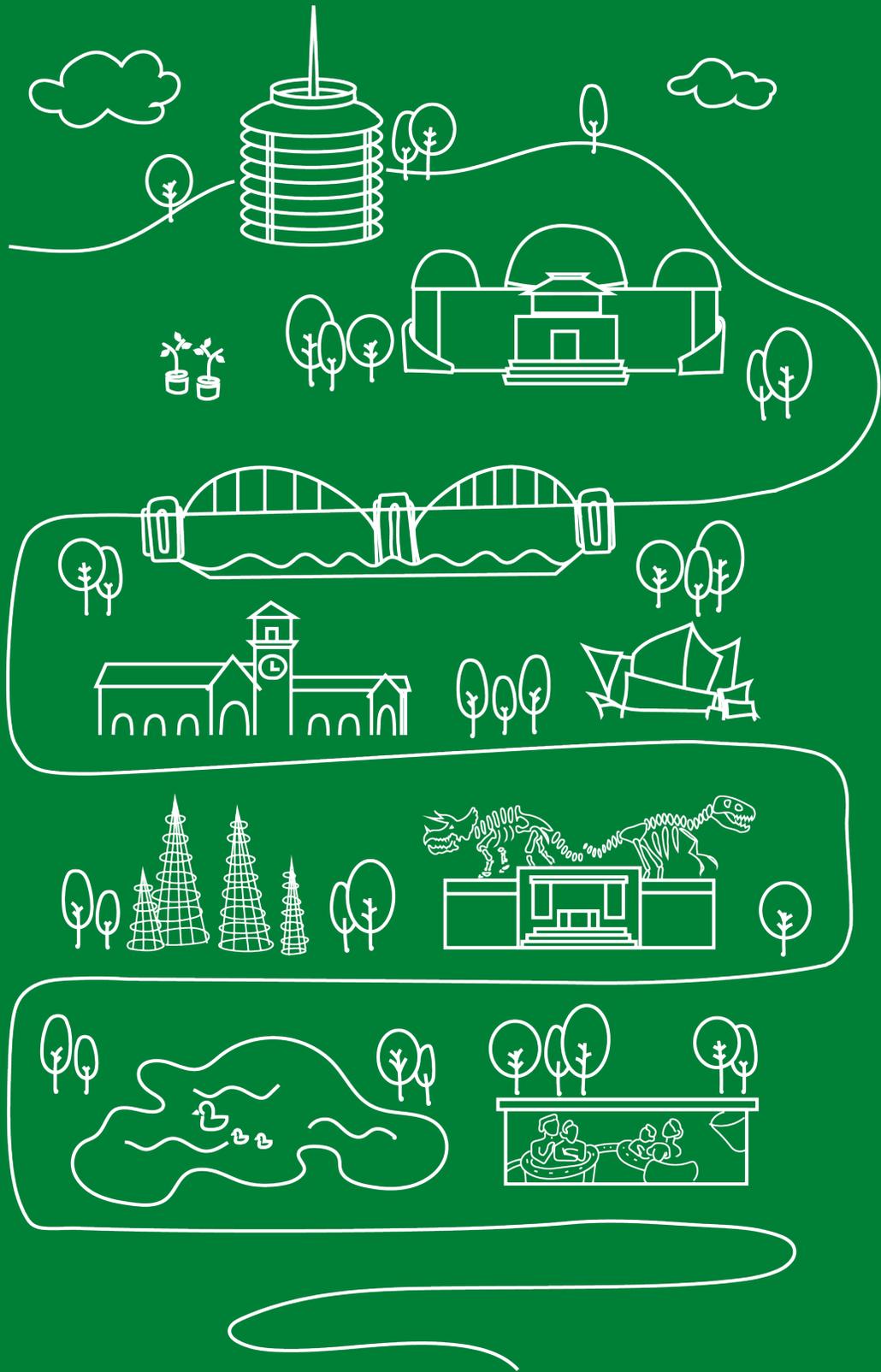
Remember whose land we are working to restore and plant. Learning the history of place can help us understand how to navigate the field of environmental work moving forward and which parties have a seat at the table.

3

Building Relationships:

Our actions become meaningful when coupled with authentic relationship building and informed intentional actions. Enter community with respect and without extractive expectations.

Together, we can effect change beyond the Tree Ambassador program and beyond our internal communities, but it requires a brutally honest assessment of the history, reality and future of U.S. society.



Your city. Your voice. Your urban forest.
Tu voz. Tu ciudad. Tu bosque urbano.