**Incorporating Indigenous History into California Naturalist Talks and Walks:**

**Yosemite Valley Presentation**

*Environmental setting: In Yosemite Valley, with a view or proximity to the Merced River.*

*Age group: Any, though it is geared towards all ages and not kids specifically.*

*Props required: None, just the landscape, though photos or a map could be used to supplement.*

*Skills needed: The ability to lead and group and present information in a clear, concise manner.*

*Prep/practice time is required: 15 minutes to read over and memorize information, and write down any cues/facts to remember on cards.*

Understanding the history of California’s indigenous peoples is a very important part of understanding California’s natural environment. Gone are the days of subscribing to European concepts of “wilderness” and “pristine landscapes.” In California Native Americans interacted with, shaped, and were shaped by the natural environment in so many ways. Whether it’s annual burning practices, pruning endemic edible plants, or crafting baskets from the landscape, the people of California have made it what it is today and it’s very important to recognize their legacy and present existence. In the notes for this presentation I’ve included a brief bulleted list of things to consider when rightfully incorporating Native history into Naturalist talks.

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* [*Ossie Michelin*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEzjA5RoLv0) *explains that though terms like “indigenous” aren’t necessarily wrong, when used in place of known specific information they can become wrong. Always take the time to identify the specific peoples and histories of an area (e.g. the Southern Sierra Miwuk of Yosemite).*
* *Recognize that the people of the land you’re on are still in existence, and do not refer to them in past tense (this has been used as a political tool to deny them their identity and power). If possible, point out where the tribe lives presently, and that it’s important to respect their connection to the land and therefore not degrade the land. It may be relevant to point out specific sacred spots that should be looked at but not touched or climbed on top of (e.g. Castle Rock in Tahoe).*
* *Make it clear if you’re not an expert on certain facts, but acknowledge that we need to share these histories and push for better indigenous history information for Naturalists. Never share facts that make an indigenous group take the blame for anything (e.g. a loss of species, an attack, etc.) without knowing and providing the full picture, as this perpetuates false negative histories that colonizers have instilled. Understand the question “How has the conservation movement perpetuated white privilege and indigenous oppression in California?”*
* *One point from "Principles of Action: A Credo for Working in the Maori World" by Ritcerie, a credo on how to respect Maori and other indigenous partners, coworkers, friends, etc.: “Whakakitenga: Never presume to understand. Ask questions when necessary, don't place it on others to tell you everything you need to know. There have been times, during my life working in the Maori world, when the process of disintegration seems to me to be too great and the survival of Maori culture by no means assured. Yet here we are in another renaissance. So even when you think you know or understand, there may be new processes, new developments, new reasons, new alignments. The task of understanding is never complete.”*
* ***Look up the amazing Native history of the natural areas you explore and talk about!*** *There are often great resources out there, through universities or through tribal websites (e.g. southernsierramiwuknation.org). The Native names and stories of an area can make a place much more interesting and special!*

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To provide an example of what a few minute Naturalist presentation incorporating Native history could look like, I’ll be speaking about the natural history of Yosemite Valley and the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation there. [Note: the images I use in my video provide examples of what may be shown in the field when speaking.]

**OVERVIEW**

Glacially-carved after tectonic uplift, Yosemite Valley is found in the center of California’s Sierra Nevada mountain range, does anyone know how much of California’s water supply the Sierra supplies?

A: 60 percent of California’s developed water supply (Sierra Nevada Conservancy, 2014).

Snowmelt recharges the Merced River basin during hot summer months in this temperate-climate area.

Vegetation includes wet/grass meadows, riparian forest, and a spectrum of oak and conifer forests.

In the Valley the Merced river flows atop alluvial deposits that filled the pre-historic Yosemite Lake.

These deposits formed present-day soils that generally consist of coarse, sandy loam with low clay content and cohesive properties. This has made the area particularly susceptible to human-induced erosion. So be careful where you’re stepping in this beautiful river corridor, does anyone know what to stay off of when exploring along a river?

A: make sure to stay off plants and roots and to use hard surfaces like rocks, sand bars, and boardwalks!

**RECENT HISTORY**

As the first protected area in the US, Yosemite National Park is a pioneer in land management practices for both the United States and the world.

Now the fourth most visited national park in the US and tenth in the world, a lot of people are invested in Yosemite– especially Yosemite Valley, which hosts 90% of visitors (Madej, et al., 1994), Yosemite Valley faces issues of overuse and being loved to death. It makes sense as the area has been called “the most beautiful place in the world” by Teddy Roosevelt, and has been romanticized by famed artists and writers such as Ansel Adams and John Muir.



**SOUTHERN SIERRA MIWUK HISTORY**

Going back to the Merced River that flows through the Valley here, it currently has Wild and Scenic River designation and you’ll see many new restoration projects and signs throughout the Valley in relation to this so pay attention!

The Merced River is known to the Native people of the Valley as the Wa-kal-la, which simply means “the river”.

Though there were many tribes and villages throughout the Valley, in places such as the current “Yosemite Village” (Haw-kaw-koo'-e-tah) or the Pohono Bridge on the west side of the Valley (Ah-wah-mar), the peoples of Yosemite Valley have more generally become known as the Ahwahnechee (″Yosemite Valley People″), since they called the Valley “Ahwahne”. This is the name that the large Ahwahnee hotel took.

A present-day group of Native Yosemite people is the Southern Sierra Miwuk, who were actually not completely forced out of the park by the Park Service until the 60s. They’re based out of Mariposa and are currently rebuilding one of their Native villages, Wahhoga, near Yosemite Village that was burned down by the Park Service in 1969. They could always use donations and support for this!

If you’d like to see the existing Native structures and do the self-guided tour through this area, you can get off at shuttle stop 5 and head towards the library and museum there.

I hope you enjoy exploring the Wa-kal-la or Merced River and the Ahwahne or Valley today! Any questions?