

## A glimpse into area's indigenous culture and protected wildlife

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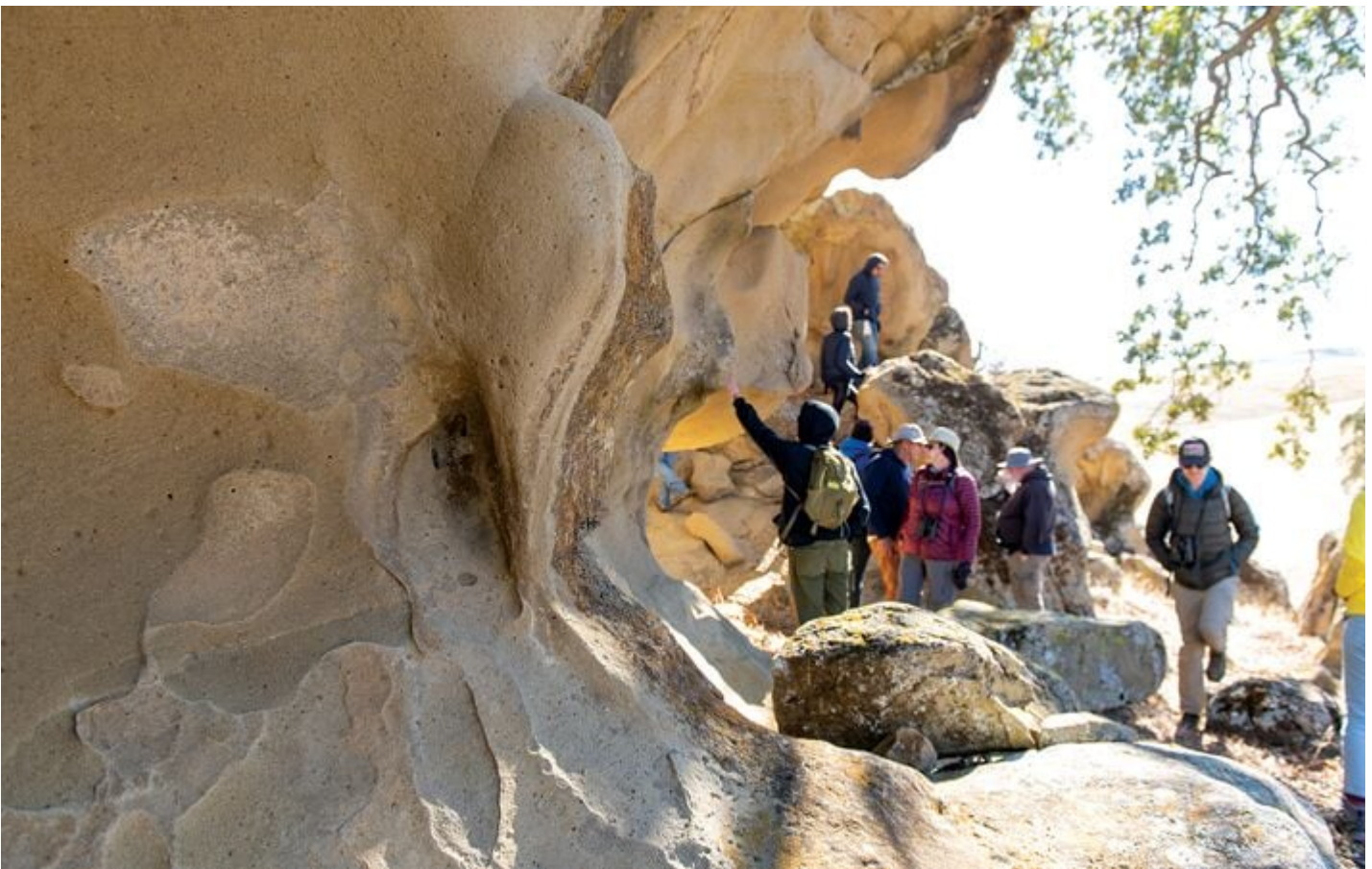


Photo by Melissa van Ruiten

Vasco Caves Regional Preserve is home to various native and rare flora and fauna, and is considered a sacred place to indigenous peoples who once inhabited the area.

Tucked away in the hills, and protected by the East Bay Regional Park District, lies an ecologically vibrant space that has been sacred to the indigenous peoples of this area for centuries.

Guided tours of Vasco Caves Regional Preserve are a popular way for locals to learn about the nature and history of the area. The park district only recently restarted these reservation-only tours after COVID-19 restrictions prevented the district from offering these explorations.

The area surrounding the preserve is home to the Bay Miwok, Ohlone, and Yokuts people, specifically the Ssaoram and Volvon villages. Ancient pictographs scatter the walls and cupules (a form of ancient rock art) and mortars, used for grinding herbs and acorns, dot the bedrock.

While the immediate area surrounding the preserve didn't house the native population, it lies at the center of a network of ancient trade routes that linked Bay Area Ohlones, Bay Miwoks, and Northern Valley Yokuts, who were drawn to the area for economic, social and ceremonial events. Vasco Caves continues to serve as a ceremonial gathering place for the area's native tribes even today, and the sacredness of the place is still recognized.

EBRPD Naturalist Kevin Dixon, a 15-year veteran of the district, explained that there were many layers of cultural history surrounding the Vasco Caves area.

"Native people say they have been here since time immemorial," Dixon said. "They were created in this place."

Dixon is referring to The Birth of Wek`-wek and the Creation of Man, a Hool-poom`-ne (Julpun) story of creation. The legend outlines how O-let`-te (Coyote), the Creator, and his grandson, Wek`-Wek (Falcon), worked together to obtain the music of the lah`-pah (elderberry tree) from Hul-luk mi-yum'-ko—the great and beautiful women-chiefs of the Star-people and bring it back to their home on Oo'-yum-bel'-le (Mount Diablo). Once the task was completed and the lah`-pah obtained, O-let`-te and Wek`-wek went out and traveled all over the country, planting the lah`-pah, so that it would furnish music, food, and medicine for the people they were going to create. O-let'-te told Wek'-wek that the berries would make food, the roots and blossoms medicine, and the hollow branches music, according to the story.



**[Photos] A glimpse into area's indigenous culture and protected wildlife**

“Things changed with the arrival of the Spanish and their missions, and that really impacted a lot of people here in the East Bay,” Dixon continued. “Within a pretty short amount of time, most of those people who had been here for hundreds of generations had to leave their land. They were forced out, or their whole ecosystem was changed, and in various ways they were forced off of their ancestral land. That’s one layer of the relationship of people with the land and the culture that was here.”

Dixon explained that the culture of the native people in the area is closely tied to the land and exists in and around the land. People considered themselves to be so closely connected to the land, that they were almost like a part of the land, including all the plants and animals of the area, as well.

As time moved on, the relationship between people and the land began to change. Mexican settlers would graze their cattle in the hills, and post-Gold Rush settlers ran sheep ranching operations. More and more, the culture shifted to exploitation of the land in various ways, as opposed to living with it and cultivating it in a gentle way and tending it as native people did for a millenia, according to Dixon.

“With the coming of the Los Vaqueros project, when the Los Vaqueros Reservoir was built, which started in the ‘80s, the worth of the land was recognized in a new way,” said Dixon. “It was set aside as a preserve and also as a protected watershed. So, as a preserve, as part of this more cosmopolitan culture in the East Bay now, it’s been recognized by a broader audience that this is a sacred place. Native people have known this all along.”

Elderberry still grows throughout the area, and the preserve remains home to many species of native flora and fauna, some of which are considered protected and/or endangered species.

Centuries of shifting weather patterns have resulted in uplifts of sandstone, known as inselbergs, the elements carving depressions and caves into their surface. Massive sandstone concretions, which are rocks formed by the accumulation of minerals into dense, compact spheres, are scattered throughout the hills like abandoned cannon balls.

Among these fragile rock outcroppings, you’ll find vernal pools, which fill during the rainy season, but remain dry the remainder of the year. The pools are home to three different species of fairy shrimp, including the extremely rare and endangered longhorned fairy shrimp.

“They’re not very big, not as big as a shrimp you’d want to put on your plate,” Dixon quipped.

Additionally, the pools, known also as a tinaja, are home to the rare California red-legged frog and California tiger salamanders, both of which are listed as threatened, according to the National Wildlife Federation and Center for Biological Diversity.

First-time visitor David Dawson of Livermore was happy to learn the importance of setting aside a space for nature to “do its thing.” Dawson said his favorite part of the hike was seeing the vernal pools and “the structure and the little pieces of life that can only exist there, and how important it is to protect them and how fragile they are.”

Other plants and animals that call the area home include valley and blue oak, creeping wildrye, purple needlegrass, the San Joaquin kit fox, coyote, and western burrowing owl. Bobcats and mountain lions prowl the hills, as golden eagles and condors fly overhead. The area is even home to the American badger, although they remain the most elusive, according to Dixon.

“Our primary responsibility is to protect the sacred site and also the creatures that live there.” Dixon said. “The only way we can do that is by limiting access...Through the park district, people have a place now where they can come and experience pieces of what used to be here, what’s been lost and what still remains, and reflect on the changes of the land and culture over time... That’s the culture that we’re part of when we come out here to visit.”

In order to continue to protect the culture and ecology of the vulnerable landscape, access to Vasco Caves Regional Preserve is limited and available only through advanced reservation guided tours. EBRPD offers 24 guided hikes throughout the fall, winter, and spring seasons. The hike is a 3- to 4-mile loop and moderately strenuous. Space is limited to 22 attendees, and spots can fill up quickly. For more information, visit <https://www.ebparks.org/parks/vasco-caves>.

[https://www.thepress.net/news/community/a-glimpse-into-area-s-indigenous-culture-and-protected-wildlife/article\\_62bd7c46-669f-11ed-8a03-93817b3b0081.html](https://www.thepress.net/news/community/a-glimpse-into-area-s-indigenous-culture-and-protected-wildlife/article_62bd7c46-669f-11ed-8a03-93817b3b0081.html)