

**Chapitre 11/Chapter 11**  
**Eco-Cultural Devastation and Revitalization:**  
**Indigenous Women in Southern California**  
**Deborah Small**

**Introduction**

For the past seven years, I have worked very closely with women involved in the revitalization of their indigenous cultural traditions. One of the most important of these traditions is basketweaving. Recognized as the most important tool in the technological repertoire of California Indians, baskets shaped every aspect of their culture and were critical to their survival. Women wove seed beaters, harvesting baskets, winnowing trays, burden baskets, cooking baskets, storage baskets, granaries, fish-trapping and fish-netting baskets, cradle-board baskets, as well as intricately woven gift and ceremonial baskets. Some of their houses and ramadas were essentially large woven baskets. Celebrated for their watertight weaves, utility, and astonishing beauty, California baskets are considered some of the finest in the world.

For contemporary basketweavers in southern California, gathering basketry materials and other important edible and medicinal plants is fraught with many perils, including the spraying of pesticides and herbicides on traditional gathering areas, trespassing charges for collecting plants on what were once ancestral homelands, and the complete obliteration of native plant communities by developers. At a development site, an industrial oak grinder can pulverize a majestic 200-year-old oak in minutes, or devour an endangered oak woodland in a matter of days.

Women never took the obliteration of their homelands passively. In 1785, a Tongva Indian named Toypurina, called a “sorceress,” “medicine woman,” and “witch” by her mission biographers, led her people in a revolt against the colonizers at the San Gabriel Mission in Southern California: “I hate the padres and all of you,” she told them at her trial, “for trespassing upon the land of my forefathers and despoiling our tribal domains.”

When the Europeans arrived in California in 1769, they did not discover a “wilderness.” Sites where abundant edible plant foods, fibers, medicines, water and other resources were found were considered the center of the indigenous universe and worthy of exultation. These sites were carefully managed by indigenous people to insure the survival of *all* species who share this particular part of the planet.

Without indigenous peoples’ profound understanding and management of the land, California’s state bird, the valley quail, is now threatened; California’s state reptile, the desert tortoise, is endangered; and California’s state animal, the grizzly bear, is extinct. San Diego County where I live and work is home to more rare, threatened, and endangered species of plants and animals than anywhere else in the continental United States. Many of the plant species are endemic—they grow nowhere else in the world. Southern California is considered an “epicenter of extinction,” and Conservation International has designated the California Floristic Province as one of 34 worldwide biodiversity “hot spots.” The California Floristic Province has already lost 75% of its native habitat, and over 2000 endemic plant species face serious threats from

development, large-scale agriculture, strip mining, oil extraction, freeway construction, invasive plant species, logging, and the suppression of natural fires, among others.

### **Indigenous Basketweavers**

Diania Caudell, Rose Ramirez, Marian Walkingstick, and Lydia Vassar are four contemporary women dedicated to revitalizing their indigenous cultural practices and restoring the healthy ecosystems necessary to sustain those practices. All are active members of CIBA, the California Indian Basketweavers Association, a grassroots activist organization whose mission is “to preserve, promote, and perpetuate California Indian basketweaving traditions.”

All work extensively with plants, because in southern California, it is *plants* that make the culture possible—as food, fiber, cordage, clothing, tools, shelter, fuel, weapons, musical instruments, medicine, sacraments, and ceremony. All are deeply committed to teaching others in order to pass along the traditions they have cultivated and learned. In the past, basketweaving was predominantly a *woman’s* cultural practice. Now, because basketweaving was until recently an endangered art, they have opened their learning circles to male and female, native and non-native.

The four basketweavers are active in tribal politics. All by choice and by necessity work with city, county, state, and national government agencies. My students and colleagues at California State University San Marcos (CSUSM) have collaborated with the basketweavers to create public exhibitions, as well as slideshows and videos to screen for the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Environmental Protection Agency, and the California Department of Transportation. To produce this work, we’ve walked with the basketweavers down steep poison oak-covered stream banks and slogged up streambeds in search of *Juncus textilis*, hiked through Rancho Cuyamaca State Park to harvest deergrass, walled in muck to photograph willow, climbed steep hillsides to gather chia, received security clearances to travel on the Camp Pendleton Military Base to photograph rock art and ancient village sites, pruned piñon pine branches on southern California Indian reservations, gathered wild cucumber seeds in the heat of the high desert, and traveled to Baja, California to interview indigenous elders and native plant specialists. The goals for our extensive documentation are not only to demonstrate the beauty, resilience, and vitality of southern California indigenous cultures, but also to persuade government agencies to change their restrictive gathering policies and herbicidal spraying regimes on public lands, to promote the protection of culturally important native plants and plant communities, and to encourage government agencies to work *with* indigenous people as stewards of public lands.

The brief stories of the four women that follow do not focus as much on what they have lost through habitat destruction, species extinction, or language diminution, but rather on their reweaving of interdependent ecological and cultural relationships.

### **Diania Caudell**

*A language is not just a body of vocabulary, or a set of grammatical rules. A language is a flash of the human spirit, the vehicle through which the soul of each particular culture comes into the material world. Every language is an old growth forest of the mind, a watershed of thought, an entire ecosystem of spiritual possibilities.*

—Wade Davis, ethnobotanist

Diania Caudell is a Luiseño basketweaver, teacher, and outspoken activist who works to insure that Native Americans have a seat at the table when public policies are discussed. Until recently, she sat on the Board of Directors of CIBA representing southern California. She was the first Native American Board member for San Diego's Agua Hedionda Lagoon Discovery Center, and she is currently a member of the Environmental Protection Agency's Tribal Pesticide Program Council.

As part of her efforts to revitalize *all* Luiseño cultural traditions and practices, Diania is learning Luiseño, her ancestral language. When the Spaniards first came to California in 1769, approximately 100 California Indian languages were spoken. Three-quarters of them are now extinct. When Diania began learning Luiseño, only a few dozen elders spoke her language. "With the death of ancestral languages, the process of comprehending one's own history and describing the landscape is changed," Gary DuBois, director of Pechanga Cultural Resources, writes. "The intimate descriptions of nature and human relations, which were once locked in the native language, no longer exist . . . it becomes impossible to transmit fundamental cultural ways of knowing across the generations."

In *A Country Year*, beekeeper Sue Hubbell writes of sorting through the emotional debris left in the wake of her wrecked marriage, and how she obsessively learned the Latin binomials of the plants surrounding her property in the Osarks. Those names grounded her, and she recited them as a spiritual person might recite a mantra. Diania is learning the Luiseño names for the plants surrounding us—énwish for *Marah fabaceus*, or wild cucumber, qáásuk for *Salvia apiana*, or white sage, kúuta for *Sambucus mexicana*, or elderberry. But for Diania, it is not enough to know the Luiseño names of the plants, or their Latin binomials. What *is* crucial to comprehend are the *relationships* between plant communities and the people who have used and honored them. It is this deeper understanding that will help to perpetuate the language so vital to the cultural survival of the Luiseño community.

Diania is extraordinarily generous with her knowledge and her time. For the past six years, she has worked closely with art and anthropology students at California State University San Marcos in southern California where I teach in the Visual and Performing Arts Department. Although my digital art students have no difficulty navigating the World Wide Web, searching databases, downloading MP3 music files, or signing on-line petitions against the Iraq war, they have enormous difficulty in navigating their own backyards. The students assume that the oleander that divides our freeways, the eucalyptus trees that line our streets, or the bougainvillea that drapes over our homes and apartments have always been here. Diania has helped them understand otherwise. She has led the students on many fieldtrips in the North County San Diego back country to gather important native plants used for food, clothing, shelter, and medicine.

On one spring gathering expedition, students documented the harvesting of *Juncus textilis*, one of the four most important southern California basketry plants. Two hundred twenty-five species of juncus are found worldwide, but the *Juncus textilis* we're gathering is endemic to California—it grows nowhere else on the planet. As Diania harvests the juncus, she speaks of the difficulties in finding traditional basketry plant materials—seasonal streams where juncus stands once proliferated are now cemented over, or they're inaccessible because of the dense overgrowth of invasive non-native plants such as mustard, pampas grass, arundo, and tumbleweed. She explains that the

specificity and sophistication of indigenous land management practices—the use of controlled burns, the pruning of plant stands, and the coppicing of plant limbs to encourage straight stem growth for basketry materials—reflect a profound understanding of the ecology.

In *Gardening with a Wild Heart*, Judith Lerner Lowry refers to the field trip as “our modern ceremonial exchange of information,” a way to broaden and deepen our understanding. As a field instructor, Diania is deeply attuned to the power of the places where we gather. She is sensitive to the nuances and subtleties of the land her ancestors were dependent upon for their survival—the fragrance of black sage, the taste of succulent leaves of Indian lettuce, the velvety texture of yerba santa, the subtle shifting of the light, the translucency of phacelia leaves at the end of the day. Many of the cultural ways of knowing that Diania teaches us cannot be found through a Google search. In addition, Diania helped CSUSM students produce a large 60-page, full-color book that documents their field trips with basketweavers and their collaborative work with the San Luis Rey Band of Luiseño Indians to develop a native plant garden at an ancient ceremonial rock art site in Vista, California. The book features Diania’s recipe for acorn mush, or wíiwish, for which she is well known.

In 2005, Diania asked me to create a visual document of indigenous harvesting practices to demonstrate to U.S. Forestry officials that gathering by native people is respectful, sustainable, and enhances rather than diminishes the environment. The Forest Service was about to change their gathering policies and charge everyone, including Native Americans, fees for gathering materials on public lands to prevent what they imagined as the rampant overharvesting of “Forest Products.” The public lands the Forest Service would be “protecting” were Diania’s ancestral homelands. We first screened three short videos—*Gathering Juncus* and *Gathering Chia*, both filmed in the San Diego back country, and *Gathering Deergrass*, filmed at Rancho Cuyamaca State Park—for a meeting in San Diego of state and national Forest Service officials.

Diania’s ultimate goal is to preserve and restore **all** public lands as areas for Native American gatherers to insure their cultural survival— “It’s not just the juncus and deergrass. It’s everything we need: the acorn, chia, manzanita, gooseberry, currants, elderberry, willow, sedge. Then there’s the different medicines—the sages, the mugwort, yerba buena, yerba mansa. All the plants that are native.”

### **Rose Ramirez**

*. . . a feeling of rootedness, of belonging to a time and a place, and a felt sense of continuity with a tradition which transcends the experience of a single lifetime, a tradition which may be said to transcend even time.*

—Alfonso Ortiz, Tewa San Juan Pueblo, quoted in *The Sacred*

Rose Ramirez is a Chumash/Yaqui basketweaver as well as a photographer and filmmaker. She has been doing this work for some time. As an undergraduate at UC Santa Cruz, she created a photographic series about the challenging but rewarding lives of single mothers attending the university. (Rose was one of them.) She and her Luiseño husband, Joe Moreno, a basket collector and former archaeological monitor, founded the American Indian Channel, a non-profit Native American documentary company dedicated to insuring that Native Americans are more involved with producing and

disseminating information about themselves. One of the American Indian Channel's on-going projects is to document the revitalization of the cultural practices of Kumiai, Paipai, Kiliwa and Cucapa artisans in Baja California, whose communities are among the poorest in the U.S-Mexico border region. Rose works with anthropologist Mike Wilken and the Native Cultures Institute (CUNA), as well as with indigenous plant specialists, potters, and basketweavers as they renew their ties of kinship and culture that link them with communities north of the border, where many of their traditional technologies have been lost.

Working with basketweavers is very important to Rose: "By working with people today who are involved with revitalizing basketry, with bringing it back, we are honoring our ancestors, and cherishing not only what they used to do and create, but also what they lost. I don't think our ancestors lost the language and their food and their culture and their religions willingly. I think it's a real honor to try to recover as much as we can. This is one of the best things we can do."

In 2005, Rose and I produced a video about contemporary basketweaver Dee Dominguez, a descendent of Kitanemuk/Chumash/Yowlumne people. We accompanied Dee as she gathered juncus and the leaves of an elderberry tree that she uses to dye the juncus a rich black color. In her home, we filmed her fluent hands weaving a coiled juncus basket over a deergrass foundation as she spoke about her relationship to ancestral and contemporary basketweaving practices and to the native plant communities that sustain those practices. We first screened the video in 2005 at the annual gathering of CIBA, the California Indian Basketweavers Association.

For Rose, like Dee Dominguez, it is basketweaving that most profoundly connects her to her past: "When we gather, we feel spiritually as if our ancestors are alongside of us. When I'm gathering, I feel that there are people with us. Either they're my ancestors or they're my husband Joe's ancestors, because we're in his territory. They're not in conflict with what we're doing. They're side by side with us."

Rose often speaks of a sense of urgency that pervades all cultural revitalization projects—record the language before the last native speaker dies; document the medicinal uses of plants before the knowledge disappears with the passing of a particularly gifted healer; record stories that teach us to live with dignity and grace, in balance rather than at war with ourselves and the environment that sustains us: "I feel a tremendous sense of urgency. We should have been doing this yesterday, last year, five years ago. I think one of the hard things when we're trying to record elderly people—we're worried that we should be living there next to them and recording them every single day which we can't do. That's something very hard for me."

Rose is an indefatigable organizer of field trips to gather native plant materials in the San Diego back country. "Stop!! Pullover! Back up!" Rose has spotted a piñon tree full of closed green cones with their delicious nuts still inside. We already have passed many trees whose cones have already opened. I pull-over, check my rearview mirror, and slowly begin to back up. Acjachemen elder/basketweaver Minnie Tafoya and Zuni elder/basketweaver Ray Tafoya, Luiseño basketweaver Lydia Vassar, Rose, and I hop out of the car, grab our gloves, buckets and an avocado picker, an improvised implement we find works well to gather the cones at the top. None of us is quite young, agile or foolhardy enough to climb the tree to gather the cones far above our heads. We're ultimately after the highly nutritious pine nuts. The piñon pine is another important

edible, material, medicinal, and ceremonial plant for many California Indians. While our companions are busy gathering the pine cones, Rose and I photograph them. Like many photographers, Rose is reluctant to be photographed herself, but occasionally she'll humor me on our field trips. More often, she'll be so absorbed by a particular poppy or prickly pear or piñon pine cone that I'm able to photograph her before she notices that my camera is pointed in her direction.

Recently Rose recruited art and anthropology students to collaborate with the American Indian Channel to produce an ethnobotanical calendar. The goals for the calendar are to raise awareness and appreciation of the historical, social, ecological, and cosmological value of culturally significant plants for California indigenous communities. The calendar, for example, will help basketweavers and others to distinguish between poison oak and *Rhus trilobata*, or basketbush, another one of the four important southern California basketry plants. Basketweavers use their teeth to split *Rhus trilobata* stems into three pieces, so it's essential for basketweavers to recognize the difference between the two plants. Although they look very much alike, *Rhus trilobata* has smaller leaves than poison oak, as well as a strong smell. The flowers of poison oak are white. Those of *Rhus trilobata* are yellow.

On a recent field trip to gather agave, an important edible desert plant, Rose and I spoke to Kwaaymii Elder Carmen Lucas about our ethnobotanical calendar project as she led us on a hike to view ancient pictographs in the Anza Borrego State Park. We were delighted when she offered to share her knowledge of native plant uses with us. Later when we visited Carmen in her home, she showed us her grandmother and great grandmother's baskets woven with the juncus that grows directly below her home. She pulled out a coil of basketbush, or *Rhus trilobata*, from her grandmother's olla. She tells us that her father always referred to the plant as witch hazel, and it's clear she would like us to honor *his* name for the plant, as well as the common or Latin names. "I have developed a deep, deep passionate love for those old people who walked this land," Carmen tells Rose and me as we hold the sandals her grandmother carefully crafted out of the fibers of agave. And for the "intuitive knowledge that our people had understanding the rhythm of life, the rhythm of their universe, the rhythm of our seasons."

### **Marian Walkingstick**

*The face of the land is our face. . . .*

—Linda Hogan, *Dwellings*

Marian Walkingstick is an Acjachemen elder, basketweaver, writer, and teacher. A repository of cultural knowledge, Marian is an eloquent defender of the land, its sacredness for Acjachemen people, and its importance for all species who inhabit it. She has worked tirelessly researching her tribal history and genealogy to secure federal recognition for her tribe, the Acjachemen Nation, also known as Cuel Atah, or the Star People. In November 2005, she and her Tribal Council submitted 30,000 pages of documentation to the Office of Federal Acknowledgement.

Marian is a member of the Tushmalum Heleckum, the Hummingbird Singers. In the recording studio at CSUSM, the Singers worked with my students to create a CD of children's songs to help teach children in Headstart classes their native language. As

chair of the Acjachemen Basketweaving Committee, Marian also teaches basketry. She is very proud of her students—“Not only are they good basketmakers, but they’re carrying on the heritage of our people.”

For the past ten years, Marian has collaborated with U.S. Forest rangers on the ecological restoration of a large meadow on what is now National Forest land. In *Nature’s Restoration*, Peter Friederici writes that the scale and consequences of the environmental devastation instigated by humans is potentially so disastrous that restoration must become the dominant paradigm for how people manage the land. Restoration, according to Friederici, is ecological medicine, a way to heal the earth. Meadow restoration is extremely labor-intensive and demanding work. A huge component of any restoration project involves removing non-native species. When invasive European mustard and Russian tumbleweed were strangling the native plants, Marian worked to remove them with a crew of U.S. Forest rangers and Hotshots, the professional firefighters who fight back country blazes in rugged terrain throughout the west. Their weapons of choice to root out the exotics are rakes, weed whackers, hula hoes, gloved hands, and plain hard work. “The fire chiefs and Hotshots came in and got on their hands and knees and were pulling weeds out.” Marian laughs mischievously as she tells us: “I think it’s great I’m working with all these chiefs.” They also help to extirpate the profligate oatgrass, cheatgrass, and filaree, three more exotic species on the most wanted list of invasive species that without careful management will out-compete native plants at the site.

Invasive species can drastically alter the ecology of a region in fundamental ways by lowering the water table and diminishing the ecological integrity of the area. They can completely shut down the immune systems of native plants and entirely eliminate culturally important native plants, such as manzanitas, whose edible berries are harvested when they ripen in spring and summer and then mashed to make a healthful and refreshing drink. Invasive species can overrun the high protein chia plant, whose seeds were one of the primary staples of southern California indigenous people. Willie Pink, a Luiseño/Cupeño botanist for the Pechanga Reservation, speculates that chia was “even more popular, more abundant than acorn at one time.” From June until September, women harvested the tiny black chia seeds using special woven seedbeaters. The seeds were eaten on long journeys, and it has been said that one tablespoon of chia was sufficient to sustain an individual for twenty-four hours.

According to Ann Howard in *Wild California*, invasive exotics threaten at least forty-nine of California’s 216 native plants that are listed as rare, threatened, and endangered. Some invasives such as eucalyptus are allotropic—they chemically alter the soil beneath them, inhibiting the growth of other plants. It’s particularly important to Marian that invasive plants in the Meadow don’t crowd the elderberry trees, whose leaves are used in blessing ceremonies and whose prolific medicinal flowers are brewed to make a powerful tea to break a fever or fight the flu. Elderberries were prized as a delicious food, and many people still make elderberry jam, pie, and wine from the berries. According to Luiseño elder Villiana Hyde Calac in *Yumáyk Yumáyk*, “trees used to be people. They were one kind of tree, or another. Spruce, different kinds of oak.” For Marian, the elderberry tree is not only a generous provider but a sentient being who communicates with her: “As a singer, I have to make my own clapper sticks, so I go to the elderberry tree and ask the tree for a young straight shoot to make my musical

instruments. I also use the leaves for the dyeing process. It's a very giving tree."

In addition to collaborating with fire chiefs, forest rangers, and Hotshots to remove non-native species from the Meadow, Marian also works with other basket weavers to thin, coppice, and prune the native plants to cultivate healthy plant communities to produce the strong materials necessary for their baskets. "If you're a basket maker, and you don't take care of the plants and process them correctly, then you're not going to be able to make a basket. . . . I almost love gathering and tending the plants more than I do basketry."

Marian's work connects her to her ancestors: "The Meadow is our ancestral gathering place. When we first came here 10 years ago with the forest rangers to restore the Meadow as an Acjachemen gathering area, we prayed on the land, and we sang gathering songs. It felt as if our people had been here before. It felt as if this was indeed our place." Restoration, whether the physical restoration of the land or the cultural revitalization of indigenous traditions and languages, is also a restoration of ourselves. When Marian first took on the responsibility for the restoration of the Meadow, she tells us how her daughter encouraged her: "'Mother, you can do this.' And I thought about that Native American woman up North who stood in front of a big dozer where they were going to take down some trees, and she stood in front of it. And I thought, if that little old lady can do it, I can do it too. To protect the land. . . . The meadow has been the challenge of my life."

The restoration of the Meadow is part of the on-going contemporary revival of California indigenous languages, songs, dances, cuisines and other traditional cultural practices. In Spring 2008, the Meadow will be officially designated as the *Acjachemen Meadow*, a traditional gathering ground "dedicated to the memory of the late Acjachemen tribal member, Pato Sanchez, and to our ancestors who gathered materials in this meadow to weave the beautiful baskets we know." The Meadow is also for contemporary basketweavers, with an interpretive area and picnic tables. Through the tireless work of Marian and others, agencies such as the U.S. Forest Service are recognizing the efficacy of indigenous land management practices and acknowledging that public lands and *all* species will greatly benefit, *once again*, from indigenous stewardship.

### **Lydia Vassar**

*It's not as if they learned about willows and grasses in order to make baskets, but as if they learned to make baskets by knowing willows.*

—Mary Austin, *Cactus Thorn*

Lydia Vassar is a Luiseño basketweaver and teacher. In *Four Wings and a Prayer*, a meditation on the mystery of the monarch butterfly, Sue Halpern writes that what distinguishes us from one another is our passion. Lydia's particular passion is the basketry plant, *Juncus textilis*. At the tribal school on the Pechanga Reservation where she teaches basketry, Lydia wants the children to understand that "juncus isn't just an important plant because it's useful; it's also a sacred plant whose use stretches back hundreds of years. It's intimately connected with a hugely important and ancient cultural practice." Lydia's teaching nurtures in the children a deeper and more committed relationship with their environment. And when she gathers juncus, she not only gathers

for her own baskets, but also for her young students who are learning the traditional southern California open-weave technique.

Often Lydia's mother, Jeannie Hofer, accompanies her on gathering trips. Jeannie is a very active and fit 72-year-old, but Lydia is always solicitous, taking her mother's arm as they make their way over the uneven and often steep path to the creek. With Lydia, gathering juncus is always a revelation—to observe the profound respect and devotion that guide her as she gathers, or to witness her unrestrained excitement when we find an undisturbed stand of juncus. “This is my favorite part about weaving—going out and finding the materials, searching for them. It's like a treasure hunt, and when you find the juncus, and you pull it out and you've got 12 inches of this rich deep brown on the bottom, then you've struck gold. It's just so exhilarating. It's so exciting. And I can't wait to share it. I've got to show everybody else.” For Lydia, it is not so much the actual weaving of the basket that is important, but the cultivation of a way of being in the world that is deeply rooted in the land, in connection with the ancestors, and in profound kinship with species other than our own.

When Lydia speaks of the profound exchange between the basketweavers and the plants they gather, her animated face lights up: “You just feel the plant coming to life in your hands. And it brings me more to life. I'm taking it's energies, and it's taking mine.” A juncus voluptuary, Lydia luxuriates in the generosity and beauty of the natural world as she runs her fingers along the juncus stalks, stroking them the way someone might stroke a beloved dog. She's unabashed in her appreciation of the plant's sensuousness, its smooth texture, its gradations of deep rich browns in the stem.

While gathering juncus at De Luz Canyon, one of her favorite sites, Lydia speaks of the commitment and time necessary to harvest the basketry materials, and then to dry and split them. To weave baskets, she explains, you have to understand the life cycle of plants, when to harvest, how to harvest, and where to harvest for the best color. Like the other basketweavers, Lydia expresses a deep concern for the habitats where she gathers. It's very difficult to find undisturbed stands of juncus—loss of habitat from development and the invasion of non-native plant species have greatly diminished riparian ecosystems that support thickets of juncus. De Luz Canyon is owned by private land owners, and she has observed one property owner indiscriminately spraying herbicide to eliminate poison oak. A few invasives such as the umbrella plant have made their way there, but this particular creek-filled canyon is lush with native plants—juncus, cattail, willow, sycamore, live oak, as well as poison oak. Lydia also speaks of another favorite gathering area where the juncus grows over sulphur springs. There, the minerals in the water dye the juncus the deepest, richest brown Lydia knows.

In March 2006, Lydia helped Daniel McCarthy, Tribal Relations Manager with the U.S. Forest Service, organize a field trip to the Anza Borrego Desert State Park to harvest the *Agave deserti*, formerly a vitally important Native American food source in southern California. Her mother Jeannie once again accompanies us, as well as her nephew Tristan, from the San Pasqual Band of Kumeyaay Indians and the youngest member of our gathering group. Lydia revels in teaching Tristan the traditional harvesting method for agave using long digging sticks. When one of our group accidentally impales himself on an agave thorn, Lydia calmly removes it from his hand. The thorns of the agave were used as awls in basketweaving. The thorns were also used for tattooing, and the ashes of burned agave stalks were used as tattoo dye. Dried agave

leaves were pounded and made into carrying bags, sandals, cordage, nets, women's skirts, bow strings, and snares. After harvesting the hearts of several agave, we collect some of the leaves for their fiber, and other leaves for roasting in earth ovens. Two days later, after 30 hours of roasting the hearts and leaves, we celebrate with an agave feast on the San Pasqual Reservation.

CIBA, the California Indian Basketweavers Association, has been working for many years to establish free access for Native American gatherers on public lands, but a formal policy had not been forthcoming. In the basketweaving community, Lydia is credited with helping government agency officials *finally* comprehend the *enormous* difficulties and distances involved in gathering native plant materials on public lands. In a serendipitous but fortuitous moment at a Fire Management meeting in 2005, she sat next to the two keynote speakers—the heads of the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The three spoke casually as they waited for the meeting to begin. Lydia opened her large bag and passed the two men her deergrass and juncus bundles, her awl, her in-progress green-weave basket, and two finished open-weave baskets. She related how she had just come from a gathering trip, and that it was necessary for her to travel 250 miles to the BLM office in El Centro to get the necessary permits to gather basketry materials growing near her home. Hearing her story, the two agency officials were both astonished and embarrassed. They said they'd get back to her, and they did.

In November 2006, the California BLM and USFS signed a landmark document, the Interagency Traditional Gathering Policy. Thanks to Lydia and the many tenacious and hard-working members of CIBA, the Gathering Policy will insure that traditional gatherers and basketweavers in California have *free* access to gather on *all* public lands managed by the two agencies, which encompass approximately 35 million acres.

## Conclusions

The everyday lives of Diania Caudell, Rose Ramirez, Marian Walkingstick, and Lydia Vassar are intricately and intimately woven into the land. The heart of their identity lies in the surrounding chaparral-covered hillsides, sage scrub, oak woodlands, riparian corridors, and desert washes. Tending, gathering, and preparing plant materials to weave baskets is part of a sacramental cycle, the renewal of a relationship with a region and a cultural practice that is thousands of years old. Gathering plants not only honors the basketweavers' ancestors and the role they still play in their lives, but also involves cultivating a profound respect for the land and for species other than our own.

For Diania, Rose, Marian, and Lydia, their complex ecological knowledge of the region, their gratitude for the generosity of the natural world, and their spiritual beliefs sustain them in the face of relentless development and ravaged habitats. Basketweaving is a luminous thread that connects them to the larger struggles for indigenous environmental, cultural, and linguistic revitalization. Rather than despair at the ongoing destruction and desecration of the region, they offer us a breathtaking vision of what our southern California landscape could be—a buzzing, singing, howling place, a cornucopia of foods, a pharmacopoeia of medicines. Their work, of profound importance to the intellectual, spiritual and cultural vitality of all of us, embraces ever-expanding networks of indigenous elders, tribal members, linguists, rock art specialists, native landscape designers, archaeologists, anthropologists, artists and students dedicated to the

preservation, revitalization, and continuity of indigenous eco-cultural traditions.