Cultural Background:

For thousands of years prior to European contact, the Nisenan thrived alongside the watersheds, flora and fauna of their ancestral lands. Living in small tribes near rivers and streams, Nisenan language, culture, and story of life flows with the water of the Sierra Nevada.

The connection between the Nisenan and the land was brutally severed with the onset of the Gold Rush. The Nisenan ancestral lands along the region’s waterways were logical and attractive locations for gold camps and were quickly appropriated. Tribal elders have estimated that in the 1850’s, at the onset of the Gold Rush, 13,000 Nisenan were living in what is now Nevada County, California. This population was quickly annihilated.

In 1867, the relatively few Nisenan that survived attempted to band together on a land allotment on Cement Hill outside of Nevada City. Within 25 years, in 1913, the land allotment was converted by executive order into Federal Trust Land and the Tribal government became federally recognized as the Nevada City Rancheria. Unfortunately, federally recognized status was short-lived - the Nisenan’s land and federal status was terminated in 1964 pursuant to the Rancheria Act of 1958.

Illustration: Ashley Church
NISENAN ACQUISITION: In October 2018, after years of strategic work facilitated by TSF with numerous organizations and community members, California Heritage: Indigenous Research Project (CHIRP) acquired the land, a move which was made possible by a grant from the California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA) developed and administered by TSF. CHIRP is a tribally guided 501c(3) that seeks to preserve and protect Nisenan culture. The 2018 land transaction marks the first time the Tribe has had private access to ancestral homeland in over fifty years and provides an opportunity for the land to be stewarded in perpetuity.

SITE BACKGROUND: For nearly 170 years following Nisenan displacement, the 32-acre parcel of land along Deer Creek has lacked stewardship. In the 1850s the land was appropriated by miners in search of gold. Extensive hard rock mining, notably the Champion Mine (1911) followed.

The Champion Mine Complex includes the historic Providence and Champion Mines and was one of the foremost hard rock mines in Nevada County. Between 1851-1919 approximately $20 million in gold was recovered from the mine. The area was mined with one of the most advanced ore processing facilities in the State at the time and was the site of the first chlorination works in the country.

The land was later acquired by a timber company (1968) and finally by a private developer (2005). Presently, mining contaminants are exposed, forests are overgrown, and transient encampments litter the riparian corridor.
**Project Summary:** In 2018, The Sierra Fund (TSF) facilitated the acquisition of 32-acres of ancestral homeland along Deer Creek for the California Heritage Indigenous Research Project (CHIRP), the nonprofit serving the Nisenan Tribe. Leveraging the $600,000 acquisition, in 2019 TSF acquired another grant from the California Natural Resources Agency to implement on-the-ground objectives that support revitalization of Nisenan culture. With this funding, TSF will work with CHIRP to:

- Create a cultural resources plan for the Nisenan Cultural Reclamation Corridor (NCRC).
- Plan and build a public trail across the CHIRP-owned NCRC property as part of the Deer Creek Tribute Trail system.
- Build fences to keep the public out of mining contaminant “hot spots” to avoid any dusty exposures over the short term.
- Develop a plan to remediate the toxic sites found on the property over the long run.

**Nisenan Land Management Plan:** Management of the land is an important step in the stabilization, restoration, and protection of Nisenan culture because it reconnects Tribal descendants with their ancestral waters and landscapes. The Nisenan land management plan will guide land-use planning and implementation activities. The plan will integrate existing information (trail easement, chemical/physical mine hazards, natural resources, cultural features) with future plans (built infrastructure, communal gathering spot(s), harvest locations).

The Nisenan significantly shaped the landscape where they lived through practices including selective thinning, preferential seeding, and fire, informed by thousands of years of familiarity with local ecosystems. These practices were so successful that the landscape they tended supplied all the sustenance, fibers, and medicines the Nisenan required. This project relies on the cultural memory of the Nisenan for land-based activities at the Nisenan Cultural Reclamation Corridor (NCRC) that will protect and restore natural resources including healthy forest and riparian ecosystems.
**DEER CREEK TRIBUTE TRAIL**  
**BACKGROUND:** The Deer Creek Tribute Trail (DCTT) was built over the last nine years with grant support from the CNRA River Parkways Program awarded to TSF. The DCTT leads from downtown Nevada City through a rural neighborhood and then terminates on previously inaccessible land owned by the Bureau of Land Management.

The overall trail system includes two bridges that cross Deer Creek. One bridge is dedicated to the Chinese pioneers that played a largely unrecognized role in the California Gold Rush. The other is dedicated to the Foothills Nisenan, the original people of this area. That bridge is directly upstream and contiguous to the parcel recently acquired by CHIRP.

**TRAIL EXPANSION AT NCRC:** A trail will be built across the Nisenan Cultural Reclamation Corridor (NCRC) property. The trail easement is held by the Bear Yuba Land Trust who will lead construction of the new segment, adding approximately 4,600 feet to the existing trail network, allowing users to access distal portions of the trail without utilizing Champion Mine Road, a well-trafficked gravel road.

**MULTILINGUAL INTERPRETATIONAL SIGNAGE:** In developing multilingual (Nisenan/English) signage for the new trail segment at the Nisenan Cultural Reclamation Corridor (NCRC) and Wild Space Reserve, CHIRP will work in the spirit of their mission to preserve, protect and perpetuate Nisenan culture. The Tribe will describe the NCRC in their own words, leveraging linguistics as touchstones to ancestral lands, and ensuring that the multifaceted meanings embedded in language are not lost. Signage will increase community education about the history of the Nevada City area by focusing on a highly important and less widely told story – the experience of the First People.