

# Gathering Site in Sonoma County Protected for Basketweavers and Traditional Gatherers

*Claire Cummings and The Cultural Conservancy were asked by The California Indian Basketweavers Association (CIBA) to assist them, and an inter-tribal group of Native people in the North Bay Area, to save this critical Native plant collecting site.*

## By Claire Cummings

**D**OGBANE IS A COMMON HERBACEOUS plant used by Native people to make cordage, which is how it gets its other name “Indian hemp” (*Apocynum cannabinum*). The stringy removable outer bark of the mature stalk is used to make thread, rope, nets, bags, and soft baskets. For thousands of years, Native people throughout the west have cared for this important and useful plant, but urban sprawl and herbicides have wiped out most of the accessible sites where basketweavers and Native practitioners can gather this valuable plant.

As the cars and trucks rush by, heading North on Highway 101, few motorists notice an abandoned orchard at the fringe of Santa Rosa in Northern California. But right alongside the

freeway is one of the best and last remaining accessible stands of dogbane in the West. These particular plants are some of the finest dogbane growing anywhere and this site is one of the oldest known gathering areas in California and Oregon, according to an ethnobotanist who has studied the site. The local Native groups who use this site are still tending the plants and they tell of finding archeological items there as well, an indication of its use for many generations.

A series of developers have tried to turn this property into housing over the years, but a determined local group of activists have protected the dogbane until recently, when Sonoma County initially approved a new plan that would combine preservation of the dogbane along with development.

*(Continued on back page)*



## Protection for Basketweavers and Traditional Gatherers

*(Continued from page 3)*

Our role has been to meet with the local Native groups, study the issue and with the local groups, to attend public meetings, then make recommendations to the public agencies. Melissa Nelson began work on this project with Kathy Wallace and Emily Schwalen in the spring of 1995 through CIBA's Land Access Committee. She successfully raised \$2,000 from the Fund of the Four Directions to help cover some of the project costs. Claire began to work on the project in June, 1997. In the remaining months of 1997, she reviewed the easements, met and conducted extensive negotiations with Sonoma County agencies including the county counsel and the Open Space District. After conferring extensively with local Native groups and other experts, and working closely with Steve Nicola at CIBA, we composed an extensive report. This dogbane report was submitted to the County, including a letter signed by

four representatives of the local Native groups. It provided documentation for the Native issues and recommendations for the development plan. The developer has agreed to place the housing in a limited area, to put the largest acreage where some dogbane grows into an agricultural conservation easement for Native access and management. The protected parcel will be owned by the Open Space District that will also hold the easement on the agricultural land.

TCC and CIBA worked to get stronger easement language in the agricultural easement, to expand the boundaries of the dogbane parcel and promote awareness of the importance of the site to the public agencies involved. This was accomplished with the complete support and involvement of the local groups, and the people they collect for, throughout California.

There are always ways to improve the results of a project like saving this dogbane site. Working with informal coalitions, however, is challenging, and the result is not always under the control of the activists. Part of the work must involve building the relationships that will eventually return Native cultural resources like this to Native hands. The next step for the dogbane will be

building the capacity among the local Native groups to take on management of the site, in partnership with the Sonoma County Open Space District, who will be the new owner of this approved project. Should that relationship become a productive and positive working relationship, we hope that a local group will be given the land itself and that this will have been the beginning of a remedial effort that not only protects a plant, but returns Native management and even ownership of the habitat that they have used and valued for generations. ☯



*From l-r: L. Frank Manriquez, Kathy Wallace, Sonoma Co. Open Space District representatives, Sage LaPena, and Claire Cummings, at the dogbane site*