

IMPACT
Fall 2020

A global pandemic, devastating wildfires, and deepening inequality have given San Francisco Zen Center new and continuing opportunities to embody the wisdom and compassion of the Buddha. Here we bring you some stories of how we are living our values in the world.

In this issue, we share stories about:

- Land stewardship of Tassajara in partnership with the Esselen Tribe
- Green Gulch Farm produce donated to kids, families, and elders
- Letters & books sent to incarcerated people by SFZC volunteers

SAN FRANCISCO ZEN CENTER

Tassajara
Beginner's Mind Temple
Green Gulch Farm



For most of its history, says Little Bear, the Tassajara Creek canyon has been a sacred place of healing.

VENTANA WILDERNESS

126

acres stewarded

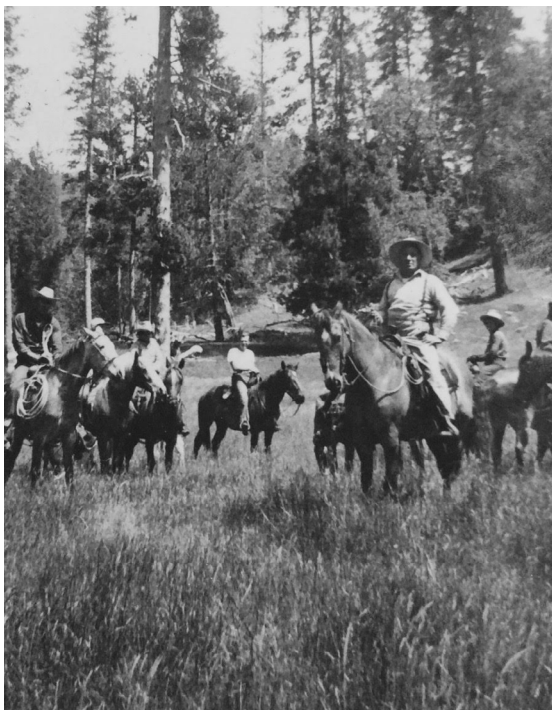
For more than 36 years, Tassajara has partnered with the Esselen Tribe, the New Camaldoli Hermitage, and Esalen Institute to reflect and act on what it means to be wise stewards of the Ventana Wilderness.

These four groups in the Big Sur community comprise the Four Winds Council, an organization that grew out of the members' shared desire to preserve and protect a culturally- and ecologically-rich and distinct area.

Each member brings its own traditions and practices to the Council. Esselen Tribal Chairman Tom Little Bear Nason, a seventh generation descendant of the Esselen Tribe of Monterey County, helps situate the Council's work in the long cultural history of the region and the web of relationships among the plant, animal, and human residents. The Esselen Tribe has had a presence in the upper Carmel Valley for over 6,000 years, and the indigenous relationship to the land stretches back over 15,000 years. The Esselen regard the Ventana Double Cone and the surrounding Big Sur region as a spiritual portal, one that encompasses the sacred qualities of the West, which Little Bear describes as including introspection and "the strength to look within yourself—to take a deeper look."

For most of its history, says Little Bear, the Tassajara Creek canyon has been a sacred place of healing. Over thousands of years, many indigenous people seeking remedies for ailments of the body and spirit traveled to the area, knowing it was a place where shamans—those in deep reciprocity with the healing powers of the land and waters—resided and held ceremonies.





Great Grandfather Fred Nason in Pine Valley with Guests from Tassajara in the 1940's

Little Bear's ancestors carried the creation story of Tassajara Hot Springs, and now he carries it, telling of an Esselen chief whose sister fell gravely ill and traveled to the region in search of healing. The chief, fearful his sister would die, asked Creator to take his life in place of hers. Creator turned the chief into a rock, sparing his sister from illness. When she realized what had happened to brother, she was overcome with grief. Her tears became Tassajara Hot Springs.

Little Bear notes that it's not just the human history that makes the Ventana special. "We have many different species found nowhere else in the world... the Santa Lucia fir, other plants," he explained. "We have eight distinct life zones in the Santa Lucia Mountains, from alpine to desert, oak savannah, pines, and other rare species of trees and animals. We have a little owl, a pygmy owl, that at night sounds like a woman screaming that we honor as one of our relatives, a messenger of the night." In the Esselen creation story of Tassajara Hot Springs, the screaming owl is the grieving sister of the chief.

The Esselen Tribe is committed to working in partnership with SFZC to ensure that Tassajara remains a sacred site, even as climate change amplifies fire danger and presents additional challenges to land stewardship. Before the Dolan Fire, Little Bear was working with Tassajara staff to implement fire-mimicry techniques, such as removing by hand underbrush and other light fuels, while leaving behind the herb and medicine plants. Besides reducing fire danger, this traditional practice also liberates additional resources for a healthy forest canopy.

While not minimizing the difficulty the pandemic has caused, Little Bear notes that it has had at least one beneficial effect: allowing the land to rest. Typically during the warmer months visitors driving into the Ventana Wilderness stir up dust; the dust settles on the leaves of oak trees, blocking sunlight and reducing their ability to photosynthesize. This year in the relative quiet of the pandemic, however, the Wilderness's majestic oaks prolifically leafed out and produced an acorn abundance, creating crucial habitat and food for wildlife.



Little Bear sees continuity between the healing his ancestors sought at the hot springs, and the nourishment that's offered today at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center. Those who arrive there, he says, find it's a very "quiet, solemn place to be, and they get healing from that. It's very hard in this world today to find places like Tassajara... where you can actually be still. For a tribal people, we feel the same way when we come here. " When soaking in the hot springs, he says, "we can cleanse ourselves internally in our body; in our mind; and in our eyes, so that we can see better; in our mouth, so that we can speak better; wash our ears in hot water so that we can hear better; in our hearts, so that we can be a better person."

For Little Bear, the "long relationship of spirit" between the Esselen Tribe and San Francisco Zen Center is a connection he holds close to his heart—and one that he hopes to continue to honor through partnering in stewardship of the land.

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Little Bear Interview Excerpt (3 min)

Full Interview





Green Gulch produce might be best known for making appearances at farmers' markets and upscale restaurants, but did you know that it also feeds local school-age kids, families, and elders?

GGF PRODUCE

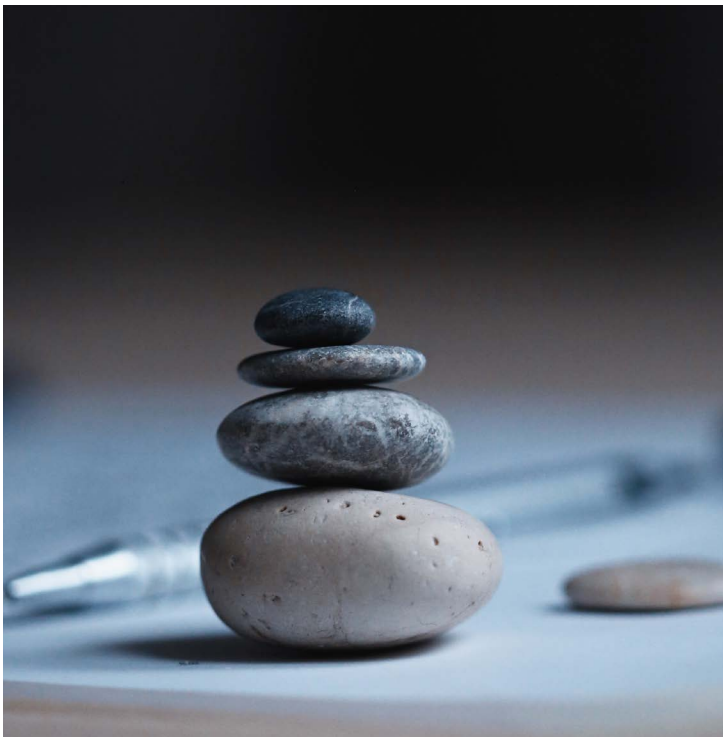
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boxes of produce distributed weekly

Green Gulch produce might be best known for making appearances at farmers' markets and upscale restaurants, but did you know that it also feeds local school-age kids, families, and elders? Each week Green Gulch Farm distributes boxes of farm-fresh produce to community partners throughout the greater Bay Area working to address food equity and security, including Congregation Sharith Israel's Hamotzi Project in San Francisco, the Berkeley Food Network, and The Cultural Conservancy, a San Francisco-based Native-led organization empowering indigenous people on their ancestral lands.

Nearly half of the donated produce is delivered to local community partners in Marin City, who we feature here. Pre-pandemic, **Conscious Kitchen** operated in both Martin Luther King, Jr. Academy (public K-8) and Willow Creek School (charter K-8) in Marin City, sourcing food donations and distributing it to chefs, who returned cooked meals for student lunches. During the pandemic, Conscious Kitchen pivoted to offering free meal pick-up for any student under 18 who lives in Marin City. **People's Inter-Cities Fellowship**—a non-denominational, interracial, Christian church—operates a food pantry twice a week where people can "shop," and also delivers meals directly to the ill and elderly. The Fellowship serves about 250 households per week.

Additionally, Green Gulch Farm has donated over 5,000 seedlings to the Intergenerational Garden Project at the **Marguerita C. Johnson Senior Center** in Marin City. SFZC is delighted to be partnering with these community organizations building a more ecological and equitable food system.



If you have an ongoing Buddhist practice and are interested in learning more about the pen pal program, please contact Outreach Coordinator, Jeffrey Schneider at outreach@sfzc.org.

PRISON PEN PALS

876

letters sent in 2020

SFZC has a long history of providing spiritual support for incarcerated people. One of our most far-reaching programs, Prison Pen Pals, matches people inside with practice partners outside who volunteer to exchange letters focused on cultivating a meditation practice, engaging with Buddhist teachings, and sharing Zen traditions across time and place. The program has national reach: incarcerated people write in from all over the country, and the volunteers also live throughout the US and Canada. Every single person who writes to SFZC gets a personal reply, which often includes meditation instructions and a book about Buddhism. Since 2014, SFZC has sent 8,251 letters and 2,189 books into prisons and jails.

Since the pandemic began, incarcerated pen pals have shared stories of being confined to their cells virtually around the clock, without access to visitors, classes, therapists, or support groups. Others have written of living in dorms in which social distancing is impossible. As one non-incarcerated Pen Pal noted, being in prison right now is "kind of like being in prison inside a prison." The letters exchanged through Prison Pen Pals represent a rare connection to sustaining outside support, and an opportunity for all engaged by the program to explore and manifest the bodhisattva vow.

If you have an ongoing Buddhist practice and are interested in learning more about the pen pal program, please contact Outreach Coordinator, Jeffrey Schneider at outreach@sfzc.org.



Together, we engage and build community.
Your support makes this possible.

Our minds and hearts express the fullness
of our gratitude.

Deep bow.

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