California Institute for Community, Art & Nature

The California Institute for Community, Art & Nature (California I CAN) was launched in 2016 by Malcolm Margolin as a project of Earth Island Institute. Although recently created, it has a solid foundation in Malcolm's deep friendships and working relationships with writers, artists, and institutional leaders at the core of California’s political and cultural power as well as those from some of the state’s most marginalized communities.

Senior members of our staff have been prominent in the cultural life of California for decades, bringing further networks of friendships and working relationships to California I CAN. Younger staff, volunteers, and interns are carefully mentored. While we take our work seriously, joy, playfulness, generosity, and a belief in the transformative power of beauty permeate everything we do.

To learn about upcoming events, inquire about opportunities for creative involvement, or to donate online, please go to californiaican.org.

Donation checks should be written to Earth Island Institute / California I CAN and mailed to the address below. All donations are tax deductible, used well, and greatly appreciated.

Berkeley

California I CAN’s focus on Berkeley is more than hometown pride and boosterism. Berkeley has been a crucible for social change and mass movements since its founding—advocating for scholarly excellence, free speech, environmental protection, civil liberties, disability rights, artistic freedom, and other ideas that have become powerful agents of change. Unlike “what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas,” what happens in Berkeley spreads throughout the world.

A 60s Museum, Historical Society, and Cultural Center

After organizing a successful public symposium on the 1960s, California I CAN assembled a group of highly skilled and well-connected museum professionals to explore the topic further. With the encouragement of the Mayor and other Berkeley officials, we are examining how best to present the ideas that fired our imaginations and fed our spirits back then.

Recapturing the wisdom, hopefulness, zaniness, and restorative powers of that pivotal decade, and to pass it on to the younger generations is a challenge. We envision the 60s Museum, in whatever form it takes, as more than a repository of nostalgia. We see it as a vibrant community that will study how to take what was best in that era and adapt it to the needs of the present.
Native Ways: Re-Indigenizing California

After two centuries of oppression and unremitting loss, Native people throughout the state are reviving their ancestral languages, foods, arts, and rituals. Coming at a time when many in the dominant culture are questioning Western values and practices, this revitalized Indian culture points to alternative ways of achieving fulfillment, happiness, and sustainability. When called upon, California I CAN does what it can to help Indians strengthen their own traditions and, whenever appropriate, to introduce non-Indians to this underappreciated and significant source of knowledge and wisdom.

California Indian Arts and Culture Festival

In June 2019, in conjunction with the Alliance for California Traditional Arts and others, we organized a festival in Berkeley’s Ohlone Park that featured two dozen Native California basket weavers, boat builders, jewelry makers, storytellers, and others skilled in Native arts. The attendees and the indigenous presenters—who came from all over the state—were delighted with the event. We are now raising funds to enlarge the festival and make it an annual gathering that will showcase the beauty, vitality, relevance, and diversity of California’s deepest and most abiding sense of itself.

California Indian Archives

There are still among us Native elders who in their youth absorbed language, attitudes, and a way of being from the generation before them that was born in the 19th century. Before the memory of their world fades and the unique specificities, complexities, and contradictions of their lives are reduced to generalized clichés, we feel an urgency to make sure that the stories and archival records of that time are preserved. We are currently working to find safe havens for the photo albums, journals, letters, and objects of cultural interest of two elders who recently passed away. We are further laying the groundwork for a project to identify the most important collections still in private hands. We will then create programs to save what we can of this heritage so that it can inform and inspire future generations. We have enlisted the California State Library, the California Arts Council, and several of California’s leading museums and research libraries. We are also urging our Native friends to create a California Indian Historical Society to help shape the acquisition and handling of archival material to serve the needs of Native communities.

Berkeley Shellmound Project

For the last three years we have been cooperating with archeologists, members of East Bay Indian communities, and local cultural and civic organizations to preserve the site of a 5,000-year-old Ohlone fishing village, widely considered to be the earliest human habitation on the shores of San Francisco Bay. Our many public programs have helped stop development on the Shellmound site while educating much of Berkeley about its historical significance. We have commissioned fresh illustrations, maps, and photographs, and we are transforming scholarly reports into lucid, lively text to create a book and a museum exhibition that will bring to life 5,000 years of habitation in an ever-changing environment and make archaeological research relevant and accessible to Bay Area residents.

Art

Our longtime involvement with California Indian culture and our inquiry into what has made Berkeley so hospitable to innovation have made us realize that art is much more than entertainment and not at all an escape from “reality.” Rather it is essential to cultural vitality and resilience. We feel that the environmental and social justice battles being fought in the courts and legislatures are essential to cultural vitality and resilience. We feel that art is much more than entertainment and not at all an escape from “reality.” Rather it is essential to cultural vitality and resilience. We feel that the environmental and social justice battles being fought in the courts and legislatures are the foundational building block for a sustainable state—were delighted with the event. We are now raising funds to enlarge the festival and make it an annual gathering that will showcase the beauty, vitality, relevance, and diversity of California’s deepest and most abiding sense of itself.

California I CAN is initiating a number of programs to elevate the role of the arts in the environmental movement. Yosemite was saved for its splendor and beauty, a powerful lesson for activists and community leaders alike. The arts can alert us to unexpected beauties, reconnect us emotionally to the world around us, inspire us to question the societal constructs that present nature as mere resource, and give us new lenses to see the world afresh and ourselves within it. We regularly host artists and writers simply because we find them inspiring. At salons and informal gatherings we have featured authors like Gretel Ehrlich, photographers like Tim Palmer, and a number of other artists, writers and activists. We happily lead friends and colleagues on visits to local art studios, backyard Shangri-las, fine art printers, and others who engage in unique, heartfelt, and meaningful work. We collaborate with Love the [Albany] Bulb, Café Ohlone, Vital Arts, and other organizations, sharing contacts, resources, co-hosting events, and otherwise enjoying the creativity and passion of friends and colleagues. Our recognition of beauty and our willingness to share it with others is indeed at the center of what we do. It’s a joy and a privilege. For a list of ongoing partnerships, please visit californiaican.org/creative-partnerships.