

History of Ward Valley

Sierra Lupines

Formation of the Sierra Nevada

The Sierra Nevada mountains began forming millions of years ago through tectonic uplift. The most dramatic rise occurred in the last 3–5 million years, creating the steep mountains and valleys we see today, including Ward Valley.



Plants and Animals Return

After the last Ice Age ended about 12,000–15,000 years ago, glaciers retreated. Plants and animals gradually returned, turning Ward Valley into a rich meadow ecosystem full of wildflowers, grasses, and wildlife.



The Washoe People

For thousands of years, the Washoe people lived seasonally in Ward Valley. They hunted, fished, gathered plants, and used controlled burns to maintain healthy meadows long before European arrival.



The Comstock Lode and the Ward Rush

In 1859, the discovery of the Comstock Lode, one of the richest silver strikes in history, sparked a huge demand for timber on the California side of the Sierra. Loggers and miners rushed into the valleys west of Lake Tahoe. The valley was eventually named after Ward Rush, a prospector who filed a claim here in 1874.



The Comstock Lode and Ward Rush

Intense logging from 1863–1877 cleared large areas of forest. Grazing and road building began altering the meadows. This early development set the stage for long-term changes in Ward Valley's ecosystem.



Alpine Meadows Ski Resort

During the preparation for the 1960 Winter Olympics at Squaw Valley, Los Angeles businessman John Reilly looked over the iconic KT-22 on horseback and told his son he was going to build a ski resort in the adjacent valley. Alpine Meadows opened in 1961 and opened terrain called “The Pacific Crest South Bowls” in the high mountain meadows of Ward Valley.



John Reilly and the Twin Peaks Dream

After being ousted by Alpine Meadow's board, John Reilly shifted his focus to the Twin Peaks, the crown jewel overlooking Ward Valley. Reilly proposed a full scale resort deep into the basin of Ward Valley, a lift up to the peak, and a gondola from the proposed resort to the shores of Tahoe City. Luckily, environmental groups stepped in and stopped the development before it could start.



Present Day: Restoration

Decades of fire suppression and development allowed conifers to invade the meadows. Ward Valley is now part of the Lake Tahoe West Shore Restoration Project. Sierra Lupines is working to restore the meadow by hand-thinning small conifers, planting native wildflowers, and recording data to bring Ward Valley back to healthy, thriving meadow ecosystem.

