

Yurok Tribe welcomes Rios to Rivers back to Requa

August 3, 2019



As the group of young adults with the nonprofit international exchange Rios to Rivers rounded the bend in the Klamath River and came within earshot of the Requa Boat Ramp, some 50 Yurok tribal members rose to their feet in welcome.

“We are here today to stand with our people who are coming down the river, and the advocacy and hard work they have done,” Yurok Chairman Joe James told those gathered.

“Not just for the Klamath River, but for what they do in their homeland and internationally.”

James then sang traditional Yurok songs, flanked by another singer and a group of five young Yurok women dressed in ceremonial dress.

When the kayaks, rafts and redwood dugout canoes finally reached shore, they were greeted with a large yell, which was returned by the Rios to Rivers contingent.

One of the members of Rios to Rivers, Fernanda Castro Purrán of the Mapuche indigenous people from Chile, then paddled back out to place a wreath in the water meant to thank the Klamath River itself, before everyone was invited to feast.

“It is our duty and our responsibility to recognize other people when they travel into our country,” said Dale Ann Sherman, who had organized the welcome and cultural exchange on the bank of the Klamath River on July 31. “They have come a long way.

“So, singing them to our shores is what was done to tell them that they are welcome to come onto our shore, and feeding people is an important thing.

“The whole process needed to be done. The singers needed to come out, and the young women, who represent youth and healthiness and the vibrancy of our people, they stood with the chairman as he sang them to shore,” said Sherman.

“They were in ceremonial dress because it was an acknowledgement to the Creator that we are recognizing the river and we are asking the Creator to see what we are doing today. It came about naturally, because it is what we are supposed to do.”

Added Sherman, “It is customary when people come into your territory that you offer them food and drink, socialize with them, hear their stories and they hear ours. They see our connection to the river.

“And when we are there, they do the same thing to us. It is an indigenous thing to do.”

Once everyone was fed, the young adults who took part in Rios to Rivers took to the stage to tell of where they were from, and the challenges they face on their local rivers back home.

The students on their year’s trip hail from various indigenous tribes in Chile, Bolivia, Myanmar and the U.S. Together, they represent seven different river basins from around the world. All of the rivers represented are dealing with similar issues involving river health, particularly dams.

It was a particularly poignant message for Yurok tribal members, who have been working for years to remove the dams on the Klamath River.

“Rios to Rivers is a nonprofit organization that works to save rivers and to spread knowledge to people about the actions needed,” Sherman said.

“Everybody has to have a part in saving rivers, or we are not going to have any clean water. Our fish populations go down when that happens and for the Yurok Tribe that is very important, because our spirituality is connected to the river.

“We belong to this river and the salmon that run in the river,” said Sherman, “we belong to those salmon. We gain our spiritual strength from the river, so we work to have the river be healthy.

“We work with other organizations that are interested in saving water and rivers around the world, because it is finite. People need to realize that.”

Rios to Rivers was formed in 2012 and took its first trip in 2013. They have continued to host trips on rivers around the world each year since.

“We really work at the grassroots level with youth and students, because we really feel that that is the level that you need to work to make an impactful change,” said Weston Boyles, founder and executive director of Rios to Rivers.

Rios to Rivers originally came to the Klamath River in 2017. Two years later, Boyles said, the organization was back with a larger group of participants who represented indigenous peoples from the Bio Bio and Ñuble rivers in Chile, the Beni River in Bolivia, the Mekong River in Myanmar, and the Snake, Colorado and Klamath rivers in the U.S.

“It was difficult, because we are from different tribes and speak seven different native languages,” Purrán told The Triplicate in Spanish, through a translator.

“We always talk about this. But we became stronger knowing that we are all fighting for the same cause.

“Really, in the end it was work that was very successful. Every indigenous village and entity learned from each other,” said Purrán. “We all learned from everyone.”

This year’s trip began on the Elwha River, currently the site of the largest dam removal in history, although that title will go to the Klamath River once four dams are removed as planned.

Purrán, who represented the Ñuble River, which runs through the Bio Bio region of Chile, said the trip on the Elwha River really stood out for her.

“Probably the most emotional part of the journey, and where we spent a lot of time weeping, was when we saw where the Elwha hydroelectric dam had been dismantled,” Purrán said through a translator.

“The reality is that in our community, we already have three hydroelectric dams and so to see this dam that is in half — we dream to be able to take down our dams.

“To see these taken down gives us this light of hope that we can also do this on our rivers.”

After the Elwha River, Rios to Rivers visited the Columbia River and saw Bonneville Dam, then went to Crater Lake, where they heard the creation story.

Then the group headed to the Klamath River, where they began by visiting the headwaters and Klamath Tribes in the upper basin.

The group next traveled downriver and proceeded to raft from Happy Camp before visiting the Karuk Tribe.

They returned to the river and floated the rest of the way to the Mouth of the Klamath to wrap up their trip.

This was the third year in a row of participating in Rios to Rivers for Yurok tribal member Peter Gensaw, also a member of the Ancestral Guard. Gensaw said that various organizations, including the Yurok Tribe, were in the process of fighting for removal of four dams on the Klamath River when the group first visited in 2017.

This year, they were able to see the progress made as the dams are scheduled to be removed in 2022, pending final approval from the federal government.

“This year was a lot different, because we can tell the students, ‘Hey, this is my river, this is my problem.’ But now, we know that the dams are coming down for true,” Gensaw said.

“So it is a heartwarming thought, just to tell them that when the dams are removed, the river will be free-flowing once again.”

For Purrán, seeing the strength and sovereignty of the local indigenous people was an uplifting experience.

“It is very impressive to see indigenous people leading their territories,” she said through a translator.

“Our indigenous community lives under the rule of the Chilean State. We don’t have recognition as a nation. So, my message to my community is that with some organization, respect and also the love for our nature and ecosystem, we can see nature free without interventions from third parties.”

Gensaw said he traveled to Chile twice last year, and was struck by stories told by the indigenous people he met there.

“I walked down to a river’s edge with a man and he told me a lot about the past,” Gensaw recalled. “He said, ‘If you look deep enough down in the water, you can still see my cherry trees in my backyard.

‘If you look deeper down, you will see my family’s house, that now has been fully submerged underwater.’ Seeing that house submerged, and hearing those stories from the people, was really touching.”

Although this was the second trip on the Klamath River for Rios to Rivers, Boyles said it won’t be the last. He said the organization is trying to expand over the next few years, with a goal of returning to the Klamath for the removal of the dams, tentatively scheduled for 2022.

“We want to witness the removal of the dam and learn why functioning dams are being taken down,” said Boyles, “so they can take that back to their basins, to their homes, and to share that at the grassroots level

with rivers where they haven't built dams yet.

“And also in places where they have built dams to inspire the removal of those dams.

“It is thanks to the work of many villages, many indigenous tribes, and many people that this is happening,” he said. “We really hope we can continue this forward, and in 2022 we are here with 22 river basins represented and a big celebration.

“It will be a moment to celebrate a monumental thing. We hope to amplify that and have that message heard around the world.”