

Yurok Tribe opens first tribally operated visitor center in the California State Park System

April 19, 2022



The Yurok Tribe, in partnership with the Redwood National and State Parks, celebrated the grand opening of the recently renovated and renamed Chah-pek-w O' Ket'-toh "Stone Lagoon" Visitor Center, the first tribally operated visitor center within the California State Park system.

"The restoration of our role as the steward of Chah-pek-w O' Ket'-toh represents a significant step toward the healing of our people," said Joseph L. James, the Chairman of the Yurok Tribe to more than 150 tribal and state park officials, and representatives from other state and federal agencies.

"We are extremely proud to be the first tribe in California to operate a visitor center within the state park system. It is humbling to know this precedent sets the stage for many other tribes to follow suit," Chairman James added.

Chairman James thanked the North Coast Redwoods State Park for taking the time "to build a reciprocal relationship with the Tribe, and taking action to correct an historic wrong."

“I hope public land managers from all over California and the entire United States use the partnership between the state park and the tribe as a blueprint to build solid working relationships with sovereign tribal nations in their regions,” added California State Parks North Coast Redwoods Superintendent Victor Bjelajac.

“Our partnership on the visitor center, the renaming of Sue-meg State Park, and the condor restoration projects are only the beginning. I know we will embark on many more equally exciting endeavors in the not so distant future.”

Managed by Yurok Cultural Resources Director and Tribal Heritage Preservation Officer, Rosie Clayburn, the Chahpekw O’ Ket’-toh “Stone Lagoon” Visitor Center now contains a multitude of digital and conventional displays that reflect the Tribe’s longstanding cultural connection to the lagoon.

The Tribe and Park hired Yurok interpreters to share Tribe’s history from pre-contact to contemporary times. “Visitors have an opportunity to learn about the Tribe from Yurok citizens,” Clayburn said.

For countless generations, Yurok families occupied multiple villages, such as Chah-pekwe and Cho-chkwee, near the coastal lagoon. The residents of the villages lived in relative peace until the California Gold Rush, when European settlers attempted a genocide against the Tribe and neighboring indigenous nations.

The Tribe endured several devastating atrocities during this tumultuous time period, but the Yurok people were never removed from the region. In fact, many contemporary Yurok citizens are descendants of the Chah-pekwe and Cho-kwee villagers who survived the Native American holocaust.

One of the descendants, Yurok Tribal Council Member Sherri Provolt, assisted in the formation of the agreement that paved the way for the Tribe to operate the Chah-pekwe O’ Ket’-toh Visitor Center.

“It feels really good to regain our rightful place as the primary caretaker of Chah-pekwe O’ Ket’-toh,” said Tribal Council Member Provolt. “I know our ancestors would be proud that we are making positive change for future generations of Yurok people and natives throughout the state.”