

Yurok Tribe Opposes Major Aspect of Marine Stewardship Initiative

April 11, 2025



Resighini, Trinidad Rancherias Have No Authority in Yurok Ancestral Territory

Based on months of careful consideration, the Yurok Tribe is opposing a significant part of the Yurok-Tolowa-Dee-ni' Indigenous Marine Stewardship Area (IMSA) that falls within Yurok ancestral territory.

Last year, the Resighini Rancheria, Cher-Ae Heights Indian Community of the Trinidad Rancheria and Tolowa Dee-ni' Nation announced plans to create a tribal stewardship area spanning three miles offshore along the Pacific Coast from the California/Oregon border in Del Norte County to the Little River in Humboldt County. Approximately 60 percent of the IMSA's claimed jurisdiction is in the Yurok Tribe's ancestral territory. The Yurok Tribe has no issue with the Tolowa Dee-ni' Nation establishing an IMSA in their aboriginal lands.

"We cannot in good conscience support this initiative in our ancestral territory because it is a clear violation of the Hoopa-Yurok Settlement Act," said Joseph L. James, the Chairman of the Yurok Tribe.

Resighini Rancheria and Cher-Ae Heights Indian Community of the Trinidad Rancheria are comprised of a few hundred descendants from multiple local tribes, including the Yurok Tribe. More than 30 years ago, both Rancherias relinquished all rights in Yurok ancestral territory through the Hoopa-Yurok Settlement Act.

Enacted on October 31, 1988, the legislation offered the Resighini and Trinidad Rancheria members with Yurok ancestors an avenue to become members of the Yurok Tribe with the same rights as enrolled Yurok citizens. Instead, the Rancherias' membership chose to give up their federally protected tribal rights for a single payment of \$15,000 per person, which was worth more than

\$40,000 in today's dollars. "Any person making an election to receive, and having received, a lump sum payment under this subsection shall not thereafter have any interest or right whatsoever in the tribal, communal, or unallotted land, property, resources or rights within, or appertaining to, the Hoopa Valley Reservation, the Hoopa Valley Tribe, the Yurok Reservation, or the Yurok Tribe," according to 25 U.S.C. 1300i-6(d)(3) in the Federal Code of Regulations.

The Act also cemented the Yurok tribal government's sovereign regulatory authority in Yurok ancestral territory. In 1988, when the Yurok Tribe started the formal organization process, the 3,800 Yuroks who rejected the buyout and enrolled in Yurok Tribal membership made great sacrifices to rebuild the Yurok Nation. At the time, most Yurok people lived well below the poverty line due to the extremely high unemployment rates in this rural region. More than half of the reservation lacked electricity, safe drinking water or any other form of public infrastructure. Additionally, the Tribe had little land and no reliable funding. Still, the Yurok people worked tirelessly to establish a strong government, community and economy.

"The Rancherias' inclusion of Yurok ancestral territory in their marine stewardship area is an affront to the Yurok people who refused to give up on the dream of a sovereign Yurok Nation despite tremendous hardships," said Yurok Vice Chairperson Rose Sylvia.

While there are positive aspects of the Yurok-Tolowa-Dee-ni' Indigenous Marine Stewardship Area, Resighini and Trinidad Rancherias are attempting to force jurisdiction in Yurok ancestral territory to gain rights divested in the settlement agreement and enforceable through federal law, such as fishing and gathering rights.

The name Yurok-Tolowa-Dee-ni' Indigenous Marine Stewardship Area has caused confusion at the state and federal level as many agencies assume the Yurok Tribe is part of the project. The Resighini Rancheria's recent effort to change its name to Pulikla Tribe of Yurok People resulted in similar issues. The name alteration violates the Hoopa-Yurok Settlement Act because it claims interest in cultural rights, cultural resources, and cultural property appertaining to the Yurok Tribe.

The Yurok Tribe has a hard-earned reputation for its unique scientific capacity and ability to complete landscape-scale environmental restoration projects. The Tribe also conducts marine research. The Resighini and Trinidad Rancherias have limited experience in these fields.

The Yurok Tribe supports the Resighini and Trinidad Rancherias' sovereign authority over their respective land bases. Outside of Rancheria land, they do not have any rights or jurisdiction in Yurok ancestral territory, including the Klamath River and the coast.

Currently, there are over 6,500 enrolled Yurok citizens who have familial connections to all of the Tribe's 77 original villages along the Klamath River and Pacific Coast. These villages extend for 60 miles from Damnation Creek in Del Norte County to the Little River in Humboldt County on the coast and inland from the mouth of the Klamath River to the Trinity River confluence.

"The Yurok Tribe wants nothing but the best for Resighini and Trinidad, but it can't come at the expense of the Yurok people and the sovereignty of the Yurok Tribe." concluded Chairman James.