

Indian Island returned to Wiyot Tribe

October 27, 2019



The City of Eureka returned ownership of nearly the entirety of Tuluwat Island, also known as Indian Island, to the Wiyot Tribe during a ceremony Oct. 21.

Eureka may be the first local government to take this action, according to the North Coast Journal.

The Yurok Tribe in Klamath found the act encouraging and hopes to see local governments take similar steps. “The Yurok Tribe supports tribes in receiving land back and recognizes that the City of Eureka and the Wiyot Tribe’s return of these lands reflects the growing trend and should be one of many more to come,” said Joseph James, the Yurok tribal chairman.

Wiyot cultural liaison Cheryl Seidner’s voice resounded through the Adorni Center in Eureka as she sang the tribe’s “We Are Coming Home” song. People packed the building Monday to witness the historical moment as officials signed the transfer-of-lands agreement.

City council members and tribal leaders spoke on the day’s significance, and tribal members performed traditional dances and songs.

“We never gave up on our land or where we came from, and that’s the story I want people to know,” said Cutch Risling Baldy, a Native American studies professor at Humboldt State University.

The Eureka City Council decided to make the land transfer in December 2018, but had to go through a complicated process before making it official.

“I have great respect for the City of Eureka in working to build stronger relationships with the Wiyot Tribe. Their efforts provide a strong example to other local governments in our region on the importance of addressing the history, both positive and negative, between us and our local Native American tribes,” said Crescent City Mayor Blake Inscore.

In 2000, the tribe purchased one and a half acres of the island after raising \$106,000 through selling posters, T-shirts and Indian tacos, among other things. In 2004, the city returned 40 acres of the island to the Wiyot people, and on Monday it transferred approximately 202 acres, nearly the entire island except for a few private residences.

The Wiyot people lived and worshipped on the island, which sits in Humboldt Bay, for 1,000 years, according to an archaeologist, but they lost the land when a dairy farmer purchased it in 1860. That same year, during the Wiyot’s “Land Renewal Ceremony,” a group of white settlers massacred over 200 women, children and elderly while the men were away, a massacre that received national attention in its day, according to the Los Angeles Times.

Since then, the island has been the site of a ship repair factory, lumber mills, and a boating and yachting club. In the 1950s, the city of Eureka acquired much of the island except for the residences.

“This has been an intergenerational movement to heal our people and to heal our community,” said Wiyot Tribal Chair Ted Hernandez during the ceremony. “We all are coming home.”