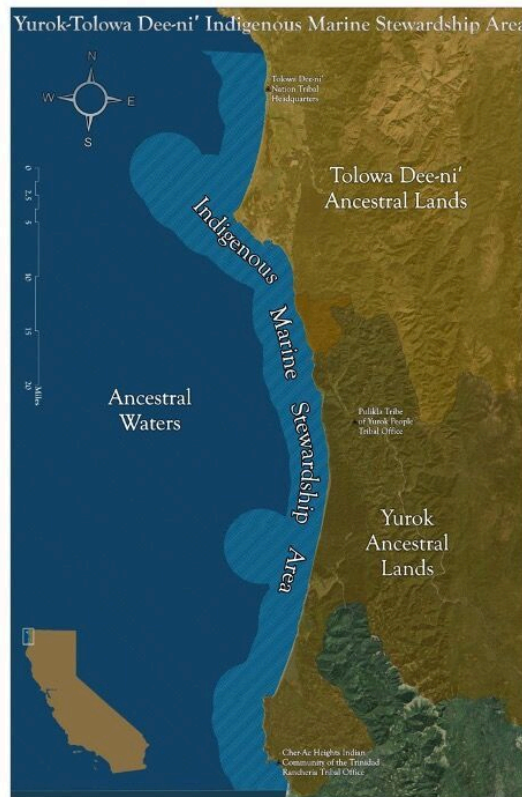


Yurok Ancestral Territory is Shared: Tribes Respond to the Yurok Tribe's Opposition to Marine Stewardship Initiative

May 10, 2025



Just last month on March 24, 2025, Tribal leadership from the Pulikla Tribe of Yurok People, Tolowa Dee-ni' Nation, and the Cher-Ae Heights Indian Community of the Trinidad Rancheria were invited to participate in a panel as part of the Governor's California Tribal Nations Summit in Sacramento, CA.

These Tribal leaders were invited to the panel because of the historic collaboration in navigating differences and establishing the Yurok-Tolowa Dee-ni' Indigenous Marine Stewardship Area (IMSA) and related Inter-Tribal Treaty.

The purpose of the IMSA is to foster collaboration among Tribal Nations in the stewardship and management of shared ocean and coastal territories. By honoring inherent responsibilities, the Tribes aim to preserve cultural lifeways and ensure that the traditional practices of the Yurok and Tolowa Dee-ni' Peoples, carried out since time immemorial, continue to thrive. Central is the protection and enhancement of ecosystem

resiliency, biodiversity, ocean health, and ensuring the long-term vitality of the environment. The IMSA also seeks to honor the deep connections between the Tribes and advance their collective presence in unceded territories.

Open Invitation to Join IMSA Initiative for Tribes of Yurok and Tolowa Dee-ni' Peoples

In 2023, all six Tribal governments composed of Yurok and/or Tolowa Dee-ni' Peoples were invited to collaborate in the development of the IMSA concept. Any Tribal government that expressed an interest resulted in government-to-government meetings among Tribal Councils. During those initial meetings, three Tribal governments expressed a strong interest in collaborating. On October 27, 2023, a government-to-government meeting was held with the Yurok Tribe at the Yurok Tribal Office in Eureka, CA. The Yurok Tribe's Council did not express any opposition (or a position) at that time. No follow up meeting was requested and no formal response was provided.

Eighteen months later, and just hours before Tribal leaders from the IMSA Tribes took stage at the CA Tribal Nations Summit, the Yurok Tribe provided a response. Their response came via a Facebook post and press release. Unfortunately, the Yurok Tribe's statement in opposition of the IMSA is meritless.

A Disheartening and Harmful Response for Tribal Communities and Tribal Sovereignty

It is disheartening that the Yurok Tribe would choose to use the media to respond. It is also disheartening that the response perpetuates a biased position of colonial politics and does not focus on the core tenants of the IMSA.

Most damaging to the Pulikla Tribe and Trinidad Rancheria in particular, is the Yurok Tribe's assertion that they, and they alone, have rights within Yurok ancestral territory because of the 1988 Hoopa-Yurok Settlement Act (HYSA). The IMSA designation is most certainly not in "clear violation of the Hoopa-Yurok Settlement Act," as Chairman Joe James of the Yurok Tribe stated. The press release later purports that, "The Act also cemented the Yurok tribal government's sovereign regulatory authority in Yurok ancestral territory," an assertion that appears nowhere in the Act.

The HYSA has nothing to do with Yurok ancestral territory. In fact, the HYSA does not even mention the words "ancestral territory," or any words associated with the ocean. The Yurok Tribe's claim to this shared ancestral territory is based on the same legal standing as that of the Pulikla Tribe and Trinidad Rancheria, among other Tribes.

It is difficult to succinctly summarize the over 100 years of changing federal policies, along with the decades of court litigation that led up to the HYSA. Most plainly, the purpose of the HYSA was two-fold. The first was to disperse timber revenue from the Hoopa Valley Indian Reservation to all eligible "Indians of the Reservation," as had been defined in the Jesse Short cases over the preceding decades. The second was to resolve the issues that lead up to the Short and other cases, and partition the Hoopa Valley Indian Reservation into two reservations that would then be governed by two separate Tribal governments. This is what led to

the creation of the “Yurok Reservation” as defined in Section 2(c) of the Act and led to the creation of the “Yurok Tribe” to govern said reservation.

The claim by the Yurok Tribe that “Indians of the Reservation” who did not become a citizen of either the Hoopa Valley or Yurok Tribes under the HYSA subsequently lost any rights they hold as citizens of other federally recognized Tribes is not factual. It is critical to not conflate an individual “Indian’s” financial interest in a reservation with the Tribal rights they hold as citizens of an independent sovereign Tribal nation. The HYSA was not a termination bill of any pre-existing Tribal rights nor in any way impacted the sovereignty of the Pulikla Tribe or Trinidad Rancheria. There is absolutely nothing in the Act stating that such individuals gave up their connection or rights as historic Yurok People and the Act did not terminate the ancestry of any such persons. This has been confirmed by the federal government on numerous occasions, including during the HYSA proceedings.

The Yurok Tribe also asserted that the HYSA established their sole interest in “cultural rights, cultural resources, and cultural property” associated with the Yurok People. Again, the words “culture” and “cultural” are not mentioned in the HYSA. The Yurok Tribe is not synonymous with the Yurok People, and it is critical that the public not conflate the Yurok People (who have been Yurok, or traditionally known as “Pulikla and Ner-er-ner,” since time immemorial) with the Yurok Tribe (a Tribal government whose constitution was created in 1993 to fulfill Congressional requirements).

No single federally recognized tribe represents the Yurok People, the ancestral territory of the Yurok People, or the Yurok culture tied to place. Again, these things are shared by several federally recognized tribes. This has been and continues to be acknowledged by the federal and state governments on countless occasions. This is also common knowledge among Tribal governments on the North Coast.

Open Invitation Remains, in Honor of Our Inter-Tribal Connections and Shared Goals

Despite the aforementioned disheartening and harmful actions, the IMSA Treaty Tribes remain steadfast in the invitation to the Yurok Tribe and other Tribes to join the IMSA initiative. The Tribes remain committed to move forward in a way that acknowledges our shared ancestral territory and strengthens our connections as Tribal people.