



YUROK TRIBE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Tribe regains ownership of sacred site, salmon stronghold

Blue Creek is a pivotal piece in the Klamath salmon restoration puzzle

From the headwaters high in the Klamath Mountains to its aquamarine entry into the Klamath River, Blue Creek is now a permanently protected sanctuary for salmon. The Yurok Tribe, in partnership with Western Rivers Conservancy, recently completed a transaction reacquiring 9,000 acres of land within and adjacent to the Blue Creek watershed, a tributary to the Klamath River. The Tribe will manage the land—heavily logged in the past 100 years—to restore the ecosystem for fish and wildlife and to protect tribal spiritual areas.

The Yurok Tribe is now the primary steward of this important salmon stream and its watershed, which boasts some of the best fish habitat in the Pacific Northwest. For the Yurok Tribe, the purchase of this vital salmon stream was long ago deemed a top priority because of its importance to salmon populations and its immense cultural value.

“We have much to celebrate in the reacquiring of our land and our natural resource stewardship role in this profoundly sacred place,” said Thomas P. O’Rourke Sr., the Chairman of the Yurok Tribe. “However, there is still much more work to be done if we are to restore the struggling Klamath salmon runs to which the health of our people is inextricably intertwined.”

Using settlement funds tied to the 1988 Hoopa Yurok Settlement Act, the Tribe worked with Western Rivers Conservancy to purchase this land through the federal New Market Tax Credit program. Over the last ten years, the Tribe has worked with Western Rivers Conservancy to accomplish this and several other land acquisitions. This acquisition marks the final successful piece of an ambitious land recovery plan.

The Blue Creek acquisition also represents a significant portion of integrated river-restoration initiative.

“The Yurok Tribe’s goal is to heal the Klamath River from its headwater to the Pacific Ocean. This is a step forward toward realizing a bigger vision — restoration of the river’s mighty salmon runs,” said Amy Cordalis, the Yurok Tribe’s General Counsel and traditional salmon fisher.

Blue Creek, the largest tributary on the Yurok Reservation, provides critical habitat for Lower Klamath fish populations as well as thermal refuge for migrating fish from throughout the Klamath Basin. When fall Chinook, the Klamath River's most abundant salmon species, begins the upstream migration during late summer and early fall, Blue Creek provides thermal respite from the warm Klamath River, helping salmon to survive the remainder of their journey to their spawning grounds.

"The late fall run Chinook of Blue Creek are genetically distinct from those of the rest of the Klamath Basin, adding to the diversity and long-term health of Klamath River salmon populations," said Dave Hillemeier, the Director of the Yurok Tribe's Fisheries Department and veteran fisheries biologist. "The watershed is rich in biodiversity and home to several special status plants and animals."

For millennia, the Tribe employed complex natural resource stewardship strategies to maintain massive fish runs on the Klamath River, but this role was forcefully removed from Yurok hands in the mid-nineteenth century. In less than 200 years, non-Indians decimated numerous native fish and wildlife populations in the region. Concurrent with the effort to reacquire land, the Tribe has been engaged in a far-reaching endeavor to reverse the negative impact that historic natural resource extraction industries have had on the Klamath and its fisheries.

Since becoming formally organized in 1993, the Yurok Tribe has worked tirelessly to recover the vast swaths of land that were largely taken, with federal assistance, by participants in the Gold Rush. Even with recent acquisitions, the Yurok people only control about half of the acreage on the reservation. The loss of traditional fishing and hunting grounds, ceremonial sites and other cultural assets has caused tremendous suffering among Yurok families, a reality that is only just now beginning turnaround.

Moving forward, the Yurok Tribe plans to use traditional and contemporary forest management practices to rehabilitate damaged habitat in the Blue Creek watershed, an approach the Tribe has applied in other watersheds to improve conditions for fish.

In addition to Blue Creek's importance to fish and wildlife, the watershed's significance to the Tribe's sacred ceremonies, dating back to time immemorial, cannot be overstated. "The Blue Creek watershed is not only a significant salmon stronghold, it contains the path to our spiritual center, a sacred place where our medicine makers have travelled since time immemorial to bring the world back into balance. We would like to thank Westerns Rivers Conservancy for partnering with us to restore a portion of our ancestral lands and the associated Yurok way of life" concluded Chairman O'Rourke.