LAND USE

After 140 Years, the Wiyot Tribe Has Come Home

For the first time in U.S. history, a local municipality has returned stolen Native land without an accompanying sale or lawsuit. By Adina Solomon

Members of the Wiyot Tribe (above) celebrate the return of the land in October. Below: Wiyot's second World Renewal Ceremony since 1860 will be held this month on Tuluwat Island.

IN 1860, a massacre left the Wiyot Tribe at the brink of extinction and triggered the theft of their ancestral land.

After years of local activism, Eureka, California's city council voted to return a historic 202 acres of Tuluwat Island to the federally recognized tribe in October. It marks the first time a U.S. municipality has transferred a Native land parcel of that size without an accompanying sale, lawsuit, or court order.

"This gave the community an opportunity to change the history into something different," says Wiyot tribal administrator Michelle Vassel. "Now instead of the island where the massacre happened, it's the island where Wiyot people returned."

Working toward reclamation

For thousands of years, the indigenous Wiyot people lived on Tuluwat, the largest island in Humboldt Bay off the coast of northern California. The tribe had two villages there, Etpidolh and Tuluwat, which was also the site of the annual World Renewal Ceremony, a days-long event with important cultural and religious significance.

One morning during the 1860 ceremony, white settlers killed hundreds of sleeping Wiyot people, bringing the tribe to the brink of extinction and seizing the island. The land—renamed "Indian Island"—eventually entered the hands of Eureka, California. In the 1870s, a ship repair facility began operating there, leaving behind toxic materials. A retaining wall made of used boat batteries further contaminated the island. Invasive plant species displaced native ones.

The Wiyot people first asked Eureka to return ownership of Tuluwat Island in the 1970s, says tribal administrator Vassel.

Nothing came of it, but conversations began again in 1992, when Native and non-Native people started holding annual vigils on neighboring Woodley Island to remember the lives lost in the massacre.

"It was like a stain on the city that really nobody liked to look at," says Vassel. "And this vigil really opened up people to be able to come out and share that they were unhappy with

LEFT: SARAH HOLDER/*CITYLAB*; TOP: CKC IMAGE, COURTESY THE CITY OF EUREKA

what had happened and say, 'Hey, how can I lend a hand?'"

The activism increased understanding of the island's importance to the Wiyot and the need for its reclamation, which resulted in some small wins. In 2000, the tribe bought 1.5 acres; in 2004, the city handed over 40. The Wiyot spent more than a decade cleaning up the environmental contamination.

But the city still owned most of the island. So in 2015, a delegation led by tribal chairman Ted Hernandez again asked Eureka's city council to return the remaining acreage. This time, the city agreed. And so began a flurry of planning.

The land's return marks an important step in the community healing process.

Starting the healing process

In the following years, Eureka appraised the land, which was zoned as natural resources, at $1,000 an acre. Regular meetings were conducted with the tribe.

Because there was no charge for the property and the city took on the expense of appraising the island, the Wiyot agreed to financially cover assessments under the California Environmental Quality Act, which requires government agencies to identify and mitigate environmental impacts of any project. Ultimately, the assessment found that the transfer would not have a significant impact on the environment.

Then there was the question of ownership. The island was never legally transferred to the state or city, Vassel says. In 1860, days before the massacre, settler Robert Gunther had purchased the land from California and it eventually ended up in the hands of Eureka.

This created title issues in the runup to the land transfer. To obtain a clear title, Eureka provided a letter from the California State Lands Commission to the title company.

Finally, in 2018, the city council voted to declare Tuluwat a "surplus property," a legal step required to transfer the land. And last October, the land was officially returned to the Wiyot without restrictions in an emotional ceremony at a Eureka community center.

"The council just really viewed that this would be the right thing to do, and that it would help just create stronger bonds with the Wiyot community, as well as probably other Native American communities in the area," says Greg Sparks, former city manager for Eureka. Others facing similar situations—including another California tribe and Austin, Texas—have since reached out for details on the transfer.

The land's return marked an important step in the community healing process, Hernandez says.

Now that the tribe controls the island, their first tasks are further clean up and removing invasive species. New dance houses and an information center are also on the to-do list.

And this month, the tribe will be holding the World Renewal Ceremony on the island. It will be the first since 2014, when the tribe completed the ceremony interrupted by the 1860 massacre.

"The world can become complete and whole and heal," says Hernandez.

Solomon is a freelance journalist based in Atlanta. She specializes in urban planning and design and how it affects people, with bylines appearing in the Washington Post, Next City, *and* CityLab.