

California

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California city returns island taken from native tribe in 1860 massacre

Associated Press

Mon 21 Oct 2019 10:39
EDT



📷 Wiyot land in Eureka, California. Photograph: Ben Margot/AP

Indian Island off the coast of Northern **California** was the site of a massacre, a place that was contaminated by a shipyard and flush with invasive species.

It's also the spiritual and physical center of the universe for the small Wiyot tribe, and it will belong to them almost entirely Monday after a city deeds all the land it owns on the island to the tribe.

"It's a really good example of resilience because Wiyot people never gave up the dream," tribal administrator Michelle Vassel said. "It's a really good story about healing and about coming together of community."

The tribe was decimated in 1860, when scores of elders, women and children were wiped out during a raid by settlers while the tribe's men were away gathering supplies. Since then, the now 600-member tribe has been making small strides toward regaining the land it lost.

The tribe sold art and fry bread and took in donations to buy 1.5 acres (0.6 hectares) on the eastern tip of the island for \$106,000 in 2000. Years later, the city of Eureka gave the tribe more land.

On Monday, the city will sign over the deed to the largest chunk - more than 200 acres in what was the historic village of Etipidolh. No money was exchanged.

"For our city, it's the right thing to do, and that's why we're doing it," said Kim Bergel, a councilwoman who was born and raised in the county. "Certainly, it's been far too long."

Tribes have lost millions of acres of land through treaties broken by the US government, by force and in exchange for federal services such as healthcare and education. Rarely has it been restored, said Cris Stainbrook, president of the Indian Land Tenure Foundation.

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The Wiyot knew the parcel it bought in 2000 had extensive contamination from a former shipyard that was established on the island shortly after the massacre, along with livestock grazing. That didn't matter. People in the community asked what they could do to help.

The tribe and community members came together to remove boat batteries, lead paint, chemicals, scrap metal, rusty buckets, a huge engine and contaminated soil. A 1,000-year-old clamshell mound containing burial sites, tools and things left over from ceremonies was restored.

The land was deemed safe in 2014. The overall quality of water, plants and marine life have improved, the tribe says.

The clean bill of health by the US Environmental Protection Agency also meant the tribe could resume a ceremony it was forced to abandon after the massacre.

The ceremony staged in 2014 to renew the world and restore balance lasted 10 days. The tribe has been trying to revive its language and cultural practices that were driven underground after the massacre. The last person fluent in the Wiyot language died in the 1960s. Some elders who were sent to boarding school were afraid to teach Wiyot traditions to the younger generation, Hernandez said.

The city had no use for the land it declared surplus property and offered up to public agencies but had no takers. Few parcels on the island are privately owned.

The tribe imagines the island as a place where native plants can flourish and be used in ceremonies, where the community can gather and where its renewal ceremony can be practiced annually. The next one is scheduled in March.



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