



# Exploitation, Fear and Restitution: The Story of Tuluwat Today

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## **Abstract:**

Genocide continues to have everlasting effects on the it's victims across the globe. In Humboldt county one of the most harrowing atrocities was the massacre of 1860 on Tuluwat island. In 2019 the City of Eureka returned the island to the Wiyot Tribe because of Tuluwat's cultural significance to the local Native population. The following narrative details my personal experiences and research delving into the lasting effects of this mass murder, the way it's story is told now and the reparations being made today. While doing this I learned more about the island through personal testimonies, local signage and attending local events.

The land on which Humboldt State University stands is Wiyot ancestral territory, as is the coastal lands surrounding it. Prior to delving into these topics, I feel that it's imperative that I acknowledge my privilege as an individual of European descent. While this history is not my own, it is history that I have been captivated by, and carried out research on, for the last two years. I have looked into the history of the island of Tuluwat and followed its return process from the Eureka City Council. I was lucky enough to attend the return of Tuluwat to the Wiyot Tribe on October 21st and witness history being made before my very eyes. The following narrative details my personal experience delving into this history and the emotions that were brought up for me as I learned more about not just the atrocities of the past but also the hardships that the Wiyot people are still facing today. In this research I originally set out to better understand my local Native history but ended up deeply influenced by the impacts that the past is still having and a desire to share this story.

The story of Tuluwat was one that I was drawn to from the very beginning of my research into local genocide. Tuluwat is the center of the world for the Wiyot people, where they performed their world renewal ceremony since time immemorial, up until the Massacre of 1860. This was a story that I heard over and over again in my Native American Studies classes, but it was not until I found out that the land was finally being returned that it caught my attention. The eventual return of this small island outside of Eureka may seem like a miniscule victory initially, but it marks the first time in United States history that land has been returned to indigenous people without condition and without co-management status. This sparked a great interest in me because Tuluwat truly is a place of renewal, and its story is crucial for the world to hear.

In my research of Tuluwat, I observed the interpretive signage made by local

interpreter Denise Newman along the waterfront trail; this trail runs from Arcata to Eureka, and follows the waterfront around the way with one sign in particular looking out at the island. This sign is titled "Wiyot Way of Life," and is accompanied by a smaller sign with a quote from Karuk/Yurok tribal member Alme Allen "To all those that came before us, who stood strong enough for our stories to be told today." While visiting interpretive signs in the Humboldt area, I found that despite the signs being in differing locations, the inherent message remained the same. This is not necessarily an issue, and makes good sense in terms of saving money and time, considering the process by which the text must be approved by the tribal council. However, the glaring omission in all of these signs is any mention of the genocide that was inflicted on these people. I have spent the past year scouring the internet researching the atrocity of 1860 that took place on Indian Island, and found that credible sources about it are rare, and first-hand accounts even scarcer. Very little information has been recorded about this massacre in scholarly or historic documents beyond what has been done locally and what is available is widely scattered, disorganized and generally hard to find.

When I visited the interpretive trail that winds along the coast of Eureka, and made it to the stop on the Wiyot people, I really expected that there would be some form of formal recognition or apology by the city, but there wasn't. I was standing just 200 meters from the site of a mass genocide, reading a sign about the very people who had lived on Tuluwat and celebrated the renewal of the world ceremony there for time immemorial and

there wasn't one word about the atrocity that had taken place on that island.

Rather, the two signs painted a peaceful picture of the Wiyot people, glossing over the generations of trauma and death with one line "The Wiyot people lived in permanent villages along waterways prior to European settlement in 1850." This completely shocked me. I couldn't fathom why anyone would actively choose to cover up the past in this way, and not to take the opportunity to educate contemporary society on the atrocities that these indigenous people had faced. I originally placed the blame on the interpreter who had made the signs, and was disappointed that she had chosen not to take this opportunity to educate people about what had happened. I reached out and interviewed her about the signs, asking why she would ever leave out something that seemed, at least to me, so critical.

Denise Newman (2019) is the project coordinator for the non-profit Redwood Community Action Agency (RCAA) which works locally in Humboldt on environmental education and interpretation projects. She has worked with the Wiyot Tribe over the past 17 years, with many different Tribal Historic Preservation Officers (THPO). As THPOs change, the cultural information can also change, when it comes to details such as tribal boundaries and the pronunciation of names. What she shared surprised me even more than the sign itself. She explained that whenever there is a proposed location for signage about the Wiyot Tribe, she reaches out to them and presents a first draft based on some site specific information, but she has found that in most cases more generalized, "way of life" information is preferred

by the Wiyot tribal council; this is due in part to fear of grave robbing, or of misuse of cultural resources. She told me that she was ready to make a somber, accurate sign, detailing the location and loss of life that took place on Indian Island, and the lasting effect that it has had on the Wiyot people up to today. She told me that this is what she had expected the Wiyot people would want for the sign at the actual location of the atrocity, but when she reached out to the Wiyot tribal council, she was told the polar opposite. They asked her to stick to generalized information about the Wiyot people, due to the fact that the island is a sacred site and they did not wish to draw extra attention to it. Respecting their wishes, she made the sign accordingly, and that is still how it stands today. The idea that providing information about the massacre has often led to grave robbing and illegal digging up of Native bodies was truly horrific to me.

To try to gain a better understanding of the perspective of the Wiyot people, I contacted Ted Hernandez (2019), the tribal chair for the Wiyot Tribe. Ted acts as a mediator during tribal council meetings and speaks on behalf of the tribe and represents them at different events. Organizations looking to create signage about the Wiyot tribe reach out to the tribe, or come in and present a draft of material that they would like to put on the signage. This draft is discussed during a tribal council meeting and experts like linguists and botanists from the tribe will go through the material to make sure that it is accurate. The final draft is approved by the council and the organization is given the go ahead to post the signage. Ted explained to me that most of the council knows

the local area and all of the local sacred sites and burial grounds, so if any signs directly reference these sites, or places with artifacts, they will most likely not be approved. The tribal council values information about these sacred sites very highly and sadly, the issue of grave robbing is still prevalent today, often being carried out by homeless people hoping to find, and then sell, artifacts. The tribe goes out once a week to walk the perimeter of the island and to break up homeless camps when necessary. Ted says that someday he plans to have a new sign installed, now that the land has been fully returned, which details the process and full history of the island. He says this is crucial because it is important to share the story here so that other cities might recognize and return sacred land; returning the island is crucial for healing to begin.

I find this dilemma on the part of the Wiyot tribal council to be devastating, as it highlights a form of oppression that ripples out as an aftershock of genocide, one that is often left out and overlooked. Many people believe that genocide is simply the killing of people on a large scale, but I have learned through my research, and Native American studies classes, that it has in fact eight stages, and is far more complex. These eight steps are the defining characteristics that lead to the destruction of a people - not just their living bloodline but their human rights, livelihood and culture. These steps are: Intent, Classification, Symbolization, Dehumanization, Organization, Polarization, Preparation, Extermination, and Denial.

None of these steps completely describes the type of oppression that the Wiyot people are currently facing. Even



though they own all publicly available land on Indian Island, and have had the City publicly apologize for the wrongdoings of the past, there are still deniers, and worse those who would capitalize on the genocide of the Wiyot; those who continue to take from people who have already been stripped of everything. A possibility existed for a space that could be used for education and growth, for learning from the horrible mistakes of the past, from which to build a better future but that space has been destroyed. No longer available out of fear, the cycle of oppression continues regardless, and once again the Wiyot people must compromise to protect their inherent cultural and human rights.

In an attempt to better understand some of the ways that interpretive materials attempt to deal with sensitive issues such as genocide, I reached out to Marnin Robbins (2019), the Chief of Interpretation for our District of State Parks. He doesn't create interpretive signage himself, but is responsible for overseeing its creation. He didn't work on the Waterfront Trail because it isn't part of the State Park System, but of the signage that he does work on, about a third of it is based on cultural, rather than natural, resources. When overseeing a sign with information on Native American tribes, he is clear that consultation with tribes is paramount.

He works with the Cultural Resources Manager at State Parks to ensure that tribal voices are included, but when it came down to a topic like this, he didn't really have an answer for me. This is a trend that I have noticed in many of my interpretive classes at Humboldt State University. The four leading requirements for good interpretation

are: pleasurable, organized, relevant and thematic. When I was presenting these four ideals of interpretation in my public history interpretation class, I was immediately posed with the question of "what if the information you're interpreting is not inherently pleasurable?" An example of this may be the history of slavery, or acts of genocide in our past history. This question made me think because I couldn't come up with a satisfactory answer, and it made me question whether these four categories were truly the right things that I should be striving for in my interpretation. This is an issue that is becoming increasingly apparent in the wider field of interpretation, as seen through a conference held by the National Association of Interpretations titled "Interpreting Hate" that took place last year.

As the final piece of research for this project, I attended the official land return of Tuluwat to the Wiyot Tribe. The ceremony was really inspiring, and I was astounded by just how many people crowded into the Adoni Center in Eureka. When the ceremony began Cheryl Seidner, who has been the longest standing voice in this fight for the land return, opened with a blessing, which was followed by traditional brush dancers from local tribes. The Eureka City Council was then called to order and voted on the motion to return the land, passing it unanimously. The floor was then opened for speakers and Dr. Cutcha Risling Baldy (2019), the Department Chair for Native American Studies at Humboldt State University gave a moving speech. She talked about how "[their] ancestors knew this day would come" and how "[they] are the people [their ancestors] were thinking about when they persist-

ed." She ended her speech by recounting that every time she gives a public lecture, people always come up to her afterwards, telling her how moved they are, saying that they want to help and asking what they can do. She says answers, "Give the land back. Now we know it's possible." Members of the city council spoke, as well as a representative for Congressman Huffman who stated that it "made [him] proud to be a Eureka." The final speaker was Ted Hernandez (2019), the Wiyot tribal chair who expressed that he "felt at home," and that "[they] will continue to heal: heal this community, heal this county, and then the world." The words of the speakers left people silent, in awe and inspired, bringing a few people emotional. The official documentation of the transfer was then signed and history was made!

In my research on Tuluwat, there have been many times that I have had to stop because the firsthand accounts and imagery are so graphic and hard to read. Despite the difficult history pertaining to the island, the moment that the land was returned, I felt truly honored to be there to witness such a momentous historical moment. It gives me great hope for society, and hope that new interpretive signage can be made to share this important story with the rest of the world. It can serve as an inspiration to other towns and cities to follow Eureka's path and return sacred lands to their true owners. Although at the start of this research, I felt that there was no direct solution, I now see this as an opportunity and responsibility to document this history in a way that hasn't been done before. I still struggle to comprehend why we live in a society that doesn't allow for the stories of genocide to be shared openly without

fear of repercussion. The return of the Wiyot land has made me more hopeful that the change is finally beginning, and grateful that I was lucky enough to be there to witness it.

## References

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## About the Author

**Joshua Overington** is a graduate of Humboldt State University (HSU) with a degree in environmental science. He researched alongside Kerri Malloy in the Native American Studies department with a focus on genocide along the north coast. This research was used for the NW Genocide Project and later presented during ideaFest. Joshua's emphasis at HSU was interpretation and education which he incorporated into his research by looking at representation of genocide in interpretive signage. He is continuing his education at California State University Monterey Bay in scientific illustration in the fall and hopes to incorporate his studies into his continued research.