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Carrie Tully
Cal Poly Humboldt

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Working Towards Land Return in Goukdi'n: A History of Genocide and a Future of Healing

Carrie Tully (Cal Poly Humboldt)

Since 2009, the city of Arcata, R. H. Emmerson & Sons, and Humboldt State University have collaborated on the transfer of an 884-acre tract of land in Goukdi'n (known locally as Jacoby Creek Forest). The main goals of the collaboration are to prevent fragmentation of the land, protect wildlife, and to support and enhance student research opportunities. My own involvement began just three years ago when I read an article in *Humboldt State Now* (2018) outlining the partnership and the project. I began this research by examining the history of these parcels. Through document analysis and personal interviews I sought to understand the connection between this land and the Wiyot people. This research provides an interpretation of why relationships to land are not just important, but imperative to healing (Linklater, 2014; Smith, 1999; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014).

Settler colonialism tried to separate humans from the land and has been effective in some circumstances (Hendlin, 2014). It taught us that land should be thought of as property; something that we own, have the right to control, that is less intelligent than people, and can be contained (Hendlin, 2014; Wolfe, 2006). In order to reconnect with and heal ourselves and our planet, we must return stolen lands to the tribes that are (and have always been) in relationship with them. During my interview with Ted Hernandez, Chairman of the Wiyot Tribe, he stated:

That's why we go back to the land and the healing. You know, we need this healing. We need to bring everything back to balance, so everything can be balanced... You have Goukdi'n, you got Tuluwat, you have Jaroujiji, you know, you have

all these special places [that] are part of the puzzle. And if it's missing that piece, that puzzle is not going to be balanced, it's going to fall apart. (Chairman Ted Hernandez, [Interview], June 25, 2020)

Land ownership, domination, and control were the goals of European colonizers since before their feet first touched sand. In fact, the entire system of laws that were enacted since the time of the Homestead Act until the date of the transfer of Goukdi'n to the CSU has been (both intentionally and unintentionally) effective in keeping land out of Native American tribes' hands (Bowden, 2016; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014; History, 2019; National Parks Service, 2021). Similarly, every step of the way there has been an expressed sense of ownership of Goukdi'n by non-Wiyot people.

With each of these characteristics, it is impossible to deny the deeply embedded traumas that settler colonialism has caused for Indigenous peoples across the world. Historical trauma is the passing down of traumatizing experiences and emotional states generation after generation (Linklater, 2014). Historical trauma refers to "collective and compounding emotional and psychic wounding over time, both over the lifespan and across generations" (Brave Heart-Jordan, in Linklater, 2014, p. 34). What we can do to heal these traumas is address the past and current harms and change our behaviors "in a healing direction" (Linklater, 2014).

Indigenous worldviews are inherently about connection and balance. Traditional healing is "a meaningful step towards attaining a life-in-balance, developing a commitment to self-improvement and healthy relationships with self, others,

Mother Earth, the Cosmos, and the Creator Spirit” (Couture in Linklater, 2014, p. 74). In order to take this step towards balance and healing, it means taking steps toward decolonization. While there are many definitions of decolonization, my favorite version of decolonization comes from Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s *Decolonization is not a metaphor* (2012, p. 7).

Though the details are not fixed or agreed upon, in our view, decolonization in the settler colonial context must involve the repatriation of land simultaneous to the recognition of how land and relations to land have always already been differently understood and enacted; that is, all of the land, and not just symbolically.

This definition emphasizes that decolonization means to literally return the land, and that decolonization used any other way is just a metaphor and meant to make white people feel better about themselves, which will further settler colonialism.

The entire project has been and will continue to be founded in a version of participatory action research (PAR). While traditional methods of conducting research utilize top-down methods to gather information, naming a ‘researcher’ and a ‘participant’, PAR utilizes a horizontal relationship between all parties to the researchers. Participatory action research is not only a means of creating knowledge, and a tool for education, but it also represents the idea that all people create knowledge (Fals-Borda, 2001; Gaventa, 1991). As I move through the project I continue to engage in constructivist grounded research theory, which enables me to seek to realize a social process (Charmaz, 2001) while the data guides the research itself.

Today the Wiyot Tribe has around 350 acres of land as its territory; none of those acres include the redwood forests that were pervasive throughout their ancestral territory. Part of Wiyot ancestral territory is Goukdi’n, incorrectly renamed and referred to locally as Jacoby Creek Forest. Culturally speaking, there are many natural resources that the Wiyot would have come here for, including food, medicine, housing, and basketry materials. The relationship that the Wiyot have with this land is what Dr. Zoe Todd calls a ‘storied landscape’. It’s one that is reciprocal, meaning that the land cares for the people just as the people care for the land. Therefore, reconnecting the Tribe with Goukdi’n means they are reconnecting with their family, and with their home. Ted Hernandez, Chairman of the Wiyot Tribe states, “the land will always be a part of the Wiyot people and, you know,

that’s our job is to take care of it, just like we’re dealing with Tuluwat now, you know.” (Chairman Ted Hernandez, [Interview], June 25, 2020).

The next chapter of Goukdi’n’s story began when Mark Andre, former Director of the Environmental Services for the City of Arcata, worked with HSU, the Emmersons, and multiple funders to purchase the parcels. The City, having secured 967 acres of Goukdi’n, kept 83 acres to connect its community forest. The rest of the land was transferred to the California State University (CSU) Board of Trustees, in the care of Humboldt State University free of charge (California State University Board of Trustees, 2018; California State University, 2021; Wikipedia.org, 2021).

Through multiple discussions with the Wiyot Tribe, former College of Natural Resources Dean Oliver, and others, I learned that the Tribe had not been provided seats on either the Faculty Advisory Committee or the Community Advisory Committee. As previously quoted by Dr. Risling Baldy, “The policy or research should explicitly acknowledge the Indigenous cultures and peoples of the area and their continued interaction with biota, landscape, wetlands, or environment” (Risling Baldy, 2013, p. 8) Yet, somehow, so far the Tribe had only heard of this project because of Dr. Risling Baldy and myself, and still had not been approached, even months after the transfer had occurred. In order for there to be progress, we must learn to work together, despite our differences. This particular hurdle was an undertaking by people that I did not suspect to advocate for such a change. In order to work together, we must build respect and trust within ourselves, for one another and for the land. In this case, having love for the land is what has gotten us past this giant step.

Because Goukdi’n is not yet owned by the Wiyot Tribe, the project is not complete. I continue to work with HSU and the Tribe as we move in the direction of this land being returned. It is important to note that Chairman Hernandez and the other Wiyot people who I have been working with have always been explicit about 1) wanting the land back, and 2) that they would continue to collaborate with Humboldt State to provide students and faculty the ability to engage with groundbreaking research in the forest once it is returned. So why go through with a project that will undoubtedly take years, pushback, and an overwhelming abundance of patience? It comes back to healing: healing the past, healing the land, healing the people who were ripped away from their lands, cultures, families, foods...from their

very lives. We are all witness to the harms we have caused to Mother Earth. We have violently shoved her out of balance (IPCC, 2021). The return of Goukdi'n to Wiyot peoples could potentially be a precedent setting, internationally recognized action. We could foreground HSU as a leading research institution that not only recognizes Indigenous connections to land, but also supports the ongoing revitalization and resurgence of the Wiyot, not at the expense of HSU, but as an important part of how HSU continues to be a part of this community.

Regardless of the initial oversight of communicating with the Wiyot Tribe regarding Goukdi'n, Humboldt State still has the opportunity to return the land to its rightful owners. As an institution that centers equity, inclusion, and sustainability (Humboldt State University, 2015; Humboldt State University, 2020), HSU can choose to work in partnership with the Wiyot peoples, not only to return stolen land, but also to foreground Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty as essential to research. With the onset of the polytechnic designation at Humboldt State, there has been even more talk about the importance of solidifying partnerships with local tribes, making this the perfect project to align with those goals (HSU, 2021).

Settler colonialism, genocide, US history, historical trauma, healing, and land return are necessarily intrinsically interconnected. Had explorers come to the US and just peacefully coexisted with Indigenous peoples while learning with and growing from one another, I would have written my thesis on something else completely. Had we remained in relationship to place and land, and to our Mother Earth, there would be no need for the repatriation of land. Those are the ways we can imagine otherwise (brown, 2017); a future that is worth living, and one we are worthy of receiving.

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Presentation

