

Restoring Tradition

A Winnemem Wintu ceremony

The Winnemem Wintu Tribe of Northern California embraces traditions tied to sacred streams, rocks and mountains. The construction of Shasta Dam and creation of Lake Shasta in the 1920s drowned their main village and many of those sacred sites. A smaller village, Kaibai, is now a U.S. Forest Service campground. The government promise of "like land" was never fulfilled. In early July, Winnemem and supporters — several from Eugene — gathered at Kaibai for Balas Chonas, a four-day rite of passage ceremony which hadn't taken place for more than 80 years.

Tribal members reached into their dreams, the memory of a tribal elder, and the nearby Hoopa Tribe to develop dances, fashion elaborate regalia and learn songs appropriate to the occasion. Fourteen-year-old initiate Marine Sisk Franco stayed at a cedar bark hut, protected and encouraged by two cousins, her brother and her mother, tribal leader Caleen Sisk Franco. She learned about herbs, language and songs, made acorn soup and received wisdom and support from women who came across the river from the community campsite.

Mornings of Balas Chonas began with drumming and were followed by song, dance, sumptuous meals, hearty laughter and preparation for the final day, when Marine would swim across the river with her three young companions and be embraced into the company of women, followed by several hours of dances, songs, gift-giving and a final banquet.

For at least a year the U.S. Forest Service knew about plans and sites important to the tribe; Puberty Rock and Children's Rock are submerged immediately in front the campground. Only in the few weeks prior to the event, and after pressure from supporters, including many from Eugene and California Sen. Barbara Boxer, did they decide to request voluntary closure for powerboats in the area of Shasta Lake where the ceremony would take place.

While nothing could destroy the meaning and beauty of the ceremony, a particularly ugly intrusion of outsiders occurred just as the youth were prepared to swim. Two powerboats entered the area where participants gathered. Music and rude, crude shouts from one boat shocked, saddened and put everyone on high alert. As the tribe's leader expressed it, they were ripped from their most sacred, precious feelings and propelled to warrior, defensive posture in an instant. I can only imagine what this would be like in other spiritual traditions. One important ritual of my Christian faith is baptism. I compare the incident at Balas Chonas to a moment when, just as a minister anoints a child with holy water, a Harley Davidson is driven down the sanctuary's central aisle, and epithets are hurled at the congregation.

Forest Service employees on site during

the ceremony were helpful, and several changed into civilian clothing after work and joined in ceremony activities. If decision-makers had acted earlier and with greater cooperation, the stress and uncertainty during planning and disrespect during the ceremony could have been diminished.

The road ahead holds many challenges for the Winnemem Wintu as they move forward

Initiate Marine Sisk Franco (left) and tribal leader Caleen Sisk Franco



KRISTINE NUVERT

in keeping traditional ways. Sacred sites continue to be undermined by practices such as Forest Service cutting of manzanita in the woods near a sacred firepit where it is the only type of wood to be burned.

They lack tribal status and land. Water bottling companies threaten the purity and sanctity of significant springs. And the Bureau of Reclamation has proposed raising Shasta Dam higher, which would destroy remaining sacred sites.

Their struggle is not solitary. The Oregon Winnemem Support Group made a difference in gaining attention and assistance from the Forest Service for Balas Chonas. And members of Environmental Justice Coalition for Water of San Francisco shared information about the needs for Balas Chonas at campgrounds and marinas, and took to the water in kayaks to communicate directly with boaters. But certainly more support is needed to address the daunting issues ahead. Legal assistance, grant-writing and funds to challenge tribal status and insure cultural survival would be very welcome.

Final note: On the final ceremony day someone pointed out a tiny speck of white high, high in a rather distant hill — a bald eagle! At the moment of highest tension, as the powerboats shattered serenity, the eagle flew above the river aligned between the boats and the cedar bark hut.

For further information, go to www.winnememwintu.us or call 345-5739. **ew**

Ruth Koenig is a longtime Eugene activist and educator for social justice, the environment and civil rights.

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