

Tribes: Transfer is both a ‘no-brainer’ and a surprise

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When Katie Voelke, the land conservancy’s executive director, first suggested a transfer of the Neawanna property to the nonprofit that represents more than 200 enrolled tribal members, Basch couldn’t believe it.

Besides its cultural heritage and importance — access to Ne-ah-coxie, as the tribes term the site, was included as a condition in the unratified treaty — the property is an ecologically rich place. It is where the Necanicum River meets its tributary creeks — the Neawanna and the Neacoxie — and rushes oceanward. Salt marshes turn into Sitka spruce forest. Elk roam. Salmon swim upstream.

“When we go there or when we camp there ... knowing that right there was a community that lived, fished, just did everything that a community would do right there, it fills up places that don’t ordinarily fill up in your heart,” said Basch, the vice chairman for the tribes.

Caretakers

The land was never the land conservancy’s, Voelke says now. But they are glad to have been its caretakers for a while.

The transfer is both a “no-brainer” and a surprise, said Doug Deur, a research professor at Portland State University who has written about the coastal native communities that lived around the lower Columbia River.

It is a no-brainer because there are clearly still native people living in the area, he said.

“At the same time it’s really astonishing,” he said. “People growing up in northwest Oregon 30 or 40 years ago would have been told the Clatsop people were extinct and any connection they had to the land was in the past. That they were a historical curiosity at this point and more or less irrelevant.”



LEFT: A. Diane Collier puts on a traditional cedar basket necklace that was handwoven by Katie Voelke, executive director of the North Coast Land Conservancy. RIGHT: Richard Basch claps along, creating a beat, for Roberta, his wife, to sing a traditional Native American song.



Photos by Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

But, he added, aside from the fact that their descendants are still here, “99% of our history on this coast, the human history, is native history and if you think that final 1% is the only relevant part ... a lot of this history is native history and we ignore it at our peril.”

Such histories included information about events like tsunamis or salmon run failures, he noted, information that is still relevant to modern day North Coast residents.

This type of transfer — between the land conservancy and the tribal nonprofit — is unique in the organization’s history. Voelke expects it will set a tone for things to come.

“How, I don’t know,” she said. “I just know it has been a pretty profound experience for us to be able to connect more deeply with the original people of this place. What we have learned from it and our greater understanding of how we can do land acquisition in a way that reconnects people is something that we will see unfold for the North Coast Land Conservancy in different ways.”

The Neawanna property had been an anchor point for the organization and functioned as a sort of origin story. After they acquired it in 1998 through a combined donation and purchase agreement, it was evi-

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A. Diane Collier | tribal chairwoman

dence of how they could work successfully with multiple groups, even a developer who had wanted to build condos along the estuary and a tennis court in the wetlands.

It informed other property acquisitions, as well as work throughout the watershed and related corridors. It was the node from which all the spokes extended, Voelke said.

Though the land conservancy had been in conversation with tribal leaders for several years about land that could be set aside for tribal activities, purchased with tribal traditions and cultural needs in mind or somehow conveyed to the tribes, Neawanna Point was not a candidate at first. Voelke thinks it was in part, subconsciously, because of the land’s origin story status within the land conservancy.

“But now it just feels like a gift that we get to participate in returning this land, this very sacred land,” she said. “Returning it to its descendants and to its people is the best story that I could imagine.”

for cultural and educational events, perhaps a sort of museum.

But, Basch said, “We decided that if we do nothing to the property, that’s fine. ... just to have the property sit is a gift to everyone. It’s a special spot for many people within the community, tribal or not.”

There is a spot on the property where you can see it all come together, said Neal Maine, a former land conservancy director who oversaw the acquisition of the property in 1998 — the offshore ocean, the near-shore ocean, the estuary, the tides, the salt marsh, the forest.

It’s a place of peace.

“It just takes a few steps to get to the sanctuary part of it and then you see the true Oregon Coast,” he said. “While you’re there watching the water come up and down, well, the bald eagles are flying over and the blue herons are fishing. You can get to a spot and see the coastal forces at work sort of in front of you in living color.”

With the property back under tribal management come other opportunities.

The tribe has a 32-foot oceangoing, dugout canoe named Dragonfly. In the past, only the strongest and

most skilled members could take it out into the ocean, but with the calm waters in the estuary, people who had not been able to experience this piece of their cultural history will have the opportunity to do so.

“We look forward to walking in the footsteps of our ancestors as we cherish and care for the land,” said A. Diane Collier, tribal chairwoman and a descendant of Clatsop Chief Tostum, signer of the 1851 treaty at Tansy Point that was never ratified.

Basch, a descendant of Chief Coboway, the Clatsop chief who was there when the Lewis and Clark Expedition passed through, cannot remember the first time he set foot on Ne-ah-coxie. He was too young.

There are tangible remnants of how long the land has been important to families like his. There are the piles of clamshells associated with native families that harvested and shucked them in the 1930s. There are the photos and memories from past and recent social and ceremonial gatherings.

Then there are the intangible things, the prayers put down into the ground for this kind of homecoming, said Basch’s wife, Roberta, in a blessing she gave on the land the day the transfer was finalized.

But even before all the paperwork was signed, the land had started to feel different to Basch and Collier.

Something an elder from a neighboring tribe once told Basch is on his mind now.

She told him that the ancestors do not go away from the land. They are there, asleep, hidden in the trees. They are waiting for the songs to return. When they hear their descendants singing and praying, see them gathered together again, their spirits come back to life.



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