

'It feels like I'm coming home'

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since time immemorial and were held there temporarily until they were force-marched to the Grand Ronde Reservation during 1856's Trail of Tears.

Since the signing of the 2011 memorandum of understanding, the Grand Ronde Tribe has held an annual event in Medford to establish and maintain relationships with federal, state, county and city officials in the area.

This year's event held at the Courtyard Marriott near Medford Airport attracted six attendees, including Jackson County Commissioner Bob Strosser, Nature Conservancy employees Molly Morison and Darren Borgias, and Bureau of Land Management employees Jen Sigler, Teresa Trulock and A.J. Donnell.

Tribal Council Chairwoman Cheryle A. Kennedy and Secretary Jon A. George led a contingent of Grand Ronde elected representatives, which included Tribal Council members Lisa Leno, Michael Langley and Jack Giffen Jr.

Tribal Attorney Rob Greene, Tribal Council Chief of Staff Stacia Hernandez, Natural Resources Department Manager Michael Wilson, Cultural Resources Department Manager David Harrelson and Public Affairs Administrative Assistant Chelsea Clark were among the Tribal employees who attended.

Tribal member Stephanie Craig (Wood) also attended with her husband, Joe (Umatilla).

After George and Harrelson opened the meeting with cultural drumming and singing backed by Leno, Clark and Tribal Council Administrative Assistant Shannon Simi, Kennedy gave a welcoming speech.

"It feels like I'm coming home," Kennedy said about returning to the land of her Rogue River ancestors. She also discussed her grandfather, who was a medicine man who used plants and minerals to heal others, and how a Native remedy resolved a nagging softball injury when she was younger. "I know that the ways we were taught were good ways," she said.

"We came from this community and we're coming back to share our stories," Giffen said. "We've had a rich partnership with all of you folks in this community and hopefully we'll be able to expand on that foundation that we've been able to enjoy for the past few years."

Harrelson gave a 20-minute presentation on the Rogue River peoples who inhabited the area, the treaties they signed with the federal government and the Trail of Tears that occurred during the winter months of February and March in 1856.

Harrelson said the history of the Grand Ronde Confederation was important for attendees to know to understand why a Tribe that is five hours away by car is sitting in a room in Medford discussing its concerns.



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Tribal Council Chairwoman Cheryle A. Kennedy speaks during "Coffee & Conversation with the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde" held at the Courtyard Marriott Medford Airport in Medford on Friday, Sept. 29.

"Our connections go to all the rivers where the fishing occurred, all of our village sites, all of our prayer locations that are scattered around the mountains," Harrelson said. "The places where our ancestors and our people still go to gather their basket material, where they go to hunt. We, as a people of Grand Ronde, are connected to this place."

Harrelson said that the treaties are not just important to the Tribe, but also to those who live in Tribal ceded lands because they form the legal foundation for land ownership.

"In the United States, there was a decision made not to claim land by right of conquest," Harrelson said, "but on a moral philosophy and basis that if we are going to have rights to the land we're going to enter into treaties because it will give us the right to those lands. Subsequently, everything that happens on those lands, all the commerce, all the money that is generated, all of the development on those lands will become ours through those treaties. ... The treaties are not just our treaties, they are every single landowner's and business owner's in a given area. Without the basis of those treaties, they have no right to be where they are, own what they do, be the owners of what they produce from the land."

Wilson followed Harrelson with a presentation about Tribal natural resources efforts and Tribal use of Native plants in the area.

"Tribal people used plants in every facet of their life," Wilson said. "They used them for food, shelter, clothing, medicine ... We're still using them and that's important, and that's why we are talking about them now."

Wilson also discussed the Tribe's effort to grow Native plants, such as camas, in a nursery at the Nature Resources office on Hebo Road.

With smoke still in the hazy Medford air from the Chetco Bar fire, discussion invariably touched

on forest management practices and how Native Americans knew well before the arrival of European settlers that regular fires consume fuel on the forest floor and prevent major infernos.

Wilson said that Tribal fire crews had just performed a prescribed burn earlier in the week in the Champoeg area.

"The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde don't only want to identify situations, but come with solutions," Kennedy said. "There are knowledges that we hold that will result in saving money."

The Nature Conservancy's Morison and Borgias also discussed using fire to actively manage the land. Morison said the organization recently held a prescribed burn on 50 acres that cleared the area so that 600 pounds of Native grass seed could be sowed.

Borgias said that a recent sampling of tree stumps in the area confirmed the historic role of fire used by Natives in managing the forests. He said cross sections of tree stumps confirmed that fires occurred on average every eight years in the area, which was frequent enough that fuel could not build up and contribute to catastrophic fires.

Borgias added that the sampling of tree stumps also aligned with a story documented by a member of a U.S. expedition that rode through the Rogue River area in the early

1840s. A member of the expedition wrote that the party came across a Native woman with a fire brand who was setting fires to clear the undergrowth.

During closing remarks, George said the annual Coffee & Conversation event is an opportunity for Grand Ronde Tribal leaders to continue telling the Tribe's story and share the Tribe's concerns within its ceded lands.

"We wouldn't be here if we didn't think it was important," George said. "Our ancestors are here and our hearts are here."

Giffen asked those in attendance to help the Grand Ronde Tribe expand its role in their community.

Strosser complimented the Tribe for its "innate sense of caring about the land."

After the meeting concluded, Harrelson discussed Tribal acorn harvesting practices that included the use of fire with the three Bureau of Land Management employees.

The Tribe also hosted a three-hour encampment starting at 11 a.m. at the trailhead to Lower Table Rock. Clark, Simi and Tribal Council Senior Administrative Assistant Lauri Smith beaded necklaces while Greene led a hike to the top of Lower Table Rock. Southern Oregon University Native American Studies assistant professor Brook Colley joined the group on the hike. ■

Clothes Closet open Friday mornings

The Clothes Closet is open from 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. the first and third Fridays of the month and 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. all other Fridays on the Tribal campus near the Elders Activity Center at the end of Blacktail Drive.

The Clothes Closet accepts clothing, small appliances, small pieces of furniture, electronics and household goods that are clean and in good condition. It does not accept books, large TVs or large furniture, but there is a community board where people can post those items.

Donations are accepted during regular business hours.

For more information or emergency clothes, contact Lori Walker-Hernandez at 559-847-7565. ■