

Madras High starts language class

Warm Springs tribes fight to preserve linguistic tradition

By **BRYCE DOLE**
The Bulletin

MADRAS — Dallas Winishut sat hunched over a laptop on a recent Thursday morning in a Madras High School computer room. Typing one key at a time, he tried hard to remember the password he had made in the language of the Warm Springs Indians, Ichishkiin — a language at risk of being forgotten.

“Maybe the computer can’t read it or something,” muttered the 61-year-old, one of three remaining Ichishkiin instructors on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation. Three students arrived, and he greeted them in the native language, speaking slowly.

Behind Winishut was a long, prolific career of teaching Ichishkiin to countless Native American youths like his students, keeping the language alive despite the brutal punishment his parents and others faced for speaking it in boarding school decades ago. In front of him was the high school’s first class dedicated solely to a tribal language. The class started Jan. 31, creating a critical mode of passage for a language imperiled by the recent deaths of elders who knew it best.

“What I’ve always dreamed since I first started was getting speakers speaking the language,” said Winishut, a Madras High graduate. “It’s a necessity. It’s built who we really are. If we lose that, we might as well be like everybody else and not have a reservation anymore.”

The class has six students, all of whom come from Warm Springs. By semester’s end, Winishut hopes they will be able to speak short sentences. And he hopes his students will learn the culture and history of the language, preserving it for generations to come.

The class marks another effort educators are taking to help Native American students find their voice at Madras High School, which has more enrolled Native American students than any other Oregon high school by far. These efforts have helped the school’s graduation rate for Native American students surge in recent years, from a dismal 39% in 2016 to 81% in 2018 to upwards of 95% in 2021, according to state data.

On Thursday, students scribbled in their alphabet books. Among them was Aradonna Cochran, of Warm Springs. When she learned that the high school would have the course, she knew she wanted to take it. She wanted to understand tribal elders as they spoke at church, saying she “felt happy because they’d have my language.”



Dean Guernsey/The Bulletin

Dallas Winishut teaches Ichishkiin, a native language of the Warm Springs tribes, on Feb. 7, 2022, at Madras High School.



Submitted Photo

Jefferson County School District board chair Laurie Danzuka, a member of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, speaks to students at Bridges Career and Technical High School in October.

Language preserves culture

The Ichishkiin class comes at a critical juncture for the Warm Springs tribes. The pandemic, which has disproportionately hospitalized and killed Native Americans, has cut short the lives of Warm Springs community members fluent in indigenous languages. The tribes’ elder population has been hit especially hard, placing its traditions and culture at risk.

Winishut said that of the six linguists who taught all three of the tribes’ languages when he started in the 1990s, only one remains. Laurie Danzuka, the Jefferson County School District board chair who is a member of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, said the tribal community has lost three fluent language speakers since the pandemic started.

“Most of our culture is oral history,” Danzuka said. “When we lose a language teacher or a culture keeper, we lose everything that goes along with that. None of that is recorded or set down.”

Danzuka said that makes the class at Madras High even more important.

“Now more than ever, through the pandemic, our culture and our traditions (are) really dependent on our language,” she said. “If our kids don’t understand that, they’re not going to be able to fully grasp our traditions, our cultures, as we go forward.”

History of language

Winishut also plans to teach his students about the history of the tribes’ languages — a history marked by a tragedy that looms in the memories of local tribal members whose families attended Warm Springs Agency Boarding School.

Indigenous boarding schools were established across the U.S. starting in the 17th century. They operated by forcibly removing Native children from their families and culture in an attempt to assimilate them into the white, Christian man’s society. Strict English-only policies meant that children caught speaking their native language at school were beaten and even locked away in rooms or attics for days without food or water. Thousands of those children, from schools across the United States, Canada and Oregon died.

When Winishut’s parents were caught speaking Ichishkiin, school staff would wash their mouths out with soap and force them to do arduous chores, keeping them at the school and away from their homes over weekends, he said.

Fearing punishment at the school, two of Danzuka’s aunts, fluent language speakers who recently died, would meet in secret, practicing their language so they wouldn’t forget.

Butch David, a Warm Springs community liaison who works at Madras High School and coaches multiple sports there, said his dad also had the “Indian whipped out

of him” in boarding school. David recalled that his dad never taught his family their native language. He doesn’t know precisely why, but assumes his father didn’t want them to face what he had. David said, “He didn’t want to force that on us.”

But Winishut’s mother didn’t forget Ichishkiin. After growing up in a foster home, Winishut said he reconnected with his mother in the 1970s and she taught him the language, alongside his four brothers and two sisters.

In the late 1990s, Winishut taught a short indigenous language class at Madras High. For that course, held once a week for 20 minutes, he taught three different languages. He said, “We were real limited.”

Now, Winishut teaches just Ichishkiin at Madras High. The class meets four days a week for more than four hours total.

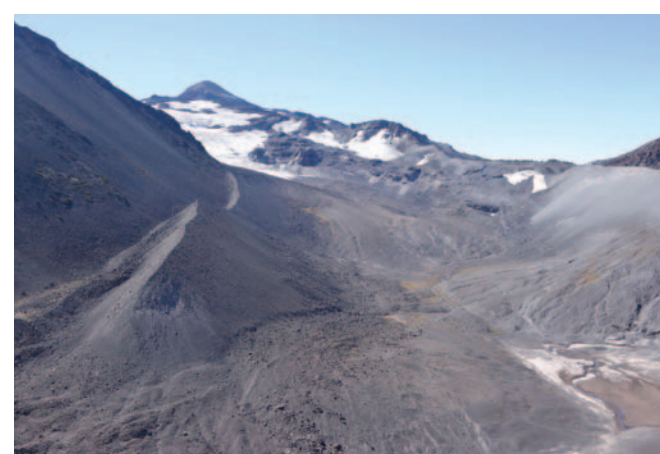
‘Get them to speak’

Every morning, Winishut wakes up in his home around 6 a.m. before driving to the high school. And every morning, he stops to pray, both for the good students and the bad. Soon he’ll retire, but he said he isn’t sure when.

Sitting in his classroom, Winishut reflected on the language speakers who have recently died.

One of them was Arlita Rhoan, the lead language instructor at the Warm Springs Culture & Heritage Language Department. Rhoan co-authored the Northwest Indian Language Institute’s language benchmarks, providing guidance and testimonies on Senate bills including one that endorsed elders as teachers in the state of Oregon. She died from COVID-19 last year.

About a year before she died, Winishut stood at her bedside as she lay ill in the hospital. She leaned toward him and repeated what she had said to him so many times before: “She was telling me, ‘Get them to speak. Get them to speak.’”



Jim O’Connor/USGS

The Collier Glacier on North Sister in 2021.

C. Oregon glaciers nearly gone

By **MICHAEL KOHN**
The Bulletin

BEND — A succession of heat waves last summer that caused heat-related deaths, dried up crops and depleted snowpack may have also accelerated the disappearance of Central Oregon glaciers.

Five glaciers that were already in danger of melting out may have thinned to the point where they no longer qualify as glaciers, according to Anders Carlson, president of the Oregon Glacier Institute. The glaciers are part of a group of 13 glaciers that remain in the Central Oregon Cascades.

Glaciers play an important role in Central Oregon’s ecology, providing late-season snowmelt that keeps streams and rivers flowing year-round, benefiting fish and wildlife. Glaciers also help keep forests cool and moist, helping to reduce the threat of wildfire.

Late season melt is also important for farmers who depend on consistent runoff for their crops. Carlson said global warming and the loss of the glaciers will have dire consequences for Central Oregon’s agricultural communities.

“If one wants to farm and ranch like the 1950s, one needs the atmosphere of the 1950s,” said Carlson. “That atmosphere will sustain glaciers and the waters that sustain economies of Central Oregon.”

Snow surveys conducted in the 1950s identified 30 glaciers in the Central Oregon Cascades. Precisely how many remain after last summer’s heat wave is unclear and more research next summer is needed, said Carlson.

“Almost three-fourths of Central Oregon’s glaciers could be stagnant or gone,” he said.

The loss of ice from Central Oregon glaciers is not a recent phenomenon. Photographic evidence shows that Collier Glacier on North Sister had already retreated significantly between the 1920s and the 1950s.

New photos show that the glacier retreat has continued unabated in recent years. Jim O’Connor, a U.S. Geological Survey geologist who visited the glacier last year, said the ice waning and the lake that once stood at the snout of the glacier are completely gone.

“It is sad in many ways,” said O’Connor. “Last year was the driest I have ever seen it up there going back to 1991.”

The weather conditions

depleting the glaciers have been record-setting.

Last year was the hottest on record in Oregon, with an average temperature of 67.7 degrees, according to Larry O’Neill, an associate professor at Oregon State University’s College of Earth, Ocean and Atmospheric Sciences. Average temperatures in the 1900s were 5.5 degrees cooler than the summer of 2021, he said.

The warming temperatures are depleting glaciers elsewhere in the state too. Andrew Fountain, a professor of geography and geology at Portland State University, says all the glaciers in the Willows are now gone. The last remaining glacier, Benson Glacier, named after an early Oregon governor, has withered away in recent years.

All that remains are some patches of ice less than the size of a football field, said Fountain.

The climate situation isn’t much better this winter either. Despite a series of powerful winter storms in late December and early January, which briefly sent Central Oregon snowpack well above average, snowpack is below average again.

Snowpack has fallen to 96% of normal in the Upper Deschutes and Crooked River basin, according to data compiled by the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Precipitation for this water year is just 92% of normal.

O’Neill worries that if the snowfall doesn’t pick up and the region finishes the year with average numbers, this summer’s water supply issues will be worse than in 2021, accelerating a multiyear drought.

From a historical vantage point, the drought has been one for the ages.

“Many of the drought indicators suggest the last two years have cumulatively been the worst drought for Central Oregon in recorded history,” said O’Neill. “That’s going back to 1895.”

Carlson and other researchers are already planning visits to the glaciers next summer for further evaluation. In particular, Carlson is most concerned about the fate of three glaciers on South Sister (North Skinner, Skinner, and Carver). Two glaciers on Broken Top (Crook and Bend) are also at risk.

“Some of them still have ice left, but they are just stagnant,” said Carlson. “The carcass of the glacier is melting away on the landscape.”

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