The Chinook want to be heard: Northwest tribe continues recognition fight

To defend their way of life, the Chinook hope for better federal status in Washington state

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by Leah Sottile (/profiles/s/leah-sottile.html) - @Leah_Sottile (http://www.twitter.com/Leah_Sottile)

BAY CENTER, Wash. — At the spot where the current of the Columbia River becomes the tide of the Pacific is the land the Chinook call home. It is a stretch of land where beaches glitter with smooth cuts of sea glass, and the ocean wind shakes the forests.
They call it their tribal home yet none of it officially belongs to them — not even the chipped, paint-dribbled gray and white house at the end of town that the tribe calls its office. A tribal member lets them use it. Its roof sags in the rain, water seeping down the walls and trickling onto their computers. It is one old house in a town of double-wides and fishing boats and mounds of cracked-open oyster shells.

This is the last standing vestige of the Chinook people — the tribe that gave its name to the Chinook salmon, the warm Chinook wind and the Chinook military helicopter. The Chinook famously aided Lewis and Clark as they journeyed west toward the Pacific Ocean. Their language was used by traders from Oregon to Alaska.

And now the Chinook have embarked on a last-ditch effort to win recognition from the federal government, aimed at ending a multigenerational battle against the authorities — and against another native American tribe — to simply prove they exist. This, said tribal chairman Tony Johnson, is the greatest fight the Chinook have ever endured. Every day since June of this year, the tribe has sent a letter to President Barack Obama (http://www.oregonlive.com/pacific-northwest-news/index.ssf/2015/09/chinook_press_white_house_for.html) asking for an executive order to recognize the Chinook as a tribe. So far, there has been no response.

“This needs to happen tomorrow. This can’t wait for another generation of people,” Johnson said.

The need, he said, is great. He sees Chinook succumb to drug and alcohol abuse with no aid. He sees his people arrested and ticketed for fishing for the very fish named for the Chinook. He sees families leave their territory to find work. He sees elders die, taking stories and language with them.

He sat inside the tribal headquarters — the old house with the chipping paint — a cup of steaming salmon chowder in his hands. Behind him, a stack of white coffee mugs read, “Chinook tribe, it’s alive.” He listened as tribal elders, sipping coffee and chowder around him, talk about how they never thought this battle would take this long.

“So many of us are getting old. We probably aren’t going to see it in our lifetime,” said Joe Brignone, 77, a tribal elder. “We’ll never see it.”

Johnson sat at the edge of his seat. “Well,” he said, “we’ve got to get it done so you do see it.”
It’s an issue the Chinook first hired lawyers for in 1899. The Termination Acts of the 1950s, which intended to assimilate natives, essentially obliterated treaty rights. But many tribes saw restoration in the late 1970s. In 1979, the Chinook began building their case for recognition.

And they got it — briefly. The Chinook were granted federal status in January 2001. In the last days of Bill Clinton’s administration, the Bureau of Indian Affairs published a notice of final determination (https://www.federalregister.gov/articles/2001/01/09/01-609/final-determination-to-acknowledge-the-chinook-indian-tribe-chinook-nation-formerly-chinook-indian) in the Federal Register declaring that the Chinook tribe “exists as an Indian tribe within the meaning of federal law.”

“When they were recognized in 2001, the Bureau of Indian Affairs held a formal ceremony — there was handshakes, tears, a cake,” said Stephen Beckham, a Northwest tribal scholar who served as a historian for the tribe for 22 years.

It lasted just 18 months.

In 2002, when then–Tribal Chairman Gary Johnson — Tony Johnson’s father — was in Washington, D.C., for the Lewis and Clark bicentennial, he received a call on his cellphone. Under George W. Bush’s administration, their recognition had been revoked.

Chinook Tribal elder Joe Brignone worries that he may never see recognition. “So many of us are getting old. We probably aren’t going to see it in our lifetime.” Leah Sottile
“All those battles seemed to finally be over. And the future looked really good for us,” Tony Johnson said. “It’s just crushing to have a 23-year battle end with that phone call. I have a hard time describing how frustrated and terrible the situation was at that moment.”

Today the Termination Acts of the 1950s continue to have a lasting impact (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AolngvHKv4Y) on several Northwest tribes. North of Chinook territory, the small 572-person Duwamish tribe — whose Chief Sealth is is the source of Seattle’s name — is engaged in a similar battle for recognition. This summer, they were turned down by the Obama Administration (http://www.thestranger.com/blogs/slog/2015/07/07/22506907/duwamish-tribe-vows-to-keep-fighting-for-recognition-despite-last-weeks-decision). Because the Duwamish want to be able to use exert their gaming rights (http://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/duwamish-say-tribal-rivalry-hinders-bid-for-recognition/) in the Seattle area, their main opposition continues to be the nearby Tulalip tribe.

But the Chinook, a tribe of 3,000, doesn’t want to get into the casino game. They just want to be able to feed themselves, Johnson said — to hunt and fish, to have a land base, to provide care for elders and preserve its history and language.
And like the Duwamish and the Tulalips, the Chinook have found their biggest opposition from the nearby Quinault tribe. In 2001, the Quinaults filed objections to the Chinook’s federal status on the 89th day of a 90-day comment period. On the Quinault reservation, Chinook tribal members are majority landholders.

Requests for comment were declined by Quinault council members.

While, the Duwamish have taken a more traditional path toward recognition — court cases, appeals for an act of Congress — the Chinook are now taking an untraditional path, directly asking for an executive order from Obama.

They’ve already tried those other avenues. A bill to see the Chinook recognized, introduced by former Washington Representative Brian Baird, failed — a moment Baird told The Seattle Times was one of the biggest disappointments of his career. And Johnson said a lawsuit is out of the question; the Chinook just “don’t have resources.”

According to Beckham, the tribe’s former historian, the Chinooks “were never legislatively terminated … The bureau just administratively terminated the Chinooks. They just dropped them. They dropped the Duwamish,” he said. “It just walked away from those tribes.”

So when the Chinooks were finally recognized in 2001, Beckham said it was based on irrefutable evidence. “The decision was rightly and historically arrived at,” he says. “It was the right decision.”

Johnson said this long-running back and forth with the government has taken a psychological toll on the tribe.

It’s a concept that Joe Gone, a psychology professor at University of Michigan, has written about extensively. He said that American Indian identity is directly tied to a tribe and connection to a place. Not having either of those can cause immense mental health struggles. “You don’t know who you are or what your purpose is or how to live,” he said. “It’s in this wide open vacuum that people flounder.”
At the tribal office, surrounded by elders and tribal members wearing gray Chinook T-shirts, Johnson said there is nothing that will stop him from continuing this fight. “We hear all the time ‘get over it,’” he said, heads nodding all around him. “Like ‘The Indians should just get over it. This was a long time ago.’”

“Sometimes you feel like you’re fighting Goliath,” said Peg Disney, a 20-year-long tribal council member. And why should they get over it? She gestures to the several men in Navy ball caps. “These people got looked away from after they served their country.”

“I’ve never asked anything from my government,” said Brignone, who served in the Navy for 20 years. “I’m not looking for anything for my tribe except that the government recognize that we are a people.”

After the elders piled into their cars and Johnson closed the door to the office, he followed his sons, Tahoma and Ferrill, down a long, winding trail toward the beach, boots crunching across the rock and oyster shell path.

It was nearly sunset, and Johnson looked out across the bay. There he married his wife, Mechele, and he wants his children to feel that this is more than just a place. He fears that they’ll forget that it’s a part of them — or never know at all.
It’s why he takes his family on monthlong canoe journeys each summer. Why he carves canoes by hand in their garage. Why he feeds them venison and oysters for dinner. Why he scolds his son, Ferrill, on the muddy beach in his new basketball shoes, in his native tongue. Why he tells them the stories their ancestors told.

“My biggest fear on a personal level, with my family, is that my kids become Americans like that, that they’d be willing to move to New York City,” he said. The thought makes him pause.

“This country is better off with us in this place,” he said. “This history is important. It shouldn’t just be allowed to die out. Right now it’s not just being allowed to die. It’s actively being killed.”

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START THE CONVERSATION

12 Comments

RedHeart64 . 56 days ago

This is a very common story... and the tales of denials of recognition are many and are found all over the US. One of my professors told of being hired by the BIA to check a (fairly large) tribe's "paperwork" - and she found that their records and documents were impeccable - and officially recommended recognition. Before she could submit her report (it had been written and she was in the process of submitting it), the BIA reported to the tribe that it would not be recognized, and the official reason was that she had "recommended that they NOT be recognized because their records were not adequate". As far as I know - the tribe NEVER received recognition, and she refused to ever work for the BIA again. (She said she tried to get things fixed, but the BIA was adamant and placed responsibility on her for THEIR decision - and refused to reconsider even in the face of being caught in such a blatant lie.)

My own tribe has the same sort of problem... if even one thing the Feds don't like is found (like trying to connect with separated tribal families once it became legal for us to exist), they will deny recognition. They also offer incentives to "encourage" fighting and dissent within the different groups - for instance, offering $ if the tribe has a "Blood Quantum", but offering $$$ if they set the "Blood Quantum" very high (like 1/2 or more). That goes on even with the long-established and well known tribes. They also create the image of a pie - and if any new tribes are recognized, then imply that the rest will receive smaller portions as some of the pie is allocated for the new group. That creates pressure on the existing groups to fight against recognition for others. (Then too, the Feds try their best to dig up ancient rivalries and use them to manipulate people against their best interests.)

It's all greed and politics... but just as with the Chinook, there are also identity and other issues involved and it
creates real hardship and misery for the individuals. There are instances where I am not supposed to be able to claim I'm American Indian, even though I have solid documentation of descent, have attended ceremony (many times) and value it greatly, and have "Paid the Price" when it became public knowledge that I am "part Indian" - it's part of me! (Loss of ~61% of my customers in one month, threatened and accused of "misleading us about your identity", ordered to use the weeds out back as a bathroom (as more fitting for "my kind"), refused service and use of public facilities, and so on - we suddenly went from a small but growing high-tech business to barely surviving (and then poverty as a combination of issues forced me to close the doors. Plus we were thrown out of one church and driven out of another - the first because of race and the second a combination of race and poverty.)

Such things still happen and are very hard to prove, especially in the more conservative (bigoted) areas of the country.) When the Feds don't recognize your people, you face even stiffer opposition to your identity and even your very survival.

Reply  Share  5 replies

Lloyd Vivola  57 days ago

As go the First Nations - and indigenous peoples around the world - so go the salmon, the forests, the healthy oceans and clean air, food security, etc, And so go modern, dominant cultures - in case anyone has not been following the news - regarding war and ecological crises. The issue is not about going back to the past, but preserving the full range of human knowledge, wisdom and experience for future generations of all the planet's peoples. In the spirit of diversity and the power of place. Whether President Obama, Congress, or anyone entangled in sheer politics, legal maneuvers, or monetary considerations can stand up, step up and do the right thing remains to be seen. Meanwhile, the clock keeps ticking.

Reply  Share  4 replies

Ted Taylor  57 days ago

Thank you to Leah Sottile for bringing to light the struggle of the Chinook Nation for federal recognition. And thanks to Al Jazeera America for coverage of important issues ignored and set aside by the rest of the American media in their lust for ratings and political agendas. I lived in Chinook WA about 40 years ago and the Nation was struggling for recognition back then too. The time is long overdue for the Feds to do the right thing!

Reply  Share  4 replies

Doug Fisher  57 days ago

Oh my god, how can the federal government be so cruel to one their own? A well-mannered court slave. They want to remove our federal recognition; come and take it. I don't have to recognize them either. How long do they think they can be on top? I have more legal and historical documentation to my consanguinity and propositus that spans longer than this government has existed. I am one man in the tribe as I am every man, therefore I am God.

Reply  Share  3 replies

Jim Ewins  57 days ago

The people of the chinook need to help themselves....the government can't and will not. They need to look critically at themselves and ask what they can do themselves. Self help for alcohol and rug problems. Work ....will set them free...for pay or for the community. Take a look at their neighbors...that could use help....today....to clean up the trash...cook a meal....tell a story....be a friend.

Reply  Share  7 replies

Lee James  57 days ago
If someone does not understand the central importance of place and connection with a people, it's easy to think that you can just make it on your own -- via "personal responsibility."

Our town has annual contact with native peoples, for a couple of decades now. We are on the war canoe racing circuit. It's hard to imagine the role of personal roots in this day and age of geographic and cultural churning. But I have seen how the two essentials described in the article -- place and tribe -- are crucial, even when a native is not full-blooded. It's just "beyond" most of us in the dominant culture to understand, in my experience. I struggle with the perspective of needing to take personal responsibility too, but I have seen ....

Doug Fisher
Suppose both our rapine we might resign. Are you man enough to come and take? And could your spoils been mine!

Tempo Toby
Please Google the phrase you use "work will set you free."

BagsyLocash
Your solution is dont work? I grew up on the Salish sea and later moved to Alaska and lived in several native villages. Natives in WA are kidding themselves if they think they are living any kind of "Native lifestyle" or have any chance of doing so in the future. That lifestyle is gone if you want to sit around and complain and talk about what used to be go right ahead. You dont have to tell me how it works out because I already know.

RedHeart64 .
Define "Native Lifestyle".

Oh, you probably define it by some imagined ideal based on TV or some other "source" (like the movies).

We evolve, just as all humans and human cultures do. The core is still there, even if the tools and language and so on have changed. That's true even for the nations that were supposedly "eliminated" or shipped to other areas (people DID try to hide and remain on the land where their ancestors were born). It's not unusual for a person's family to be separated from their tribe for at least one generation, but now that it's legal for us to exist in many areas of the US, "somehow" find their way back. Culture is not a fixed thing - it's a living extension of the people and encompasses the people.

Tell me, do you understand part-whole relationships? That's a central concept for a lot of Native American cultures... but not one held by white culture. If I say that I am part of the whole and the whole is part of me... do you comprehend what I'm saying? (Many Native Americans would.)

That's only one difference between the dominant culture and the myriad cultures of our ancestors.
RedHeart64

BTW - I think if you were to look that up yourself, it was the Big Lie put forward by the Nazis - over the entrance of one of their death camps. It was an insult to their victims - who were murdered, even deliberately worked to death. It's central to a lot of the Big Lie held by many Americans - that poverty is caused by personal failings (lazy, incompetent, etc.) and working harder will "set you free from poverty". That lie covers up the real cause of poverty - elite (rich person's) greed.

Cathy Nelson

Hey Jim, I happen to be blessed with the ability to say I am not CHINOOK but consider many family! I live here with them, and I can tell you,„they only know how to help themselves! That is their culture.
They don't rely on the government that doesn't recognize them. They just want to be recognized for their contributions to these UNITED STATES. The Quinaults are not Chinooks just like Washington residents are not Oregonian!
