

ČÁW PAWÁ LÁAKNI - THEY ARE NOT FORGOTTEN

Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation

Contemporary place names throughout the United States reflect the history of colonization. The explorers and settlers who named mountains, rivers, and other natural features after themselves or their heroes were unaware or indifferent to the fact that waterways, features of the land, and places already had ancient names. The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation have undertaken an ambitious project to organize, give preeminence to, and systematically disseminate *their* knowledge of the land.

LOST KNOWLEDGE

The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation are a union of the Cayuse, Umatilla, and Walla Walla nations. The Tribes share a reservation in the northeastern corner of Oregon which was created in 1855 through a treaty with the United States government. The treaty also secured the Tribes' right to hunt, gather, graze, and fish in usual and accustomed areas of their ceded territory – 6.4 million acres in the Columbia River and Blue Mountain region of Oregon and southeastern Washington State.

As the new peoples arrived in this territory, their “settling” behaviors of road, railroad and fence-building, non-indigenous plant introduction, irrigation, livestock grazing, and logging transformed local ecosystems and damaged important food and medicinal areas. Dam projects turned living rivers into reservoirs and commercial fishwheels decimated the salmon that formed the basis of the regional economy and culture. These changes unsettled the waterways and landscapes which altered the traditional ways in which knowledge of the land was passed down from generation to generation. Eventually, only a few of the Tribes' elders remembered place names and associated stories, and tribal citizens struggled to fulfill their sacred duties to the land.

And yet, there was hope. Many of the remaining tribal language speakers were engaged in helping the fledgling language program. Other elders were working at the Tribes' new museum on research projects. And there was a wealth of knowledge—some still to be captured and much already documented. Many aspects of tribal life in the Columbia River plateau and its surrounding tributaries had been recorded by explorers, traders, settlers, and researchers. As early as 1806, Lewis and Clark recorded what they were told by local “Indians” and wrote down words from the Sahaptin languages spoken in the area. Traders itemized purchases and sales or described trade routes. Settlers wrote letters and journals. Later, ethnographers and anthropologists made field notes and published academic articles. While geographically

scattered and generally written from non-Native points of view, the information was based on the wisdom of the Tribes' ancestors. Was there a way that this knowledge could be returned to tribal stewardship and made useful to current and future generations?

NEW TOOLS FOR ANCIENT STORIES

The Confederated Tribes took their first steps toward reinvigorating communal knowledge and reviving their languages in the 1990s. The Tribes' museum and research organization, the Tamástslíkt Cultural Institute, opened in 1998 in conjunction with the sesquicentennial of the Oregon Trail. Its permanent exhibits accurately depicted the history and culture of the Cayuse, Walla Walla, and Umatilla tribes. In planning for this exhibit, Institute staff and community partners had gathered substantial resources in their archives, some of which included Native place names.

Combining many very small grants, the Institute staff convened tribal elders, students, and scholars who had previously studied the three tribes to talk about early documentation of the language—like the words and names Lewis and Clark wrote down. One anthropologist in attendance had spent 30 years with elders researching on the ethnobotany of the region. The first-hand accounts he collected referenced more than 1,000 traditional place names – and the Čáw Pawá Láakni (“They Are Not Forgotten”) project was born.

From this starting point, Tamástslíkt staff began a 12-year process to systematically record Native place names from historical documents and to interview elders about their homeland. Project principals also linked the information to coordinates in the Tribes' Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping database.

With core funding from the tribal government and the Administration for Native Americans, and supplemental grant support from the Indian Land Tenure Foundation, Ecotrust, Oregon Cultural Trust, and the Wildhorse Foundation, among others, Čáw Pawá Láakni aimed to collect thorough, precise, and credible Indigenous information about the Confederated Tribes' traditional lands. Its focus is on identifying Native place names in the Tribes' several languages and reclaiming the ancestral knowledge embedded in those names.

To share this important work with the public, the Confederated Tribes published an atlas, *Čáw Pawá Láakni, They Are Not Forgotten: Sahaptian Place Names Atlas of the Cayuse, Umatilla, and Walla Walla* in 2015. It presents more than 70 illustrated maps and identifies the names of more than 600 traditional places used by the three tribes. It also provides narrative descriptions of the history and cultural significance of the highlighted locations. The tribal government

provided over 500 complimentary copies of the atlas to local schools, tribal programs, and language speakers, and it is available for purchase through the Tamástslíkt Cultural Institute, Amazon, and the University of Washington Press.

The Čáw Pawá Láakni atlas project has been transformative. Tribal citizens keep the book in their cars and use it as a field guide for teaching themselves and their children about the Tribes' homelands. The local school board has included the atlas on the reading list for high school teachers. The project's additional legacy is the vast ethno-geographic database that the Confederated Tribes actively use and update. By helping the Tribes reclaim their knowledge of the land, the atlas project has educated the tribal government, tribal citizens, and their neighbors about the area's Native heritage.

DEFENDING SOVEREIGNTY

While the Čáw Pawá Láakni atlas project began as an information gathering exercise, it has become instrumental in protecting the Confederated Tribes' treaty rights. For example, data in the atlas helped the tribal government secure a right of way to a root gathering area that had been inaccessible to tribal citizens for over 50 years. When state game and fish officials cited a tribal citizen for fishing below the Bonneville Dam, the Tribes used the atlas to show that the location was a traditional fishing area, and the state dismissed the charge. In several cases, the Tribes have successfully advocated for geographical names containing the word "squaw" to be replaced with Native place names or an English translation of those names. At the Tribes' request and based on information in the atlas, the U.S. Board of Geographic Names also is considering twenty additional tribal place name suggestions. Because it clearly and extensively documents traditional names and historical uses of natural resources, both the atlas and the robust database it generated allow the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation to negotiate with other governments from a position of strength.

The Confederated Tribes also rely on this information to set priorities, develop policy, and manage resources. The Tribes' Natural Resources Department measures progress with fish habitat restoration using Čáw Pawá Láakni project data as a benchmark of pre-reservation ecological conditions. The Language Department has kindled greater interest in language revitalization by building a Sahaptin curriculum around stories in the atlas. By identifying traditional food and medicine harvesting areas throughout the ceded territory, the project encourages the return to still other traditional practices. Remarkably, the project achieves these results while also protecting tribal and individual data. The atlas is available to the broader public, but the map scales purposefully obscure the precise locations of some culturally important sites. And, as determined by the Tribes' Cultural Resource Protection Program, highly

sensitive information in the database, such as burial and archaeological sites, is kept confidential.

The transmission of knowledge across generations is essential to cultural survival. The Čáw Pawá Láakni atlas project maintains the Confederated Tribes' longstanding tradition of storytelling through new methods. Elders insisted that the memories they shared should not stay "on the shelf" but be disseminated widely and continuously updated as a vital way of transmitting knowledge. While some citizens were initially uncomfortable sharing information that could be "taken" from the tribe, a consensus emerged over the course of the project that the Tribes' own children and grandchildren would benefit most from it. As one tribal employee explained, the atlas has had a big impact because it "expanded the younger generation's comprehension of the aboriginal homeland, by teaching them that their land is not just the reservation." Gathered from sources as wide-ranging as ethnographers' field notes, federal government documents, and the stories elders told as they walked the land, the Tribes' ancestral wisdom concerning their lands is now available to all tribal citizens. What's more, the information is paired with powerful modern mapping and database tools to better preserve this knowledge for later generations.

BRINGING THE LESSONS HOME

Land and language are a central part of the Confederated Tribes' identity. The Čáw Pawá Láakni atlas project has restored the knowledge of the ancestors and connected the stories of the Tribes' living elders to create a powerful statement about who the Cayuse, Walla Walla, and Umatilla peoples are today. The Tribes' careful documentation has created a resource for asserting their sovereignty and reclaiming their connection to their ancestral homeland. After centuries of being represented – and misrepresented – by others, the Tribes have repatriated their knowledge and are telling their own stories.

Lessons

1. When a Native nation reclaims others' stories about its lands, culture, and history, it is undertaking a critical exercise of tribal self-determination.
2. The strategic compilation and use of a living ethno-geographic database can help a tribe defend its treaty rights, manage natural resources, and transmit traditional knowledge across generations.
3. When a tribe uses its own language to express and share traditional ecological knowledge, it makes a bold statement about the nation's sovereignty over its history, culture, and territory.

