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Coyote Valley Tribal EPA Coyote Valley Band of Pomo Indians (Redwood Valley, California)

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Established in 1991 with the cooperation of the US Environmental Protection Agency, the Coyote Valley Tribal EPA merges two important protection initiatives into a single, mutually reinforcing effort. By empowering youth through training in environmental protection, the Coyote Valley Band of Pomo Indians not only protects the reservation environment for future generations but also protects the Tribe's most precious resource: the Coyote Valley Pomo youth themselves.

The Coyote Valley Band of Pomo Indians believes that land and water are sacred and must be cared for with reverence. Regrettably, the Pomo Indians' determination to protect and preserve their traditional homelands has been thwarted since European contact—in the 1850s and 1860s, the Pomo were repeatedly dispossessed of their lands. Not surprisingly, this pattern struck at the population's vibrancy. According to the 1910 census, the once populous, prosperous people had been reduced to 1,200 survivors. Throughout these difficult years, the few Pomo bands that managed to stay on their original territories served as a source of strength and continuity for the larger community. The Coyote Valley Band was among these. However, the 1950s, a period in which federal policy emphasized the termination tribal rights, repeated the injustices of the previous century. The Coyote Valley Band was both terminated by the US government and, in 1957, dispossessed when the Army Corp of Engineers flooded its original reservation to create Lake Mendocino. Only in 1975 were the Coyote Valley Pomo finally able to restore their tribal rights and, in 1979, secure the eighty acres of land that comprise their current reservation.

Just as the pattern of dispossession took its toll on the Pomo during the late nineteenth century, the twentieth-century experience of termination and dispossession also left its mark—particularly in terms of environmental and social ills. For the Coyote Valley Band, environmental degradation has been among the most overt problems. In the past several decades, parts of the reservation were used as a dumping ground for discarded automobiles, littering was commonplace, and the creeks and streams running through the reservation were neglected. More serious still have been the social ills experienced by the Band's three hundred members, many of which have been most notable among tribal youth. Full-time attendance in the public school system has been low, and at a number of points over the last decade, Coyote Valley Pomo students have had a zero percent graduation rate. Drug and alcohol abuse have been widespread problems as well.

In 1991, the Band launched an innovative effort to combat both of these concerns. With funding from the US Environmental Protection Agency, the Band formed the Coyote Valley Tribal EPA, youth-focused tribal program that enables the Coyote Valley Pomo and the federal government's regional EPA office to partner in addressing water quality issues on the reservation. Since its inception, the Tribal EPA has grown from a summer water-testing program into a comprehensive program that educates Pomo youth in environmental monitoring skills and provides summer and

after-school jobs for up to fifteen youth a year. Critically, the Tribal EPA is a means by which the Band can address youth problems directly by offering and encouraging productive activities. The Tribal EPA expects its youth employees and participants to attend school. It expects them to attend to their responsibilities on time, sober, and ready to learn. And, it teaches them to look beyond themselves by addressing the environmental ills of the reservation. Youth who participate in the program gain both character education and practical science skills, as they become versed in recycling systems, water quality monitoring, erosion control, revegetation efforts, riverine habitat assessment, and air quality assessment.

Having first assumed responsibility for themselves, the Tribal EPA youth have in turn assumed responsibility for the reservation environment. Today, most discarded automobiles have been removed. The Tribal EPA's robust recycling program has positively changed community behavior, and the students are leading a successful effort to reduce littering on the reservation. In addition to participating in these efforts, the Tribal EPA youth monitor and maintain a stretch of Forsythe Creek that runs through the heart of the reservation. They concern themselves not only with water quality, but also with the preservation and protection of the surrounding banks. In addition, the Tribal EPA has produced four educational slide shows to promote local environmental protection titled "Recycle or Else," "The Wide, Wild, Wonderful World of Water and Waste," "The Gathering Garden," and "Lost Waters: The Restoration of Forsythe Creek."

Indeed, Tribal EPA youth are playing a crucial role in facilitating environmental improvement of reservation lands and waters. Significantly, new and productive government-to-government partnerships have made much of this work possible. The Coyote Valley Tribal EPA was founded through a Clean Water Act Grant from the US EPA in 1991. In 1998, it was awarded a General Assistance Program Grant from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), in 2000, it received a BIA Water Studies grant award, and in 2002, it was awarded a Nonpoint Source Pollution Grant from the US EPA to implement stream restoration work on both Forsythe Creek and the Russian River. In addition to the US EPA and BIA, the Tribal EPA has worked with the Mendocino County Water Agency, the State Regional Water Quality Board, the California Department of Fish and Game, and the US Department of Agriculture's Soils and Water Conservation Service. The Band's intention to develop a Fisheries Management Plan has resulted in an additional partnership with the National Marine Fisheries Service.

The broader benefits of these partnerships mean that the impact of the Coyote Valley Tribal EPA extends well beyond its success in reversing serious environmental degradation on the reservation: The Tribal EPA has contributed to the strength of the Band as a whole. Partnerships have made it possible for Coyote Valley to initiate and operate the Tribal EPA – itself an expression of sovereignty that underscores the Band's commitment to self-governance. Additional government-strengthening benefits include enhanced interactions between the tribal government and other governments, expanded jurisdiction, and increased respect on behalf of state and federal agencies for the Band and its traditions. Moreover, Tribal EPA partnerships have resulted in the Band's involvement in environmental initiatives outside of the reservation's boundaries. For example, staff of the Tribal EPA sit on the executive committee of the Forsythe Creek Watershed Assessment, which brings together all stakeholders in watershed work; and in the near future, the Tribal EPA will participate in the Russian River Calibration Study. Additionally, tribal elders, Tribal Council members, Tribal EPA staff, and volunteer tribal youth have met twice with state and federal agency representatives to negotiate Band citizens' right to continue the traditional gathering and ceremonial use of fish that are listed as threatened or endangered by the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

Besides strengthening the Coyote Valley Band's government, these productive interactions endow Tribal EPA youth with respect for their government, increased confidence in their own abilities to act as citizens of a sovereign Indian nation, and a greater sense of empowerment through exposure to and mastery of challenging topics. This may be the Tribal EPA's greatest

success—and it is achieved in very practical ways. Through the Tribal EPA, youth who may not have committed many hours to formal education find themselves in a learning environment that is, according to the monitoring coordinator of the Regional Water Board, a “cut above a classroom experience.” Non-tribal conservationists and watershed experts hold the program in high regard for engaging youth, for teaching them scientific skills utilized by professionals on the job, and for providing a caring community apart from home and school. Non-Native parents familiar with the program are also enthusiastic about the program’s ability to engage the youth. “I would love for my kids to have access to this program,” one parent insisted. “The teenagers involved are excited about science and about learning. I wish my own children could be a part of something this interesting and educational.”

By learning to respect and protect the environment, Tribal EPA youth are investing in their own futures and in the future of the Tribe. Working with the Regional Water Board to monitor water quality, the youth learn to focus intently on building the skills that the work demands. They no longer look upon their rivers as places to dump trash or to party. Instead, they have worked to restore Forsythe Creek, an effort that required careful planning, trail rebuilding and maintenance, the management of invasive flora, and the reintroduction of traditional willow and sedge. And, the teens’ Tribal EPA work encourages them to look beyond reservation boundaries to understand themselves and their efforts in a larger context. Each summer, for example, the Tribal EPA takes youth staff and volunteers to assess different riverine habitats in Mendocino County. They have visited the mouth of the Navarro River, the Big River tidal estuary, the Middle Fork of the Eel River, the salmon spawning grounds of the upper Noyo River, the ancient redwoods along the Albion River, and the Sinkyone Wilderness at Usal on the North coast. In shifting youth attitudes, the Tribe succeeds in protecting its own future.

Through the establishment of the Tribal EPA, the Coyote Valley Tribe effectively enhanced its own future by enlisting its youth in an effort to protect and preserve the reservation environment. Engaging youth in environmental protection has become, among the Pomo, one of the most effective strategies for protecting the youth themselves. It is a strategy that other governments – Indian and non-Indian alike – can learn from and be inspired by.

Lessons:

- Tribal governments that employ youth through after-school jobs and internships receive a dual benefit: they tap a pool of inexpensive talent whose work advances tribal interests, and they provide valuable “real-world” experience and training to future leaders and professionals.
- Tribal governments should look to youth for fresh ideas and insights. Involving youth in planning, policy development, and policy implementation contributes to an environment that is able to attract and retain talent.
- Non-Indian jurisdictions that surround or abut tribal communities can benefit from tribal input. Through participation in local and regional commissions, boards, and committees, tribal governments can share expertise, information, and resources – which helps build positive intergovernmental relations and fruitful partnerships.