

# The Yurok Tribe:

## *A Basic Study Guide*

Prepared by the Sierra Service Project

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## Introduction

It is very possible that the Yurok people have lived along the Klamath River and adjacent coastal areas for as many as 10,000 years. This is beautiful, rugged country, characterized by deep river valleys, redwood and cedar covered hillsides, and a cold, rocky coastline. In the time before contact with European-Americans, the Yurok were only one of a number of distinct groups, each with a well-defined territory and separate languages. The existence of groups speaking distinct languages is a sign that these people migrated into this area at different times and from different places.

Although estimates vary, the Yurok population at the time of the encounter was probably around 3,000.

The Yurok were unique among their neighbors in occupying both coastal and river lands. Their aboriginal territory included the Klamath River from its mouth to beyond the confluence with the Trinity River, and up a short portion of the Trinity River. Its coastal neighbors to the south were the Wiyot, while most of the Trinity was (and still is) the home of the Hupo (or Hoopa) Indians. Much of the upper Klamath River territory is home to the Karuk Indians.

## Traditional Yurok Life

Prior to the arrival of European-Americans to California, Yurok society consisted of around 50 small villages. Each village consisted of several family homes as well as a sweat lodge. These buildings were partially built below ground level and were made of redwood. The land was very plentiful, and the Yurok made use of over 100 plants and animals in their diets. From the river, ample quantities of salmon, sturgeon and candlefish were harvested. Acorns were also a staple, and berries were gathered in the summer. Deer and elk were hunted.

One of the ways we know that the land provided very well for the Yurok is because of the existence of very rich arts and crafts. This indicates that people had free-time and didn't spend all of their time providing for their survival.

Life appears to have been peaceful and plentiful, and the Yurok lived in harmony with their neighbors. There seems to have been little formal tribal organization and disputes were settled by village leaders. The dentalia shell was used as a kind of currency.

The redwood tree had central importance to the Yurok. It provided material for housing and also for canoes, which were used for travel along the coast and up and down the river. Canoes were also important for fishing. Some of these were quite large, measure up to 18 feet long and 5 feet across.

In addition to using canoes, the Yurok built weirs along the river to facilitate the spearing of salmon. A weir is a kind of dam which doesn't obstruct the flow of the river, but creates a barrier that makes it easier to catch fish. Salmon was - and is - eaten fresh and preserved by smoking.

## Contact with European-Americans

Contact with Europeans occurred later in history than for most indigenous American groups. In the early 1800's, the area was discovered by trappers, but they mostly traded by boat from the coast and their impact was limited.

However, things really changed when gold was discovered in Orleans, along the Klamath River in 1849. This brought hordes of miners and other adventurers and resulted in the destruction of traditional Yurok life. This occurred in several ways:

**Through trespass.** Miners arrived via ship and rushed up the rivers and creeks in search of gold. The

Yuroks, like their neighbors, lived in small villages - collections of redwood huts - in the flats and meadows along these waterways. These settlements were literally "in the way" of these miners and were indiscriminately destroyed. Indians who resisted and tried to protect their homes were often murdered.

**Through flooding.** Hydraulic mining, which involves massive destruction of hillsides in search of gold, quickly replaced panning. Hydraulic mining brought with it massive flooding that destroyed more villages.

**Through ethnic cleansing and murder.** The history of indiscriminate and savage killing of native men, women and children in California is well document, although it isn't well known. First, you have to consider the people that the gold rush brought to California. According to "Ethnography and Archaeology of the Wiyot Territory, "...during the early mining days in California, there were gathered together some of the wildest, most reckless, savage, and dangerous men ever collected in a similar area anywhere in the world." Indians were killed for sport - shot for target practice. Organized massacres took place, most of which were not documented.

According to "Understanding Tolowa Histories" by James Collins, "Following unspecified Indian-white conflicts during 1851-1852, Del Norte [north of Humboldt Bay] settlers attacked and burned the northernmost village of Howonquet in 1853. About seventy people were killed. A well-remember massacre occurred in the late fall of that year, at the village of Yontocket on Lake Earl, north of Crescent City. During a winter dance, probably a ten-day World Renewal Dance, an armed contingent of Crescent City settlers attacked, killing a large number of dance participants, and burning the village to the ground."

This item appeared in the Marysville [California] Weekly Express on April 16, 1859: "A new plan has been adopted by our neighbors opposite this place to chastise the Indians...Some men are hired to hunt them, who are recompensed by receiving so much for each scalp, or some other satisfactory evidence that they have been killed. The money has been made up by subscription."

The U.S. Army took an active role in this process. In 1864, the Yreka Semi-Weekly Union ran this matter-of-fact report: "The new military commandant of the district, Col. Black, is doing good service in Indian hunting. He keeps his troops in the mountains most of the time scouting, and has introduced a new method of treating hostile Indian prisoners - hangs them all. That style of dealing with a murdering Digger [a derogatory term for coastal Indians] is very effective, and meets with universal approval by the citizen inhabitants of the hostile region. It seems to be a general sentiment here that a mean 'Digger' only becomes a 'good Indian' when he is dangling from the end of a rope, or has an ounce of lead in him."

Post Order No. 24, issued by Fort Gaston [present day Orleans, California] on June 26, 1863, read: "All Indians found south of the trail usually traveled by mules from Martins Ferry on the Klamath River ... will be shot on sight. "

Not everyone was silent about these outrages. On May 31, 1856, The Sacramento Union newspaper wrote that "the accounts of Indian hostilities...are almost invariably exaggerated. A small affair is soon magnified into a battle, and the origin is not infrequently attributed to Indian Outrages, while the account should read 'White man's oppression.' The Indian war is defunct. The whole matter has been a cowardly farce, the threatening legions of Indians turning out to be but about 100, seeking refuge in a brush from the rowdies, who, on the least occasion, delight in the sport of shooting them. As in all cases of this kind, the fault has been with the whites."

The San Francisco Bulletin ran an article on June 1, 1860 which state that "society is completely demoralized on Eel River; and the thugs are largely in the majority, led on by Wiley of the Humboldt

Times and by Van Nest the sheriff. Young men talk and think of nothing else but hanging and killing young Diggers and their mothers. The pulpit is silent, and the preachers say not a word."

**Enslavement.** The Indian population was also decimated by the practice of slavery, which was legalized by an 1850 California law and continued well after slavery was abolished in the rest of the United States. According to accounts at the time, young boys sold for \$60, while a young girl could sell for as much as \$200. It is estimated that 4,000 children were bought and sold in this manner.

### **The Reservation Period**

Contact with European-Americans resulted in death of 75 percent of the Yurok population. Although horrific, this was less than the 90 percent loss rates suffered by most other American Indian groups. To protect the remaining Indians and to manage the situation, the US Government negotiated treaties with the 1850's and 1860's with the area's Indian groups. However, the US Congress, under pressure from settlers and business interests, never ratified these treaties. Instead, a reservation was established in the Trinity River valley and on parts of the Klamath River to which many groups were forcibly relocated. This brought together Indians with distinct history, cultures and languages.

During this period, a very significant loss of culture occurred. Young people were forced to undergo education by missionaries and at Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding schools, where students were taught that "Indian ways" were backward and shameful.

### **Federal Recognition and Establishment of the Yurok Reservation**

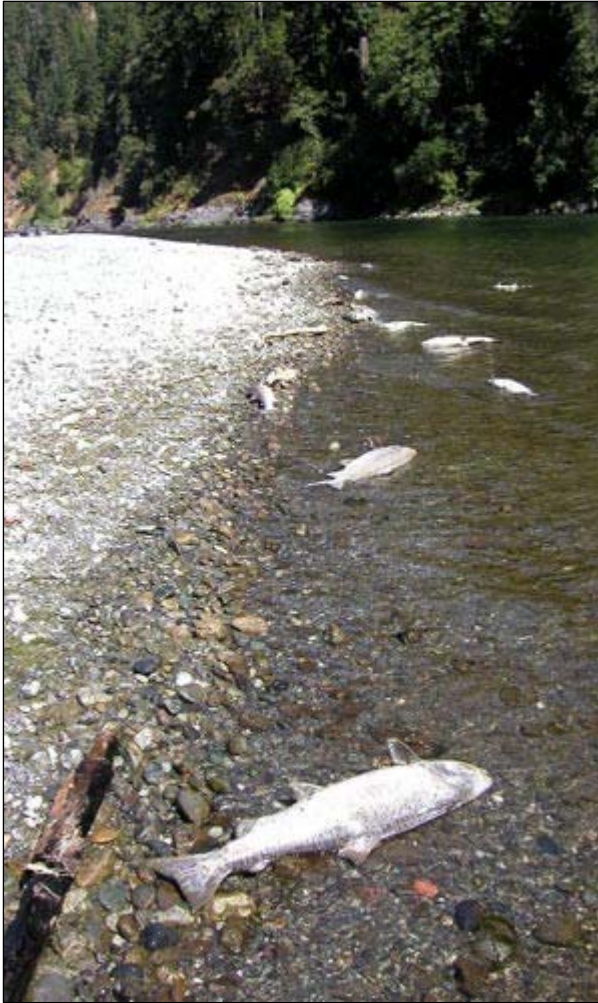
As part of this composite reservation group, the Yurok did not achieve official recognition from the US Government until 1993. This occurred as part of the separation of the Hoopa and Yurok lands into separate reservations, something that was done as part of the 1988 Hoopa-Yurok Settlement Act. The Act established the Yurok Reservation as a narrow strip of land on both sides of the Klamath River from the confluence of the Trinity to the coast.

Today, the Yurok Tribe has about 5,000 enrolled members and is the largest tribe in California. When it was established, the tribe lacked a tax base or business revenue. This is slowly changing. Most reservation residents live in poverty and most of the reservation is without telephone or electricity services.

The tribal government, based in the town of Klamath, employs 200 people and is actively developing tribal housing, fishing-related tourism and industries (such as a cannery).

The tribe is also heavily involved in efforts to restore the fisheries of the Klamath River, which includes water allocation issues and the removal of upriver dams. In 2002, the decision by the Federal government to abandon a water allocation agreement led to the massive kill-off of 70,000 chinook salmon in the low and unusually warm Klamath River water.

The tribal government has eloquently and beautifully described its mission to be "to exercise the aboriginal and sovereign rights of the Yurok People to continue forever our Tribal traditions of self-governance, cultural and spiritual preservation, stewardship of Yurok lands, waters and other endowments, balanced social and economic development, peace and reciprocity, and respect for the dignity and individual rights of all persons living within the jurisdiction of the Yurok Tribe, while honoring our Creator, our ancestors and our descendants."



The 2002 Klamath fish kill. Photo courtesy of Oregon Wild.

#### How To Learn More

There are a number of online resources that can be found by using search terms like "Yurok Tribe" and the names of neighboring tribes. Most of this material seems to be pretty accurate, but it is not always very current.

The SSP website ([www.sierraserviceproject.org](http://www.sierraserviceproject.org)) contains a list of general resources about Indian people.