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Their Heart is the Land

Executive Summary

Their Heart Is the Land

The Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians draws its enduring strength from the land. For thousands of years, this land, stretching from the Umpqua River to the Rogue River Canyon, has provided them with everything from silver salmon to bear grass, integral to their culture and survival. The Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe's connection to their ancestral homelands is central to their identity and way of life.

The Loss of Their Land

In the early 1850s, external forces, driven by the Gold Rush, invaded the tribe's peaceful existence. As miners flooded their territory in southern Oregon, the Cow Creek Umpqua's land and resources were decimated. In 1853, a treaty, dictated in languages they did not understand, was signed, stripping the tribe of 800 square miles of ancestral land for a meager \$12,000. The tribe faced forced removal and relocation, enduring immense suffering and loss.

Resilience and Recovery

Despite these hardships, the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe remained resilient. Decades of legal battles culminated in 1982 with the tribe's re-recognition as a sovereign nation. Their journey toward reclaiming their land continues, fueled by a commitment to restore and manage their ancestral territories sustainably.

This Is the Land that Lifts Us All

The Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe's ethos of compassion and understanding extends to their stewardship of the land. Their management practices, rooted in thousands of years of Indigenous knowledge, include prescribed burning, stream restoration, and habitat improvement. These methods enhance biodiversity, improve water and air quality, and foster a healthier environment. Additionally, their sustainable forest management practices reduce wildfire risks and promote carbon storage, contributing to climate resilience. Their approach is now recognized as a model for ecological health and sustainability.

Bring the Land Home

In partnership with Trust for Public Land (TPL), the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe seeks to reacquire a portion of their ancestral land. Trust for Public Land's collaboration with the tribe aims to blend traditional ecological wisdom with modern conservation, promoting sustainable futures for both the tribe and the broader community. We invite you to read their story and learn more about the rich history and culture of the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe.

An Invitation to Support and Sustain: The Heart of the Land

Supporting this initiative offers a unique opportunity to empower the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe, enhance economic diversity, and improve environmental health. Contributions will aid in the restoration of ancestral lands, benefiting the tribe and the community with cleaner water and air, wildfire resilience, and the return of vital wildlife populations. These efforts also bolster carbon storage, improving climate resilience. Most importantly, this partnership will restore the heart and soul of a people, ensuring their self-sufficiency, and fostering a sustainable legacy for future generations.

Their Heart Is the Land

Quiet strength resonates within the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians. It has carried them through times of bounty and times of adversity. It's threaded throughout their dignity, their actions, their sense of place, and who they are as a people.

For thousands of years, they have drawn that strength from their ancestral homelands. Land that stretched from the cascading Umpqua River and the blue waters of Crater Lake to the Rogue River Canyon with its towering forests and the radiant sunsets of the Coast Range. This is a land that teems with life. Its seemingly endless bounty produced vital first foods such as *p'hím* (silver salmon) and *t'hkám* (elk). It also supported animals prized for their hides and horns, such as *clawsnihwíkw* (black bear) and *p'iyín* (deer). And it provided mushrooms, berries, bulbs, tarweed seeds and *yaná* (acorns) to sustain the tribe, along with *keèt'h* (bear grass) and cedar bark for making baskets and clothing. For Cow Creek Umpqua, they know every rock, every tree, every stream as they know themselves.

“This land, these forests and streams, from the highest mountain tops to the valleys below, are my church. It's where I feel closest to my creator.” – Vonnie Dumont, Secretary, Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians, Board of Directors

While it could be a rugged and unforgiving land to outsiders, the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe understood it as no one else. They managed their lands through the millennia using tools and employing methods such as prescribed forest burns to boost wildlife feed and reduce the threat of devastating wildfire, while only taking from the land what they needed.

For the Cow Creek Umpqua this land and their people are one. Inextricably tied. Inseparably reliant on each other in the great circle of life. This land ultimately defines and shapes their being, telling the story of who they are as a people. This is the land that sustains and fills them with that quiet strength. It is part of their soul.

The Loss of Their Land

In the early 1850s, the Cow Creek Umpqua lived in harmony on their land, but there were yet-to-be-known external forces rapidly swirling around them that would soon force change. Another much newer and larger nation had a hunger for furs, gold, farmland and timber, and the Cow Creek Umpqua's ancestral lands held both. The California Gold Rush of 1849 fueled that new nation's quest for expansion, and little could stand in the way of the flood of miners and settlers that suddenly overwhelmed the tranquil territory.

As 750,000 pounds of gold (worth around \$3 billion in today's money) fueled the California economy after its discovery in 1848, it also and brought hundreds of thousands of miners to the West. The lands of the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe were soon to meet the same fate. By 1851, gold had been discovered in the Illinois River and streams near Jacksonville; then the Applegate and Rogue Rivers followed. The Oregon Gold Rush flooded thousands of people into the ancestral lands of the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe, laying waste to streams, destroying villages, and decimating game. Land that had only known the Cow Creek Umpqua and had been little explored and barely settled by Europeans or the Chinese before gold was discovered was now overrun by miners. Wave after wave of people arrived to destroy the Cow Creek Umpqua's way of life. Thousands of miners could now be seen on a single tributary that was once a hunting and

gathering ground. The Cow Creek Umpqua were threatened and at risk of being killed on their own land. Summer and winter villages and gathering areas were despoiled by miner camps and gold extraction. In just months, a way of life and culture that had existed for thousands of years were lost to invading miners. This was a terrible turning point for the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe.

With their way of life threatened, the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe sought a path forward that would avoid war and reduce the tensions that surrounded them. A treaty was signed to avoid bloodshed but did little to protect the interests of the tribe. In 1853, the U.S. Senate ratified one of the first western tribal treaties in the United States with the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians, giving them their modern name. They had never been known as the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians, but the United States government named them that because the treaty was signed at the confluence of Cow Creek and Council Creek. It established a government-to-government relationship between two nations. If this had been the only aspect of the treaty, it would have created a groundbreaking relationship between the two governments. Instead, the resulting imbalance of the treaty made the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe landless, taking 800 square miles of their ancestral lands for \$12,000. The treaty had been negotiated in English, as well as Chinook jargon, languages they did not speak. Only one faction of four bands of the tribe, who had no way of knowing what they were agreeing to, signed the treaty. This signing immediately disconnected the Cow Creek Umpqua from their land.

“The treaty granted us the government-to-government relationship accorded to sovereign nations, but it also took everything from us.” – Jesse Jackson, Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians Education Programs Officer

In October 1855, a volunteer militia of Jacksonville miners called “Exterminators” slaughtered 23 men, women, and children in their tribal camp at the mouth of Butte Creek. This action precipitated the Rogue Indian Wars. By the end of February 1856, the United States government forced the majority of the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe to begin an arduous march on foot northward to the Grand Ronde Reservation. Removing and consolidating southern Oregon tribes spread measles and influenza causing tribal members to die by the dozens.

Those who refused to leave their ancestral homelands fled to the mountains, with over half dying of starvation and exposure. The mountains east of Canyonville provided refuge for members of the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe who refused to leave their land. Even the U.S. Army failed to round up remaining members of the Cow Creek Umpqua in such rugged country. This was still land that no one knew as well as they did. Force of will and determination helped the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe survive.

Resilience and Recovery

The Cow Creek Umpqua remained resolute in the face of overwhelming adversity, and in 1910 they began the long road back to reestablishing ownership of part of their ancestral lands through legislation. By 1932, a congressional bill was passed to compensate the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe, only to be vetoed by President Hoover. In 1936, the Cow Creek Umpqua joined 17 other tribes in a landmark effort to reclaim their lands: *Rogue River Tribe of Indians v. United States*. It took until 1940 for a final determination on this case, and only two of the 17 tribes were successful in this suit. All the claims of the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians were summarily dismissed. They lost their federal status in the Western Oregon Indian Termination Act of 1954.

Years of legal defeat followed. During this time families organized, held meetings and fundraisers, and prepared for how they would be re-recognized. In 1980, Congress passed legislation allowing a lawsuit against the United States government to proceed, based in part that the agreed 1853 purchase price of \$12,000 to the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe for 800 square miles of land was “unconscionably low.” Congress granted the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe full recognition as a sovereign nation in 1982, and President Ronald Reagan signed the legislation.

Now, 170 years after the treaty that took everything away, the tribe’s ceaseless efforts to be recognized as a sovereign nation have paved the way for a new chapter to purchase and restore a small portion of their ancestral homelands.

This Is the Land that Lifts Us All

The Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe are keen to see their resources and economic efforts lift all those around them; they truly believe the bounty and beauty of their land can ultimately provide for many. They also believe that stronger stewardship of the land improves community health and well-being, as well as the strength of every family unit. The reacquisition of ancestral lands will not only create additional needed economic diversity and stability for the Cow Creek Umpqua, it will also create stability and sustainability for their surrounding community. They are resolved to work toward that future.

“The quality of habitat and timber generated from the Cow Creek Band of the Umpqua Tribe of Indians’ land is stunning. By not managing their forests as a monoculture, they achieve not only a different kind of timber, but amazing uplift for salmon, wildlife, and water quality.” – Dean Finnerty, Northwest Wild Steelhead Initiative Manager, Trout Unlimited

Under the Western Oregon Tribal Fairness Act of 2018, Congress conveyed a piece of the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe’s original 800 square miles of ancestral land back to them. This conveyance of 17,519 acres was not anywhere near the reservation size promised by treaty, yet the regional economic base the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe has already generated from this, as well as their other entities, is impressive.

The Cow Creek Umpqua’s management overlays and stewardship of their lands has created a strong, sustainable business model. Reacquisition of their ancestral lands will allow the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe to build even greater economic diversification across a new, broader landscape.

Modern climate resilience management recommends the same fire ecology that Cow Creek Umpqua practiced for thousands of years with their forest and lands. Emerging science for climate resilience is just now giving Indigenous peoples direct credit for these advanced thinking practices.

As our nation combats a wave of effects caused by climate change, the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe’s management plan provides a generational solution. Their stream restoration and aquatic efforts go hand in hand with their forest management practices that are bringing salmon back to streams where they have become extinct.



“Thousands of years of tribal forest management has taught us a unique way forward that uplifts all of the physical world around us. While modern forest management can be complex and confusing because it has to balance the diverse and often conflicting demands of various stakeholders at once, tribal management is more straightforward, holistic, and sincere, simply giving nature a push in the right direction.” – Jason Robison, Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe Land and Resources Officer

In addition to sequestering carbon within the newly restored riparian canopy (literally pulling it out of the atmosphere and holding it in forest vegetation and roots), these newly restored riparian corridors filter pollutants and sediment out of the water column, dramatically improving the water quality and biology of formerly damaged streams.

The Cow Creek Umpqua also pride themselves on bringing biodiversity back to streams and the forest floor, supporting all types of wildlife and improving air quality. This resilient, restored natural landscape helps by trapping polluting particles and absorbing gaseous pollutants. Perhaps the greatest uplift from these management practices comes from the improvement in human health. Prescribed burning has also been a hallmark of the Cow Creek Umpqua’s ancient forest management. The Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians has been broadcast burning for millennia. At the end of summer, they set fire to mountain meadows in the Umpqua–Rogue Divide as they descended for their winter camps. These practices greatly lowered fuel loads, created fire breaks, and dramatically reduced the threat of wildfire. Reducing this threat in turn dramatically enhances public health through air quality improvement across the region. The Cow Creek Umpqua’s time-honored forest management is a shining example of nature-based climate action. Employing these management practices across the broader landscape of newly acquired ancestral lands offers the best hope for a resilient and healthy environment in the face of climate change.

The Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe constantly strives to enhance their time-honored, sustainable resource management skills for greater resilience and production from fisheries to forests. While many governments struggle to manage a municipality, county, or state more than one or two years into the future, the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribal Government manages its lands seven generations into the future to ensure the care of its citizens. This far-reaching vision incorporates holistic healthcare and prevention systems through the Cow Creek Health and Wellness Center, which serves the Cow Creek Umpqua and other tribal citizens.

In 2018, a devastating fire started off Interstate 5 and destroyed a swath of the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe's newly acquired land. In the aftermath, the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe focused their forest management efforts on wildfire prevention and mitigation, fuel reduction, and biologic diversity. The destructive force of this fire was largely due to poor past land management practices. Determined to restore the forest while honoring their Indigenous cultural values, tribal leaders led a successful effort to set up their own mill so no part of the burned forest would be wasted. Salvageable charred logs were cut into lumber while others were chipped. Strategic thinning is now helping with drought and overstocked forests, which helps reintroduce wildlife of all types to these areas. These are just a few of the many Indigenous practices that the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe will use to steward its land and resources into the future. These practices are also the tools the Cow Creek Umpqua will bring to managing a broader landscape, allowing tribal economic needs to be met while creating greater independence for the Cow Creek Umpqua and the greater community around them.

Bring the Land Home

The Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe have partnered with Trust for Public Land (TPL) on a reacquisition project to acquire a small portion of their ancestral homelands from willing sellers. Trust for Public Land operates across the country, collaborating with thousands of communities and partners to foster a connection between people and the outdoors. As a national nonprofit, TPL has been instrumental in protecting 4 million acres and creating more than 5,500 parks, trails, and schoolyards for public benefit since 1972. TPL's work encompasses a broad spectrum of communities, with a particularly successful and meaningful engagement with tribal nations. For more than two decades, TPL has closely worked with over 70 tribes and Native groups, including the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians, safeguarding over 200,000 acres of land integral to cultural practices, traditional foods, and medicines.

“Our journey with the Cow Creek Band of the Umpqua Tribe of Indians merges traditional ecological wisdom with modern conservation, highlighting the transformative power of Indigenous stewardship for land and community. This effort champions restorative justice, rejuvenates ancient culture, and promotes sustainable forests and futures for the Umpqua Tribe and surrounding communities.” – Ken Lucero, Tribal and Indigenous Lands Director, Trust for Public Land

This partnership has highlighted the importance of recognizing and supporting Indigenous-led conservation efforts, especially in light of a growing body of research that underscores the ecological benefits of such approaches. This is an emerging and crucial moment to bring restoration justice to tribes and to evolve the conservation model, acknowledging the vital role Indigenous peoples play. TPL's commitment to these collaborations not only supports tribal communities in managing their ancestral lands, but it also aligns with its mission to create equitable access to the outdoors, preserving cultural legacies and supporting communities.

An Invitation to Support and Sustain: The Heart of the Land



“Your dollars have the opportunity to create a legacy so empowering for the people of the Cow Creek Umpqua. By helping repatriate cherished ancestral lands, you will be returning our heart and soul, and give us and our community the greatest gift of all, self-sufficiency.” – Carla Keene, Chairman of the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians

Becoming a philanthropic partner in this extraordinary project guarantees greater self-sufficiency for the Cow Creek Umpqua people and greater economic diversity for the community around them. Your contribution will provide broader employment opportunities and a higher level of community philanthropy as they reacquire historic lands. Your dollars will also provide even greater routes for broad positive impacts through diverse partnerships and programs as these Native lands grow.

The outstanding management and stewardship program developed by the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribal Government (without any federal dollars) is a proven investment model. Potential investors know that a successful quest to return ancestral lands will not only give back the heart and soul of the Cow Creek Umpqua people, but it will also pay permanent legacy dividends to families and children through cleaner water and air, a more wildfire-resilient landscape, greater carbon sequestration, and the restoration of Chinook and coho salmon, steelhead, sea-run cutthroat, and lamprey populations. The creation of these vital new wildlife habitats provides a strong economic diversity that will help the Cow Creek Umpqua and the community at large weather future economic storms.

To learn more about becoming a contributing partner in the Cow Creek Umpqua Ancestral Lands Reacquisition Project, please contact:

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