

Thanks for everyone's support to memorialize Bear Gulch Bridge

On December 9 the Board of Supervisors unanimously approved the InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council's nomination to memorialize Bear Gulch Bridge with a Multi-Tribal plaque listing the words for "Bear Creek" in the languages and dialects of 10 groups of Indigenous Tribal Peoples of the region within which the bridge is located.

Historically, the ten Peoples—Bear River, Cahto, Coast Yuki, Lassik, Mattole, Nongatl, Sinkyone, Wailaki, Wiyot, and Yuki—are all distinct Indigenous Tribal Peoples with their own unique cultures and languages/dialects. Notwithstanding the uniqueness and autonomy of each of these Indigenous Peoples, it is known that they interacted with each other, to varying degrees, and that alliances as well as extensive commerce and intermarriage occurred among several of them. It also is known that people often would travel several days to attend their neighbors' ceremonies. The 10 Tribal Peoples who will be honored with this bridge memorial are known to have inhabited, traveled through, traded, and in many other ways interacted with each other in the region immediately surrounding the bridge prior to and after the arrival of the area's first Euro-Americans. This fact is supported by a wealth of Tribal oral history, as well as by extensive ethnographic data. And while these Tribal groups interacted with each other and this area of land prior to the mid-1800s, there is no question that this interaction became much more extensive after arrival of the area's first non-Natives at which time even those Tribal Peoples with historically limited interaction found themselves suddenly and violently thrown together. To ensure the very survival of the Indian people, these groups had to mingle their bloodlines and pool their resources to an extent never experienced in previous times.

Today, the Tribes of Humboldt and Mendocino Counties have Tribal members who are direct descendants of each of these 10 Tribal Peoples. Many, if not most, Tribal members have lineage from two or more of these original Tribal Peoples, thereby attesting to extensive intermingling of the Peoples' bloodlines. Tribal members today trace their ancestry to many places in Humboldt County, including Garberville and several nearby locations. In both historic and contemporary terms, the broad and well-documented interaction among—and the ethnic merging of—the area's original Tribal Peoples epitomizes the motivation for the Multi-Tribal memorial plaque. In order to respectfully and accurately commemorate the Tribal Peoples of this region, it not only is appropriate but it is necessary to include in the plaque each of the 10 Tribal Peoples whose living descendants retain indisputable historical, cultural, and ancestral ties to the region immediately surrounding the location of the Bear Gulch Bridge.

By its all-inclusive nature, the Multi-Tribal plaque transcends issues of Tribal territorialism. It allows us all to rise above disagreements about whether this location is within the Tribal territory of the Sinkyone or the Wailaki because it commemorates both these Peoples, as well as the other Tribal Peoples of the immediate region. Unlike other proposed nominations, its purpose is to honor more than just one Tribal group. By honoring more than just one, it avoids the exclusion of any Tribal People who have legitimate connections to this area.

The plaque will contain no references to the territory of any of the 10 included Tribal Peoples. And while the plaque shall not be a forum for the declaration of any group's Tribal territory, neither shall it assert or suggest that the land area containing the bridge has somehow become the mutual Tribal territory of the 10 Tribal Peoples it commemorates.

Opponents of the Multi-Tribal plaque have stated that the Tribes of the region are "outsiders" who should have no say in memorializing the bridge. They also insist that the proposed memorial plaque somehow diminishes or is disrespectful to the Wailaki people—despite the fact that Wailaki is one of the Tribes

included on the plaque. The fact that more than a few local Wailaki people endorse the Multi-Tribal plaque must be weighed against this faulty assertion. Round Valley Indian Tribal Council also endorses the Multi-Tribal plaque. Round Valley Indian Tribes is a federally recognized Sovereign Nation of seven confederated Tribes, one of which is the Wailaki Tribe.

The plaque presents an unparalleled opportunity for the Tribal Peoples of the region to share their history and to celebrate the diversity and beauty of their unique languages and dialects. The plaque will list the Indigenous words for “Bear Creek” in the Native languages/dialects of each of the 10 Tribal Peoples. Three distinct language families are represented within these 10 groups—Athabaskan, Yukian, and Algonquin. Each of these language groups is comprised of several Tribal Peoples with unique dialectical differences, which will be illustrated on the plaque by the groups’ different ways of saying “Bear Creek”. The location of the reconstructed Bear Gulch Bridge is ideal for this educational plaque, as it spans the Bear Creek Canyon, named for the large population of grizzly bears that historically inhabited this location. The grizzly bear is culturally and historically significant to both Indian and non-Indian people of the region. The plaque will include a brief historical narrative providing the Tribal Peoples’ context for this setting.

The Multi-Tribal memorial plaque is proposed by the InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness, a consortium of 10 federally recognized Tribes that retain important ancestral, cultural, and historic ties to aboriginal Tribal territories that include the area of land surrounding the Bear Gulch Bridge. The plaque is additionally endorsed by the four Tribes in Mendocino and Humboldt Counties that occupy those reservation lands located within the closest proximity to the bridge. Due to their closeness to the bridge, these four Tribes have particularly important cultural ties to the area of land immediately surrounding the bridge.

Also endorsing the plaque are individual Tribal members, California Indian organizations, local nonprofit organizations, elected state officials, local historians, business owners, and both Native and non-Native residents of the Second District of Humboldt County.

The Multi-Tribal plaque nomination also garnered the support of Humboldt County’s Public Works Department. After a period of more than three years that included extensive and unbiased research regarding the documented history of local Tribal Peoples, Public Works determined that the nomination meets 5 out of 6 of the County’s criteria for evaluating proposed bridge names and memorials. On October 7, 2008 Public Works recommended Board approval for the Multi-Tribal plaque nomination. Public Works reiterated its recommendation at the Board’s November 18 meeting and again at the December 9 meeting.

The Council realizes that while the Multi-Tribal plaque nomination enjoys widespread support, it will not satisfy everyone’s expectations. And although there are many reasons that make this a fitting, respectful, and historically appropriate bridge memorial, it is also true that the nomination will not hold appeal for every Native, or non-Native, person. However, at the end of this 4-year discussion, this nomination is the best and most reasonable way to memorialize the Bear Gulch Bridge. By approving the Multi-Tribal plaque, Humboldt County has sanctioned a memorial that will be a source of great pride for the Tribal Peoples of the region, and of great benefit to future generations.

Thanks are owed to all the supporters of the Multi-Tribal memorial plaque. In particular, the many elders and Tribal leaders, as well as the Tribal governments of: Bear River Band of Rohnerville Rancheria, Round Valley Indian Tribes, Wiyot Tribe, and Cahto Tribe; Native and non-Native residents of Humboldt County; Senator Pat Wiggins; Assemblywoman Patty Berg; the Department of Public Works; and the Board of Supervisors. The support of all these people has made possible a bridge memorial that will be recognized far and wide as a unique and informative commemoration of the land’s Indigenous Peoples.