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Correcting the Record on Richardson Grove

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EPIC and allies have been fighting to protect the old-growth redwood trees of Richardson Grove from Caltrans's proposed highway widening project for over a decade. But 10 years ago, when we first filed our lawsuit against Caltrans, we made a harmful mistake. Based on factual errors in a State Parks brochure, our original lawsuit described the Indigenous inhabitants of Richardson Grove as being "Wailaki Native Americans".



That information was incorrect. We made a second mistake by failing to amend our complaint when this error was brought to our attention by the InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council, an Indigenous land conservation organization comprised of 10 federally recognized Tribes whose members are of Sinkyone, Wailaki, Lassik, Yuki, Cahto, Coast Yuki, Pomo, and other Tribal ancestries. At that time, the Sinkyone Council requested that EPIC take action to correct the error, but we failed to act upon their request. We wish to correct the record. The entirety of Richardson Grove State Park is located within the ancestral Tribal territory of the Sinkyone People. Wailaki Tribal territory is located to the east of the park.

By filing a lawsuit that incorrectly identified the Indigenous People's territory within which the Grove is located, EPIC participated in Indigenous erasure. Indigenous erasure can take many forms in the United States. Here, Indigenous erasure occurred when EPIC failed to confirm whose ancestral territory Richardson Grove State Park is a part of. By misidentifying the territory of the Sinkyone as being that of the Wailaki, EPIC also contributed to prevalent myths that Indigenous Peoples are all alike or are no longer around to collaborate with, and that their geographic territories are indistinct or of no consequence.

Far too often, environmentalists ignore or merely pay lip service to the original inhabitants of the places they are trying to protect when we should be working with and supporting them. We need to transform our antiquated views and interactions with Indigenous Peoples into meaningful and effective collaborations built on recognition of Tribes' longstanding relationships with ecosystems in their traditional territories, and the crucial role Tribes can take in defending and protecting nature.

Because we cannot now amend our original complaint, we seek to publicly acknowledge our error and correct the record to the Sinkyone Council and to our members. We also take this opportunity to share with our community what we have learned about the original inhabitants and guardians of this special place: the Sinkyone People, whose descendants remain deeply connected with this beautiful, bio-culturally diverse and abundant landscape. EPIC will strive to keep learning and be increasingly mindful and respectful of the Sinkyone and their territory as we

continue our fight to protect the Grove. We recognize the Grove as being not only a place the Sinkyone lived in and tended for millennia, but one which continues to hold great cultural significance for Sinkyone descendants and the Tribes of this region—an important place of prayer, ceremony and cultural lifeways.

EPIC's growing awareness of the longstanding, vital linkages between Indigenous place-based cultures and the imperiled species and ecosystems we defend has helped us better understand our responsibility to acknowledge the Grove as being within Sinkyone Territory, and to build allyship with the Sinkyone Council. The Sinkyone People lived in a harmonious manner in the area of Richardson Grove State Park for countless generations by carefully tending their lands and waters to ensure biological diversity and abundance. Sinkyone territory encompasses the South Fork Eel River watershed, from the vicinity of Rattlesnake Creek north to the S. Fork's confluence with the mainstem Eel, and continuing along the mainstem Eel corridor north to the current-day town of Rio Dell. Sinkyone territory extends from those portions of the S. Fork and mainstem Eel watersheds westward to the coast, between the vicinity of Mattole River south to Rockport. It extends from this stretch of shoreline westward into the Pacific Ocean to approximately 250 nautical miles from shore.

The Sinkyone conducted seasonal burning of understory plants to promote ecosystem health and productivity; carefully gathered and tended a vast variety of food, material, medicinal, and other plants; breached berms at river mouths to enable salmon migration; transplanted a wide range of plant and fish species; and carried out numerous other land and water tending and guardianship duties guided by ceremonial protocol and Law of the Land. The Sinkyone People lived at permanent villages and seasonal encampments throughout their territory. Although autonomous and diverse, the many Sinkyone communities of this region shared cultural ways distinguishing them from neighboring Tribal Peoples.

These include Sinkyone dialects of the Na-Dené (Athabaskan) language, their own system of spiritual beliefs and practices, distinctive styles of art and architecture, and commonly respected territorial boundaries within which Sinkyone Peoples socialized, gathered and hunted food, and conducted trade. In the mid-1800s, the Sinkyone and other Indigenous Peoples of the region were hunted down, massacred and displaced by invading whites. Their lands were forcibly taken and survivors subjected to numerous atrocities. Like many other Tribal Peoples, the surviving Sinkyone were denied a land base. Ultimately, many became members of neighboring Tribes confined to reservations throughout the region.

The Sinkyone, along with many other Indigenous Peoples, relate to Gááhs-tcho (redwood tree) as communities of sacred beings who provide protection, abundance and balance for the world. Gááhs-tcho is a special relative whom Indigenous Peoples were taught to never harm. Tribal leaders throughout the redwood region often have spoken of the duty to respect and care for Gááhs-tcho, and warned about the consequences of harming them. Sinkyone descendants and Tribes of this region continue to regard the Gááhs-tcho of Richardson Grove as sacred and as a Traditional Cultural Property. It is one of only a few remaining ancient redwood groves, a critical part of the surviving 2% old-growth redwood still standing. Tribal members visit the Grove to offer prayer and hold ceremony, gather traditional foods and medicines, and carry out cultural ways of life. For these and other reasons, the Grove is vitally important for the continuation and protection of Indigenous Sinkyone cultural heritage and lifeways.

Sinkyone and other Tribal peoples of this region are strongly opposed to the proposed highway widening project, which they say threatens the Grove and would cause irreparable harm by disrupting spiritual and cultural

relationships they have maintained with the Grove for thousands of years. They assert the proposed widening threatens the wellbeing and lifeforce of the Grove's Gááhs-tcho community, and therefore would violate Indigenous rights, religious freedoms, and traditional responsibilities related to the cultural protection and care of the Grove. EPIC is in discussion with InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council regarding Tribal issues of concern and broadening our strategy for protecting the Grove by building and wielding the strength of an allyship that honors the continuum of cultural relationships and Indigenous rights within the Grove. We believe that, together, we can stop Caltrans from initiating this destructive project, and ensure a lasting and culturally informed protection for Richardson Grove.