


Elwha tribe finds legendary creation site, wants uncovered land

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What will become of the lands that used to be under the Elwha Dam and Lake Aldwell, including sacred lands of the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe?

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Slowly emerging from what used to be under Lake Aldwell and Elwha Dam are some 1,100 acres of land with an uncertain future.

When Congress authorized removal of the dam southwest of Port Angeles in 1992, the so-called project lands were to be set aside either for use as a state park, a national park or a national wildlife refuge, or be transferred to the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe. **So far, the tribe is the only eligible party that has a plan and a desire for the land.**

That desire became even more intense last month, with the discovery of the tribe's creation site. Long passed on in oral tradition, the sacred site is where, by tribal teaching, the Creator bathed and blessed the Klallam people, and where tribal members for generations uncounted sought to learn their future.

But the site was covered by the waters behind Elwha Dam, and had not been seen by anyone in the tribe since construction of the dam between 1910 and 1913. Many feared it had been destroyed by blasting during dam construction — and some came to doubt if it had ever existed at all.

Frances Charles, chairwoman of the tribe, said she and other tribal members visited the site last month after receiving a call from National Park Service cultural-resources staff, who believed they had found the site.

“A group of us walked to the site and actually stood on the rock known to us as the creation site,” Charles said this week. “It was eerie in some ways. We were walking on the soil that had been underwater for 100 years, and witnessing the old cedars. It was emotional, with joy and happiness. We sang a prayer song and an honor song, and had the opportunity to stand there and really praise our ancestors and the elders for telling the stories.”

To see that those stories actually were true was overwhelming, Charles said.

“To so many out there, it was a myth,” she said. “To be able to feel the spiritual tie to the land, and know, yes, this is real, the stories that you have heard, they are true. It is very, very powerful and very humbling.”

The park service also reported this week finding a site in another location within a former reservoir that documents human use as far back as 8,000 years ago, establishing it as one of the oldest known archaeological sites on the Olympic Peninsula. The park service collected material for analysis and reburied the site.

For the tribe, the recovery of its cultural sites is a deeper dimension of the Elwha restoration, affirming the truth of the tribe’s presence here for so long.

“The land continues to show us, it speaks,” Charles said. “To be able to go down there and feel the power of the water and the land, and look at a landmark that has been covered for so many years, now being able to breathe.”

The National Park Service intends to launch a public process to decide the long-term disposition of the land, but at the moment has no funding to pay for an environmental assessment or environmental-impact statement, noted Todd Suess, acting superintendent for Olympic National Park.

The agency is aware the tribe wants the land, but can't just turn it over. "We need to have a public process," Suess said.

For now, the park service, which already manages 85 percent of the Elwha watershed, is managing the lands. Park rangers are providing law enforcement and offering interpretive walks on some of the project lands, excluding the archaeological sites, which are confidential and protected.

No matter who ends up owning the land, more than 700 acres of it along the river and in its flood plain will remain in its natural state in perpetuity, with public access maintained. That is according to the requirements of the Elwha Act, passed by Congress in 1992.

But the tribe, if it comes to steward the lands, also would like to use some portions of the remaining property outside the archaeological sites and river corridor for housing or economic development, said Robert Elofson, director of river restoration for the tribe.

In addition to protecting the tribe's cultural resources, transfer of the property to the tribe would help the Lower Elwha Klallam realize a long unmet need for an adequate land base, Elofson said.

When the United States purchased the core of what is now the tribe's reservation in the late 1930s, the superintendent of the then-Office of Indian Affairs stated that six sections of land, almost 4,500 acres along the Elwha River, would be the appropriate size of the reservation for the tribe — which was far smaller then.

But in the end, the government acquired only 300 acres for the tribe — and took another three decades to finally convey the land for the tribe’s reservation in 1968, in part because of opposition by sport fishermen.

The tribe has continued to buy land ever since on its own, and today has about 1,000 acres along the Elwha River. But the reservation still is missing the lands that used to be under Elwha Dam and its reservoir.

“We lost a lot of land,” said Adeline Smith, one of the oldest living members of the tribe. “There were campsites along the river, and at least two big settlements. The medicinal plants, the berries, the wildlife, they were all part of our life by the river.

“It was ours and our way of life. I hope someday it will be again.”

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