

A CALL TO ACTION: PROTECT PUVUNGNA

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Trucks dumping soil on Puvungna. (Photo courtesy of Anna Christansen)

By Jeanne Ferris

In spring, a living meadow blooms in yellow profusion on the west side of the California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) campus. Swallows, hawks, mourning doves, butterflies, and ground squirrels make their home among the oak trees surrounded by the ubiquitous eucalyptus, and circular stone altars denote California Native spiritual observances. Below the grass, the earth resounds with 10,000 years of sacred prayers, worship, and ceremonies—a place of serenity in the middle of asphalt.

This site holds special significance because it is considered the “place of emergence” for the Juaneño Band of Mission Indians (JBMI) Acjachemen Nation. Two thousand members remain whose ancestors rest here—they call it Puvungna (translation: Gathering Place). Tribal territories once spanned Orange County, Northern San Diego County, Southern Los Angeles County, and Western Riverside County.

Like most Indigenous areas in California since European arrival, traditional lands were methodically stolen, parceled, sold, bought, and developed by non-Native capitalists. The JBMI Acjachemen Nation, maintains state recognition but was never deemed federal status. As a result, California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) has long treated the tribe as invisible regarding campus improvements and planned developments.

Most recently, in the fall of 2019, pesticide spraying of the meadow, construction debris, and soil dumping by heavy machinery on the archeological site has refueled the tribe’s legal armament against CSULB’s latest violation.

JBMI, Acjachemen Nation invoked the Public Resources Code Section 5097.9 from the State of California Native American Heritage Commission (NAHC) by filing a California Environmental Quality Act (CEQUA) lawsuit against the CSU Board of Trustees and Chancellor Castro:

§ 5097.9 – Interference with Native American religion or damage to cemeteries or places of worship, etc., prohibited; construction and exemptions from law.

According to information on the “Welcome to Puvungna” website, tribal disagreements with the university’s land usage began in 1972, when CSULB campus workers uncovered human remains, revealing a burial site. A substantial amount of archeological points of interest were destroyed by development. Campus officials refuted the legitimacy of Puvungna as sacred by announcing a cultural review with a massive dig planned. In response, physical protests by tribal members blocking machinery ensued with success.

California State Parks gave Puvungna the distinction of placement on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). Several professional archeologists and the Native American Heritage Commission (NAHC) have also verified its cultural patrimony.

“Eighteen treaties were never ratified, and because we did not receive land, it gives us limited power in protecting Puvungna,” Rebecca Robles (Acjachemen Nation) said. “We won a lawsuit in 1993 against the university from building a mini mall but did not get a legally binding agreement between governing bodies and the tribe. So here we are again 28 years later. It feels like Groundhog Day.”

Ms. Robles, a revered tribal elder and teacher in the community, grew up four miles from Puvungna. Her mother, Lillian Robles, championed their tribe's plight for years by creating the "Ancestor Walk," which begins at their first sacred site in Orange County and ends at the seventh: Puvungna.

"I've had members from other tribes tell me Puvungna was where they went to pray because they couldn't travel back home to Oklahoma," Ms. Robles said. "When we have our ceremonies, at least 500 people attend. We had to change it to invitational only because spectators became too disruptive."

"Now we are demanding protection in perpetuity," President Joyce Perry (Payomkawchum Kaamalan) said. Ms. Perry serves as tribal manager and cultural resource director for the JBMI, Acjachemen Nation.

"We ask Governor Newsom to follow up with his executive order of a formal apology given to 100 tribal leaders in 2018 with a call to action in restoring and permanently protecting Puvungna," Ms. Perry continued. "Now is the time to make good on your public apology and heal these wounds."

California Governor Gavin Newsom established the Native American Truth and Healing Council in the summer of 2019 through an executive order that formally apologized for the state's slaughter of Native Californians, forcing family separations and servitude in the 1800s.

At the 52nd Annual Native American Day at the state's Capitol on September 27, 2019, Governor Newsom said, "We need more acknowledgment of the state's genocide of Native people. We need to commit to more truth telling so that we can start to heal."

To which Ms. Robles said, "That apology was bittersweet because on that day, a university construction truck dumped 6,000 cubic feet of dirt for eight hours on our site. Now the weight of that dirt is destroying its archeological integrity."

Chairman Matias Belardes of the Juaneño Band of Mission Indians, Acjachemen Nation, and 40 supporting agencies consisting of California Natives, social justice, and environmental activists have signed a joint letter addressed to the California State University Trustees, including Governor Newsom.

In addition to "cleaning the debris, restoring the site, and a grant for a conservation easement to permanently protect the land,"—the letter demands a "Memorandum of Understanding to ensure adequate consultation of local tribes in the future."

A telephone call requesting a statement was placed to CSULB President Jane Close Conoley, followed by an email sent to both Ms. Conoley and CSULB Media Relations, Gregory Woods.

The following day, an email reply with a YouTube video hyperlink of President Conoley's statement with a conclusion in the email, "At this time, that is the extent to which we wish to comment," signed by Mr. Woods.

In the video, Ms. Conoley defends the university's role in its land usage of Puvungna. She justified their rights by claiming they had followed all the rules and denying intentions to build a gravel parking lot (consistent evidence proves otherwise). Ms. Conoley also went on record to say they had proper authorities from NAHC and a State Historic Preservation Officer present prior to the desecration [sic].

However, the most glaring omission from Ms. Conoley's video is any mention of JBMI, Acjachemen Nation. In a sense, this video is an admission of guilt in the university's direct violation of the state law requiring tribal consultation before any construction on a Native American sacred site.

CSULB has received letters on official letterheads from state and local agencies such as the Sierra Club criticizing their actions regarding Puvungna, which they ignored and continue to do. Instead, the university spent tax dollars to make this video.

As an academic institution teaching cultural anthropology to incoming students, how do you justify endangering authenticated buried artifacts on Indigenous ancestral grounds?

Would you dump dirt on the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem? How about leaving your garbage by the tomb of St. Peter at the Vatican in Rome?

"We want the university to understand that Puvungna will live for hundreds of years in our hearts. We would like for them to find ways to honor us and work with us in perpetuating our traditions," Ms. Perry stated.

CSULB's disingenuous statement/video is rife with false activism. Their defense in 1993 cost taxpayers \$1 million; how much will legal fees cost in today's climate?

Governor Newsom's Native American Truth and Healing council (NATH) also have an expense budget that may impede its ideological agenda in the future if not approved by lawmakers.

But why wait for legal action to be held accountable? President Conoley has a chance to model diplomatic behavior and set precedence by decolonizing an academic

institution's actions and decisions. How about establishing Best Practices?—Or speaking the truth as a way of life?

Be the solution, reach out to the JBMI Acjachemen Nation, and make amends to protect Puvungna's natural beauty so that it continues to thrive long after your tenure, President Conoley. Resist colonial rhetoric and demagoguery. Don't let job security impede your courage to lead your peers out of the past and into the future. Inspire others to follow and protect Puvungna.