

July 7, 2006

## **Ceremony needs space**

### **Public asked to respect voluntary closure in forest**

Kimberly Ross

Redding Record Searchlight

An American Indian coming-of-age ceremony that hasn't been practiced in its entirety since the 1920s will usher a girl into womanhood starting Saturday. But planning the age-old rite in the 21st century has come with growing pains of its own, said Caleen Sisk-Franco, spiritual leader of the Winnemem Wintu.

"Isn't it ironic that it's the Fourth of July, 2006, and we're still begging around for our rights," Sisk-Franco said this week. "We're still not there yet."

The ceremony site – once the tribe's traditional area – is now managed by the U.S. Forest Service and a campsite concessionaire. As a popular piece of public land, the 120-member tribe can't use it as freely as it once did. As a result, the tribe says, the government has failed to honor its religious rights.

Shasta-Trinity National Forest officials last week asked that the public respect a voluntary closure from Saturday to Tuesday, from McCloud Bridge to about one mile south. District Ranger Kristi Cottini said that because the area is public land, it cannot be completely blocked off.

"While our regulations do not allow for exclusive use of an area, we are taking steps to ensure that the Winnemem Wintu can have free exercise of their religion," Cottini said.

The tribe thanks officials for that help, but the plan doesn't meet the tribe's needs for privacy and safety, tribal Headman Mark Franco said.

Last year, Franco and Sisk-Franco's 14-year-old daughter, Marine, was ready to swim across the McCloud River as part of her initiation into womanhood.

But the ceremony was cancelled because forest officials could not provide the security and access the tribe thought was necessary, Franco said.

This year, a second try at Marine's initiation has improved in the last week because of the voluntary closures and a special use permit granted to the tribe, Franco said Thursday.

Marine will swim the river, but still could encounter the danger and noise of boats in the public waterway if water enthusiasts don't heed a voluntary river closure.

A sacred place, Puberty Rock, is central to the ceremony but will likely be underwater because of Shasta Dam and the heavy spring rains. Bureau of Reclamation officials say they can't honor the tribe's request to lower the lake level by 10 feet.

The move would require releasing about 250,000 acre-feet of water and would tamper with the lake's complicated balance of water contracts, flood control, fish and wildlife protections and other needs, said Lynnette Wirth, a deputy public affairs officer for the bureau.

Finally, a 14-site campground near the ceremony site will probably be full of campers, as usual on the weekend after the Fourth of July. They could drink alcohol close to the ceremony, which worries Sisk-Franco.

"Indian people already have problems with alcohol. They don't need to bring their young women into a flower dance with drunks around," she said.

Despite the obstacles, the Winnemem are determined to hold the rite of passage, and hope the public will respect their tribal ceremony.

Holding it in the fall, when the lake is lower and campgrounds less busy, would surely be easier. But tradition dictates that the ceremony end on a full moon and while certain flowers are still blooming, Sisk-Franco said.

Meanwhile, the forest service plans to keep employees camped at the ceremony location. They will explain the event to passersby and ask them to avoid the area, as well as requesting limited travel along Gilman Road beyond Pine Point Campground. A buoy in the lake will mark the voluntary closure area one mile south of McCloud Bridge.

"This ceremony is a vibrant and vital part of Winnemem Wintu life in the present day," Cottini said. "Preservation of Native American culture, including traditional religious practices, is a legitimate objective."

Reporter Kimberly Ross can be reached at 225-8233 or at [kross@redding.com](mailto:kross@redding.com).

---

Copyright. All Rights Reserved.