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California Tribe Hopes to Woo Salmon Home

By **JESSE MCKINLEY**

SAN FRANCISCO — On Friday night, more than two dozen Native Americans embarked from here on a spiritual mission to [New Zealand](#), where they will ask their fish to come home to California.

The unusual journey centers on an apology, to be relayed to the fish on the banks of the Rakaia River through a ceremonial dance that tribal leaders say has not been performed in more than 60 years.

The fish in question is the Chinook salmon, native to the Pacific but lately in short supply in the rivers of Northern California, home to the [Winnemem Wintu](#) — a tiny, federally unrecognized and poor tribe supported by some [Social Security](#) payments, a couple of retirement plans and the occasional dog sale.

As the Winnemem see it, the tribe's troubles began in early 1940s, with the completion of the Shasta Dam, which blocked the Sacramento River and cut off the lower McCloud River, obstructing seasonal salmon runs, and according to the tribe, breaking a covenant with the fish.

"We're going to atone for allowing them to build that dam," said Mark Franco, the tribe's headman. "We should have fought harder."

As luck would have it, the United States government once bred millions of Chinook eggs from the McCloud and shipped them around the world in hopes of creating new fisheries, including a batch that went to the South Island of New Zealand, where the fish thrived.

And so it is that the Winnemem — who have used their spiritual powers in the past to try to stop dam construction, heal the sick, and sway the votes of Senator [Dianne Feinstein](#) — are on an 11,000-mile vision quest whose itinerary, according to the tribe's chief, came to her from a higher plane.

“The spirits came into the fire area here,” said the chief, Caleen Sisk-Franco, referring to the tribe's circular, open-air meeting room. “And they said, ‘You’ve got to get it done.’”

About 30 tribe members live in trailers and small houses on the hilly compound outside Redding, Calif., which is also home to 10 horses, dozens of dogs bred for sale, and a traditional bark house, which is used for puberty ceremonies. A murky, frog-filled pond comes and goes depending on rainfall, and bits of obsidian, a volcanic glass, litter the dirt and gravel. Big chunks of the glass also sit behind the meeting hut used by tribe's younger generation to practice making arrowheads. “They’re not very good at it,” said Mr. Franco, who is married to Ms. Sisk-Franco.

As smoke from a manzanita log drifted out a hole in the ceiling, Ms. Sisk-Franco said the tribe and the salmon were intrinsically linked. “What happened to the salmon happened to us,” she said. “The fish have been diminishing in numbers, and so have we.”

The group had to scrape to raise the \$60,000 for the trip by selling trinkets, soliciting help from richer tribes, and using a [Facebook](#) page. Mr. Franco said he had made it clear to the delegation that the trip was not a vacation, but a mission. “We have a job to do,” he said.

The tribe had hoped to ship their drum, but FedEx wanted \$600 for that. So they checked it in at the airport, along with several manzanita logs, a container of sacred water and a collection of ceremonial weapons, including spears and bows and arrows.

“I don’t think they will be too worried,” Mr. Franco said of [airport security](#). “All of that will be under the plane.”

The United States [Fish and Wildlife Service](#) denied the tribe permission to take much of its ceremonial regalia — including hawk, woodpecker and vulture feathers — though its eagle headgear was approved. “Win some, lose some,” Mr. Franco said.

Such battles are commonplace for the Winnemem, whose population once numbered more than 14,000. Their conflicts with the federal government date to 1852, when Congress refused to ratify a treaty that would have given the tribe and more than a dozen other Indian groups a 35-square-mile reservation along the McCloud.

Another insult came in 1985, when the tribe lost its federal recognition from the [Bureau of Indian Affairs](#), something Mr. Franco attributes to a clerical error as well as a change in bureau policy.

While the Winnemem hold on to tradition, they have not been shy about using more modern means. The Francos regularly commute to Sacramento to lobby policy makers at the Capitol. They also recently donned their regalia to protest a proposal by Senator Feinstein that they felt would loosen restrictions from the Endangered Species Act to allow more water for farmers south of the capital.

Last year, the tribe also sued the federal government for protection of a variety of sacred sites, and a copy of the lawsuit sits in the fire room where the tribe meets for religious ceremonies. “We pray for our lawsuit all the time,” Ms. Sisk-Franco said.

The trip to New Zealand is not the first time the Winnemem have turned to ancient methods to try to change policy. In 2004, while fighting a proposed plan to raise the Shasta Dam 18 feet, the tribe staged a war dance, a four-day, round-the-clock ceremony carried out by their dwindling numbers of warriors. “We were exhausted,” Mr. Franco said. But in the end, the dam was not raised.

Once in New Zealand, the Winnemem plan to rendezvous with local Maori leaders and stage a four-day ceremony starting March 28 that will culminate with the rare “nur chonas winyupus,” or middle water salmon dance.

The Francos say they intend to ask local fish and game officials if they can bring back some of New Zealand’s salmon eggs — once of California stock — back to the McCloud. “We have to do more than pray,” Ms. Sisk-Franco said. “We have to follow through.”