
Treaty Importance Personal Script

Written Script

Chee-la (hello), my name is Nick Viles and I work as a Language and Traditional Arts Instructor of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians. I'm here to talk to you today a little bit about my own personal experience learning about our treaties as a young person.

I was born in the early 1980s, not too long after our Tribe had been restored as a federally recognized Tribe and was in the process of setting up our modern tribal government. When I was a kid, I'd often hear people talking about treaty Tribes and non-treaty Tribes.

"Oh Siletz, that's not a treaty Tribe that's why the reservation is so small" or "that's why those other Tribes have better hunting and fishing rights on their reservations, Siletz isn't a treaty Tribe." Sometimes I'd even notice friends from other Tribes say these things. At the time, I didn't even really know what people meant by treaty Tribe and non-treaty Tribe but I could tell there was a difference between my Tribe, my people... me and the Indian people living in other places in the country ... a negative difference ... and it always stuck with me when I heard people talking that way. It made me feel bad, sad, confused.

As I grew up, I found a way to make sense of this type of talk. Part of my learning as a youngster was sitting with my elders to learn my family history. My family taught me how my ancestors are from the southern Oregon coast—some of the peoples who signed the Coast treaty that was never ratified by the U.S. Senate. "Aha," I thought, "the Coast Treaty wasn't ratified that's why we're not a treaty Tribe." In trying to make sense of what I was hearing I just sort of assumed that since the Coast treaty hadn't been ratified none of the other treaties signed by people removed to Siletz had been either. That's why they say we're not a treaty Tribe ... that's what makes us different.

It wasn't until I was older that I realized that assumption wasn't true at all. In fact, almost all the treaties that Siletz people signed had been ratified. I was so confused ... how can they say that Siletz isn't a treaty Tribe? We're not just a treaty Tribe ... we're a *seven-treaty* Tribe!

Today the history of our Tribe and treaties is easier to figure out than it was when I was a kid. When I was in school, there weren't any teachers telling me about how the Coast Reservation was created to fulfill treaty obligations in ratified treaties. And that's for a reason. For a long time, the government ignored the ratified treaties that members of my Tribe signed so that they could pretend that there was no link between our reservation and ratified treaties. They did this to make it easier to get my Tribe's reservation land and ignore the other obligations that they had committed to in treaties. Over time, those stories (those lies) that the government told about our Tribe became more and more powerful and easier and easier to believe.

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It was these stories that I was running into when I was a kid ... a misreading of our history that had been repeated so many times that lots of people believed it and repeated it. The more it got repeated the more powerful it became. The power and influence of that story had big impacts—like shaping the way that the federal government set policy and stole our reservation land. For my ancestors this meant watching as the government took away homes that had been promised to our people—adding to the trauma and difficulty of being forced to leave their homelands. These lies had smaller ... more personal ... impacts too—even touching the way that I felt about myself and my Tribe when I was a little one—the confusion I felt and uncertainty about my Tribe’s past and standing.

That experience taught me something about history and why it’s so important to study the past. Today, Siletz leaders and educators do a lot of work to get the correct story of our history and our treaties out there. Our people must educate not just kids in school but lawyers, judges, congress people, and Senators ... and sometimes friends and relatives from other Tribes. Our history was told the wrong way for so long that it takes a lot of effort to correct the record and make people understand our true past and status. But, it’s starting to make a difference.

I have my own kids these days and I notice that they don’t have anyone telling them about treaty Tribes and non-treaty Tribes. They even might get a chance to learn about our real history in school the way lots of children in Oregon do today. It makes me happy to know that a new generation of people in Oregon, tribal people and non-tribal people, are learning about the promises that were made in those treaties and the importance of honoring the agreements for future generations.