

CASE STUDY #3 by Tso’lo si’am A. Eatherton

IT TAKES A VILLAGE: CLIMATE
REFUGEES OF THE QUINULT INDIAN
NATION

Conversations about climate change tend to get framed around the unavoidable catastrophes of the future wrought by our actions today. But the Quinault Nation is experiencing the impacts of climate change right now, and it’s irrevocably altering the community’s culture and way of life.

Josh Cohen

Taholah sits on the western edge of the Olympic peninsula in so called Washington, USA. It is one of the main villages of the Quinault Indian Nation (QIN), sitting on land that has been inhabited by the ancestors of the kʷímay̓, Chehalis, and Chinook since time immemorial (Lehman 2017). The lower village sits about ten meters from the Pacific Ocean, a meter and a half above sea level. It has been here for thousands of years, but since 1990 the village has been inundated by storm surges

eight times. Oral history of the Quinault tells of great floods sweeping away swaths of land, destroying plankhouses, and leaving a path of flattened beach grass. These oral histories have been matched to slips and strikes of the fault lines of the Pacific Ocean, earthquakes that caused tsunamis that rise to the height of multiple trees (Lehman 2017). These events are very rare, the last occurrence in the oral record being 319 years ago. Storm surges are never mentioned in oral histories, and even recent

PACIFIC OCEAN

Taholah



Figure 2: Lower Taholah's sea wall with encroaching Pacific ocean



Figure 3: Taholah community member canoeing on flooded main street in 2015

accounts from elders record the beach being about 200 meters wide between the village and the ocean.

As sea level rises and storms become more severe and more frequent, Taholah is left increasingly vulnerable to flooding from storm surges and tsunamis (QIN 2018). QIN is left with no choice but to relocate the village to higher ground, a decision that the community

agreed upon in 2015 after two consecutive record breaking years of flooding (EPA 2018). Climate models predict that storm surges will inundate the area of the lower village every year after 2060 (QIN 2017). The loss of belonging and culture resulting from the moving of an entire village would be traumatic for any people, but the effects are intensified in Taholah by its specific demographics and history.

95% of Taholah's population are Indigenous to Quinault (QIN 2017). Taholah's residents experience intergenerational trauma from the designed decimation of populations through disease, forced removal and centralization from land based living onto small reservations, and the cultural and physical genocide of the residential school system (Amberson et al. 2016).

This relates back to the root of settler-colonialism and the policies of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), created to expand white supremacy's ideals of manifest destiny into US law. To this day, BIA controls many aspects of life for Indigenous people in the United States; healthcare, education, treaty obligations, reservation employment, and law enforcement are all administered through BIA and its branches. BIA also holds all reservation lands in trust for Native Americans and "status" Indigenous peoples are effectively wards of the state (Lehman 2017). A lost sense of agency results from the extent of this government control, and being forced to rebuild an entire village is another layer of this loss. Current-day Taholah was designed and built by BIA when people from throughout western Washington were moved onto the Quinault reservation. This is the essence of settler-colonialism in North America; enacting policies and creating institutions like the BIA to remove the agency of the Indigenous people and to assimilate those people into settler society.

Taholah's community has been making plans for this relocation for 4 years, and

a master plan for the new village was presented in 2017. Planners and officials within QIN are using the relocation as an opportunity to take ownership and agency over the construction and design of the village. Though the village of k̓íṇáy̓ sat on this land for thousands of years, Taholah as it is experienced today is under the colonial constraints of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, who built much of the current infrastructure when people from throughout western Washington were moved onto the Quinault reservation. This was during the decades-long ban on traditional housing, dance, and song; most of these buildings are currently designed for assimilation of culture, not the celebration and teaching of it (Amberson et al. 2016).

Climate change's effect on the community of Taholah is not only limited to sea level rise and storm surges. Higher amounts of average precipitation have already caused flooding of upland areas on the Quinault and Queets Rivers, exacerbating flooding issues in lower Taholah. As well, warmer ocean temperatures and ocean acidification have. Along with historic and continual overfishing, led to the degradation of salmon stocks in the Quinault River. This is a critical food source for members of the Quinault Indian Nation, and is also of great cultural importance. Similarly, razor clam populations on the beaches near Taholah are in decline due to sea level rise and ocean acidification. Though the relocation of the village to higher ground creates a solution for the flooding issues in Lower Taholah, many of these larger issues cannot be as easily solved, and will require societal shifts globally to prevent catastrophic climate change. Many of these impacts, however, are locked in, and these cultural staples may be lost forever.

Dangers to women in the community will

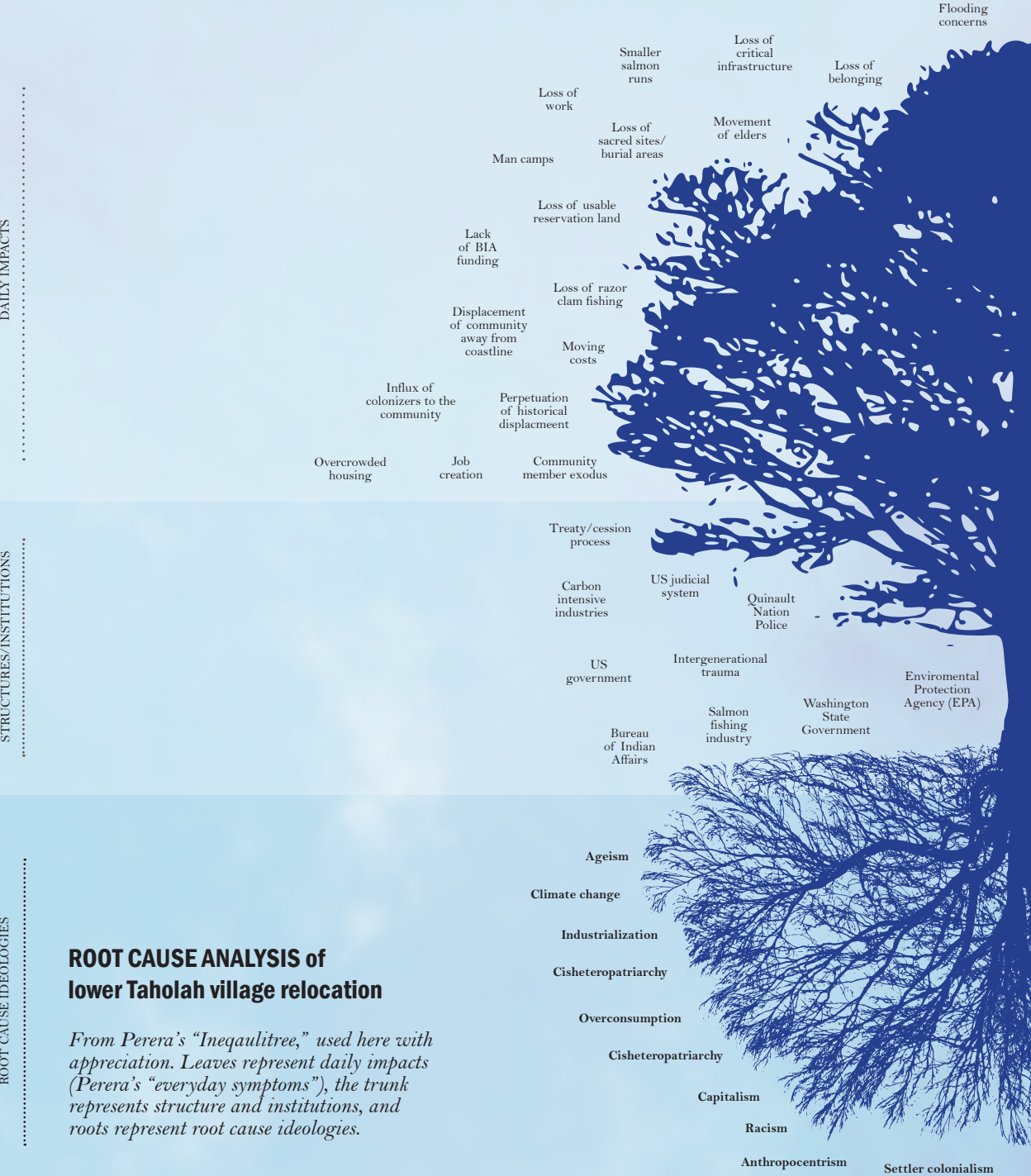


Figure 3: Quinault community members used to commercially fish the Quinault River. Most salmon stocks are now closed due to settler overfishing.



Figure 4: Quinault community members conduct arrival protocol to welcome neighboring canoes for Tribal Canoe Journeys.

be both exacerbated and addressed by the relocation plan. One of the dangers to women, overcrowding in housing, will be resolved with new single family, multi-family, and apartment style dwellings designed for the new village site. As well, access to culturally relevant health care and education will be available at the health center and at Wen̓əsgwəlləʔəw, a generationally oriented community center that will house the seniors program, Head Start, Early Start, and Day Care. Another danger to women, lack of steady community employment, will also be resolved by the relocation plan, as the project will bring hundreds of jobs to the community. However, it is unlikely that the building and construction to



be done is possible using only employment from the community, so the establishment of some kind of man camp is likely during the construction period. This influx of settler labor, usually men, typically creates a less safe environment for women in Indigenous and remote communities due to the lack of connection of these men to those communities, therefore a perceived lack of consequences for the actions of these men. This is a direct expression of the power of the cisheteropatriarchy over marginalized peoples including Indigenous women.

Loss of culture and ageism were two of the largest concerns put forward by community members during the consultation process for the relocation plan. The community is made up of a large number of elders and youth, both groups are disproportionately effected by moving the village. Community members want to ensure the new buildings would be accessible for people of all ages, that essential services would not be affected by the move, and that teaching and passing of culture would be maintained and emphasized during and after the move. During the visioning process, community members asked for a new community center where people of all ages could meet and learn from each other. The legacy of settler control on

building on reservation land is shown in the lack of this essential piece of infrastructure in current lower Taholah. As a result, plans now include the building of the community center Wen̓asgwəllaʔaW. This addresses a multitude of effects that colonization and the village relocation have on the Quinault; it will improve safety for elders and children, provide culture and language revitalization programs, and encourage community members to remain with the community throughout the process of relocation. Moving into the future with a center for gathering and learning will help Taholah embrace cultural resurgence and language.

There is hope within the crisis for Quinault and the people of Taholah. Planners and officials within QIN are using the relocation as an opportunity to take ownership and agency over the construction and design of the village. Moving the village offers the promise of a fresh start and some self-determination in the lives of Quinault people. The most recent village plans emphasize walkability, large community gathering spaces, greenspace retention, and use of traditional materials and architecture (QIN 2017). Moreover, it offers meaningful collaboration with settler planners and designers.

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Potential climate future in Taholah could include a reclaiming of cultural practices that have historically been rejected by the US government and Bureau of Indian Affairs due to their inherent incompatibility with settler-colonial ideology, white supremacy, and the cisheteropatriarchy. This reclamation would allow Taholah residents and the larger Quinault Indian Nation as a whole to return to Indigenous practices and integrate this indignity into present day culture and living. Indigenous culture is not a remnant of the past and is constantly evolving; incorporation of culture, healing, and breaking the cycles of intergenerational trauma are all achieved by integration of traditional living practices and spirituality into modern society. Though Taholah continues to struggle disproportionately with funding denials and the changing climate, the community has proven its resilience in the face of colonization, and will come out the other side with new opportunities and knowledge.

I am writing this statement as a queer two-spirit person of wəxkaʔɬəm Chinook, tʼwalati Kalapaya, British, and Scandinavian ancestry. My home reservation is the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde of Oregon. My family and people also suffer from the intergenerational trauma of settler-colonialism, forced relocation, and the abuse of Indian residential schools. I recognize that I have privilege among my community as a first generation university student, and as a light-skinned Indigenous person I outwardly benefit from white privilege in racist systems. I am affected in my gender and my sexuality by the cisheteropatriarchy; as a two-spirit person my gender identity is one that is not typically recognized in the LGBT community, let alone by “mainstream” society. I present in a way deemed feminine, which negatively affects me in colonial patriarchal societies, in contrast to my own society, which until colonization was a matriarchy.

I also acknowledge that I am studying, working, and living on the traditional, ancestral, unceded, and occupied territories of Coast Salish people, including the xʷməθkʷəʔəm, Skwxwú7mesh, and səliwətaʔɬ.

TIMELINE of history and resistance of the Quinault Indian Nation

Events related to climate, race, and the llower Taholah Village relocation; inspired by the opening activity of Conversations.

Since time immemorial

Ancestors of the Quinault people live at Taholah and throughout the so called Olympic peninsula; human and non-human life interacting together in this space

1700 Earthquake at Cascadia fault, oral history flooding of village of kʷinayɬ

July 13th, 1775 First Contact with Europeans, Spanish ship Sanora

1804 Lewis and Clark expedition reaches the Pacific Ocean in Chinook territories

1810s Colonizers (Trappers and settlers) begin homesteading on Quinault lands

1817 Group of Quinault children build a pit house to protect Salish Woolly Dogs from settlers

1830-1834 Malaria and smallpox wipes out about 80% of the Indigenous population of present day Northwest Oregon and Southwest Washington

Spring-fall 1917 US government logs about ¼ of the reservation for war funding

1915 Village of Taholah established by Bureau of Indian Affairs at former kʷinayɬ

1910 Bureau of Indian Affairs begins plans for grid street system at kʷinayɬ

February 8th, 1887 General Allotment Act, slowly allots parcels of land to individual members

November 1873 – February 1874 Hoh, Quileute, Makah, and Chehalis, and Chinookan peoples are removed to the Quinault reservation

November 4th, 1873 President Grant expands Quinault reservation to 200,000 acres

January 25th, 1856 Treaty signed, creates 10,000 acre reservation around kʷinayɬ

1918 Quinault prevent continued logging on reservation land through direct actions

1933 All common space on Quinault Reservation divided into individual parcels

April 17th, 1973 Quinault fight for fair compensation for stolen land results in \$205,172.40 payment from the United States Government

1990 Implementation of the Self-Governance Act creates opportunity for rewriting of tribal constitution and agency of tribal decisions

Summer 2006 Relocation land forests harvested and replanted

Winter 2006 Storm surge breaches the seawall and floods lower Taholah

Winter 2008 Storm surge breaches the sewall and floods lower Taholah

2009 Village relocation first proposed informally among community members

2100 Estimated 2-4 feet of sea level rise for Taholah, will put original village partially underwater

2050 Estimated 1-2 foot sea level rise for Taholah

2017 Taholah Village Relocation Plan draft published

2016 Quinault sign onto lawsuit against US approval of genetically engineered salmon

Winter 2016 Storm surge breaches the seawall, accounts of resident canoeing between village buildings

2015 Quinault closes coho salmon fishery due to low stocks

2015 Chief Fawn Sharp issues statement against oil rail transport

Winter 2015 Minor storm tops the seawall and partially floods village

2015 FEMA Flood Insurance Rate Map (FIRM) places Taholah in highest recorded risk bracket in America

Winter 2014 Storm surge breaches the seawall and floods lower Taholah

2012 Original visioning project (Noskiakos) for proposed village relocation

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