
Oral History: The Importance of the Land

In this oral history recorded in March 1977, Burns Paiute Tribal Manager Jim St. Martin describes the importance to his tribe of receiving federal recognition in 1972 of the Tribe and its reservation of 770 acres, a tiny slice of what was once its ancestral territory.

One of the things you do have to understand is that Indian people are not simply cultural animals that are brown-skinned people who speak another language or do things differently. Their whole lifestyles, their relationship, is attached to the land. Without the land, they are not Indian. That's just about that simple, and it's just about that complex.

A lot of people don't understand that just having a good job, having a nice house, is not enough for an Indian person. They have to be attached to the land, and it can't be simply private ownership like most of you have experienced. You own your own piece of land, or you're renting somebody else's piece of land, and that's fine for a lot of people. But for Indians for thousands of years it's been a commonly held piece of land, and this is the way they operate. And no matter how many changes they've gone through over the past hundred years, two hundred years, three hundred years, that concept has not changed. If you understand that, it might help you understand why Indian people feel it is so important, that even though they only have 770 acres, and even though they are in extreme poverty conditions, and even though their housing conditions are bad, it means that they've still got what they are. It's a piece of what they were. It's a piece of what they are.

And for Indians in order to build, they have to be able to look at their past to see what their future is going to be. And it is kind of like you sitting here, you're looking at your past, and hopefully that relationship will tie to what you will be, what your children will be, or somebody else's children will be a hundred years from now. Well, Indian people, a lot of people accuse them, and say well they're looking back at the past all the time, they're too interested in their past, why don't they get on and get out there in the world. Well, they can't do that because what they have in themselves and what they have in the land will determine what they are. 770 acres are vitally important to them.

St. Martin, J. (1977, March 18). Development of Burns Paiute Indian Reservation and return of Paiute artifacts. Oral history transcript from the Harney County History Project, Harney County Library, Burns, OR.