

Karuk Tribe

P R E S S R E L E A S E

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RECREATIONAL MINERS ATTACK TRADITIONAL INDIAN SALMON FISHING

Miners file vengeful petition asking state officials to shut down Karuk Tribe's last dip net site

Happy Camp, CA – Since the arrival of miners in the mid 1800's the Karuk Tribe has lost nearly everything. Once the lone occupants of over 1.4 million acres of the Middle Klamath Basin, the Karuk had over 100 villages and associated fishing sites. A peaceful society blessed with an abundance of acorns, fish, and game, early observers described the Karuk as the wealthiest people in North America. Today, nearly 90% of Karuks living in ancestral territory live below the poverty level and Tribal members have access to only one fishery. Yesterday, a recreational gold mining club called The New 49ers challenged the Tribe's right to fish there.

Karuk fishermen use traditional dip nets to fish for migrating salmon as they navigate the rapids at Ishi Pishi Falls near Somes Bar, California. Salmon are harvested for subsistence and ceremonial use only and the Tribe rarely harvests more than 200 fish. This falls far short of meeting the Tribes' needs as there are 4,200 members.

In a press release, the miners charge that the Karuk Tribe is guilty of "widespread and wanton" killing of salmon.

"These accusations are ridiculous," responded Leaf Hillman, Vice-chair of the Karuk Tribe. "Our fishery is gear limited. This means that because we use traditional dip nets, we can only catch a very small percentage of fish that are coming up the falls. This is by design. The creator taught us to use dip nets in order to not over harvest fish. We would not have survived here for thousands of years had we abused this privilege granted to us by the Creator."

Although many Tribes in the Pacific Northwest use gill nets that are strung across the river, the Karuk do not. Karuk fishermen stand on rocks and dip large nets on poles into the river to catch fish. Hillman noted, "Our fishery is non-lethal. This allows us to selectively harvest fish. In other words, we release ESA listed Coho and smaller chinook back into the river unharmed and we eat the rest. It also provides opportunities to tag fish for purposes of conducting scientific studies."

The New 49ers' petition to Fish and Game comes in retribution to the Tribe's recent effort to restrict suction dredge mining in areas that serve as critical habitat for ESA listed coho and other fish listed as 'species of special concern' under the California ESA. This includes Pacific lamprey and green sturgeon.

Suction dredges are powered by gas or diesel engines that are mounted on floating pontoons in the river. Attached to the engine is a powerful vacuum hose which the dredger uses to suction up

the gravel and sand (sediment) from the bottom of the river. The material passes through a sluice box where heavier gold particles can settle into a series of riffles. The rest of the gravel is simply dumped back into the river. Often this reintroduces mercury left over from historic mining operations to the water column threatening communities downstream. Depending on size, location and density of these machines they can turn a clear running mountain stream into a murky watercourse unfit for swimming.

Suction dredging is a recreational activity that has been popularized in recent years by hobby groups and clubs such as The New 49ers.

In 2005 the Karuk Tribe sued Fish and Game for allowing the practice of suction dredge mining to occur in areas known to be critical habitat for endangered and at-risk species. At the time, Fish and Game officials submitted declarations to the Court admitting that suction dredge mining under its current regulations violates CEQA and Fish and Game Code §§5653 and 5653.9 (the statutes which authorize the Department to issue permits for suction dredging under certain conditions) because the activity causes deleterious harm to fish – including endangered fish, such as the Coho salmon.

The suit ended in a court order directing Fish and Game to conduct a CEQA review and amend its regulations by June 20, 2008. Fish and Game has yet to initiate the process to change rules. Earlier this year the Tribe sued Fish and Game again in an effort to force immediate protections for fish.

The miners' suit over the Karuk fishery is retaliation for the Karuks' efforts. "Rather than address the issue head on, the miner's attorney has resorted to threats and intimidation," said Zeke Grader, of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations. "People would not tolerate someone ripping up their yards or their crops in the field, but that's exactly what the miners are doing to the salmon the tribes and fishermen depend on. It's got to stop."

"We just want to do what we were doing when the first wave of miners showed up in 1850 – fish and feed our families. Over the last 150 years miners have taken nearly everything from the Karuk People. We will not allow them to take our last fishery," concluded Hillman.

To date, Fish and Game has made no public comment regarding the miners' petition.

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Editor's note: for a picture of a suction dredge or a Karuk dip net fishermen in action, email request to ctucker@karuk.us

Recent press releases and documents related to this issue can be found at:
<http://www.karuk.us/press/mining.php>