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Potlatch means sharing: Tribe carries on ancestral tradition of generosity

Clark Walworth Special to The World Jul 20, 2019

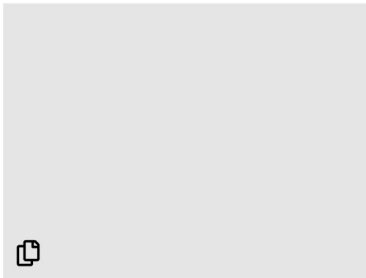
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Guests at the Coquille Tribe's recent pow wow step up to claim necklaces and

other beaded handicrafts donated by tribal members. The gifts were part of the 'potlatch' tradition observed by many West Coast tribes.

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South Coast Strong:
Our community's
unsung heroes

To Coquille Indians, giving gifts feels as natural as baking salmon or weaving baskets.

Tribal Chairperson Brenda Meade recalls a family story of long-ago festivals on the beach near Bandon. Her people's ancestors would work for months, gathering foodstuffs and making handicrafts to be given away in a party known as a "potlatch."

Guests from as far away as the Rogue Valley would don their finest clothing and feast on local delicacies. They socialized and danced. Young people met potential marriage partners.



Everyone went home with gifts from the Coquille hosts.

Today the potlatch tradition infuses the Coquille Tribe's sense of itself – and its relationship with its non-tribal neighbors. Meade proudly cites the Coquille Tribal Community Fund, which has distributed more than \$6.4 million to community

organizations over the past two decades.

“Our Community Fund is a perfect example of putting those old practices into our work today,” she said.

This year the fund distributed more than \$260,000 to 49 groups. The beneficiaries included food banks, music festivals, health-care agencies and more.

“It’s kind of our responsibility to continue those traditions,” Meade said.

Also: “It feels good.”

The tribe believes that its own prosperity depends on the wellbeing of the community it inhabits – in short, that a rising tide lifts all canoes. So expressions of the potlatch culture are commonplace in the tribe’s community activities:

- This year the tribe committed one of its four police officers to join the South Coast Interagency Narcotics Team. The tribe’s sacrifice helped prevent the team’s threatened demise.

- Construction of the Coos History Museum was bolstered by more than \$1 million in tribal support. Along with cash, the tribe donated cedar planks milled by tribal members, from timber felled on tribal lands.

- The tribe sponsors a College and Career Fair each fall, for high school seniors throughout Coos County and Reedsport.

- Every July 3, the tribe’s Mill Casino-Hotel & RV

Park hosts the area's biggest fireworks display.

- The tribe voluntarily contributes hotel room taxes to support tourism promotion.
- The Kilkich Reservation near Charleston is home to many Coquille Indians, but they aren't alone. The tribe extends housing opportunities to non-Coquille Indians and Alaska Natives.
- The tribe welcomes local fourth-graders to the reservation each year to learn about Native culture and history.
- Many Tribal youth programs, including Head Start and college scholarships, are open to any child in the community.

Meade said the potlatch tradition extends to all of the tribe's activities. For example, the tribe's embrace of sustainable forest management reflects the tribal adage, "Take only what you need, and leave some for the others."

A hands-on expression of potlatch took place in late June. For the 30th anniversary of its restoration to federal recognition, the tribe gave more than 2,000 gifts to visitors at its Bandon pow wow.

The scene that day resembled a flea market, except that no money changed hands. People crowded politely around tables to pick from displays of handmade and commercial gifts.

Many chose traditional beaded necklaces, made and donated by tribal members. Other tables displayed a smorgasbord of T-shirts, blankets, thermos bottles,

coffee mugs, canned salmon, flashlights and other goods, many of them emblazoned with tribal insignia.

The surprisingly tranquil free-for-all was a proud symbol of the tribe's generosity. To Meade, it also was a way of honoring the tribe's ancestors.

“Coquille people have lost a lot of traditions,” she said. “Those we haven't lost, it's important that we celebrate them today.”