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Sycuan Band adds 2,000 acres

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Charlene Worrell, a member of the Sycuan tribe, at the annexation ceremony. Karen Pearlman

DEHESA — Charlene Worrell, a Sycuan tribal member and a tribal gaming commissioner summed up Thursday morning's historic event on the land belonging to the Sycuan Band of the Kumeyaay Nation in just a few words: "The earth doesn't belong to us, we belong to the earth."

Worrell was among 200 tribal members, local residents and Native American supporters celebrating newly annexed land via "fee to trust" between the Sycuan Band and federal and state agencies.

In a setting worthy of a postcard --- beautiful mountains, native shrubs and grassland with coastal oak leaves covering the ground, with the Sweetwater Reservoir as a backdrop --- Sycuan Tribal Chairman Danny Tucker explained how the tribe's acquisition of 2,000 acres over several years is all about "reclaiming our ancestral lands" as well as allowing the band to "further our self determination and exercise our sovereignty."

The deal has caused some neighbors who have been critics of the tribe's casino to worry about what Sycuan's longterm plans for the land. The tribe says it does not plan to expand casino operations onto the annexed property.

The tribe annexed nearly 1,400 acres to the reservation, most of which will be preserved as open space with the cooperation of the federal and state departments Fish and Wildlife. An additional 600 acres was sold to the Kumeyaay-Diegueño Land Conservancy for conservation space. A 1,000 foot-wide wildlife corridor connecting tribal-protected land to federal- and state-protected habitats has also been established.

"Why is this so important to us?" Tucker asked rhetorically. "Land is the connection we have to our people, the broader society, the universe and our creator. All things flow from the land."

The annexation was approved by the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs earlier this summer and has been named "Halasii 'eHa Topit" or Willow Lake, according to Tribal Council Member Jamie LaBrake.

During the ceremony, a "bird dance" was performed by 10 tribal women to the vocal harmonies and maraca-shaking of 20 tribal men. The dancing was done near several Native American houses called "ewaa" as part of a tribal village which will stay there, LaBrake said.

The huts are made from willow branches tied with agave cordage and thatched with cattail, according to La Mesa resident Jill Richardson, who help build them as part of a class through Kumeyaay Community College.

"I think the value this brings to the environment cannot be separated from the value it has for the Kumeyaay people," Richardson said of the annexation of the land. "Their way of life - everything from their spirituality to their food and material needs - comes from the earth."

Several tribal members spoke about the significance of the accord. Anthony Pico, tribal chairman for the Viejas Band of Kumeyaay Indians said, "This is a great celebration not only for Sycuan but for all the tribes because of the tremendous amount of land that has already been lost."

Jim Bartell, field supervisor for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Amy Dutschke of the Bureau of Indian Affairs; and Congressman Darrell Issa all gave their blessings.

"The tribal presence will be open space where otherwise there would be endless development in our country, in our county," Issa said.

Members of the Sycuan Band have resided in and around the foothills of the Dehesa Valley for nearly 12,000 years. The new accord ensures the protection of Kumeyaay cultural and archeological sites located within the newly acquired land. A portion of the added land to the reservation will allow for the construction of tribal housing, a new emergency access road, equestrian center, new powwow grounds and small RV Park.

The picturesque reservoir was also a part of the land deal. Tucker said that the band was "able to resolve issues of water quality and access to this lake, which serves as part of the drinking water for National City and Chula Vista."

In order to get the land, the tribe agreed to pay San Diego County \$321,000 a year for 7 1/2 years. Sycuan will also pay \$800,000 for road improvements in the Dehesa area.

"This has cost us \$25 million, but it's ours and no one can take it away," Tucker said.

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