



CHINOOK OBSERVER

Law or not, include Chinook in lessons Local tribe merits statewide attention

Published: March 18, 2015 11:06AM

The Washington State Senate's 42-7 vote last week to require public schools to include the history of the state's 29 federally recognized Indian tribes in their curricula was a good step, but lawmakers missed a great chance to do right by one of our region's greatest tribes, the Chinook Indian Nation.

Leaving the Chinook out is comprehensible in simple political terms. There are at least 10 other Native American groups in the state that assert tribal status but have not been granted it via official federal channels. Some have a tenuous connection to reality, while others like the Chinook and Duwamish have strong arguments for continued existence. (There are at least 11 unrecognized tribes in Oregon, including the Clatsop-Nehalem Confederated Tribes.)

But spurning the Chinook is incomprehensible in terms of historical reality and justice.

Eminent archaeologists and ethnologists say the Chinook family of tribes along the tidal reaches of the Columbia River were one of the most powerful civilizations on the West Coast. Speak with someone like Dr. Ken Ames of Portland State University and his eyes light up with excitement at the thought of the richness and dominance of the Chinook in this prime territory. They controlled the Columbia River the way the ancient Greeks dominated the Aegean Sea.

The motivations behind the Washington Senate's Indian curriculum legislation are admirable. It received broad bipartisan support, based on the propositions that our region's first peoples deserve respect; that 19th and 20th century settlers unleashed genocidal diseases and purposeful policies that took tens of thousands of lives; and that we still have much to learn from the first peoples' deep and successful connections to the lands and waters we now all share. In modern times, tribes are major players in fisheries conservation, land development and other important activities.

There is nothing in the legislation to preclude educators from choosing to include Chinook culture and history in lessons. Here in their hereditary homeland, teachers and students certainly should spend a few days during K-12 schooling to learn about this amazing tribe.

It is possible to imagine an integrated lesson plan that would encompass the Chinook Tribe's role in Pacific Rim economics and inter-tribal politics, traditional foods and medicines, music and language. We who live here in the 21st century would find our lives enriched by better understanding how the Chinook managed to do so well here for thousands of years.

State Sen. Brian Hatfield tried late in the process to amend the legislation to include the Chinook. Perhaps it can be managed in conference committee or in some future legislative session. It is well worth keeping up this latest fight on behalf of tribal justice.