

Connecticut College

Lan-Huong Nguyen '19

A Path to Peace: Trail Maintenance with Native American Tribes in Connecticut

June 8th - August 10th 2019

North Stonington, Connecticut, United States

The Problem: For many centuries, the Native American state-recognized Eastern Pequot Tribal Nation (EPTN) combatted cultural erasure by non-Native and Native communities, land disputes with the government, and lack of funding for communal activities. Despite being one of the first Native American land reservation in the history of United States, the EPTN's land lacks a safely-marked trail that is accessible for their elders and youth. It is difficult for the EPTN to reconnect with their 1000 members because there is no central gathering space to promote a community on their sacred and historic 225-acre land reservation in North Stonington, Connecticut. Paving a three-mile nature trail and building a gazebo will promote peace internally among the EPTN and externally with nearby Native Tribes and the local community by reconnecting them to their land and to each other.

In 2005, the EPTN lost federal recognition. Federal recognition for Native American tribes provides federal funding that can support healthcare, educational outlets, and income for Tribal members. Additionally, Native Tribes have the ability to build casinos which results in bringing revenue for the Tribal Nation, as well as the state government. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and the United States government determine a Tribe's recognition title based on seven requirements including the ability to prove that they are a self-governing, sovereign nation and can trace their ancestral history to the land. The EPTN lost their federal recognition due to local New London county community members and political leaders incorrectly assumed that the EPTN would open another casino to compete with the two existing federally-recognized casinos owned by the Mashantucket Pequots and the Mohegans.

As a result of losing federal recognition, the EPTN currently relies on limited funds and constantly resists cultural erasure. Within the past year, the EPTN sold their longhouse, an office building located a few miles off the land reservation that served as a central meeting space. The purpose of selling this building was to bring in much needed resources; however, the income from that sale does not meet their current living expenses. Most of the Tribe's programs are supported through external funding or the unpaid voluntary work of Tribal Members because the United States government restricts the Tribe's ability to support educational programs. Although their historic land assures the Tribe of its heritage, they lack a gathering space to bring their people together, as well as accessible paths to share the land with all members of their community.

Peace: Peace for the EPTN means their Tribal members can heal internally by reconnecting to their culturally and historically significant land while also connecting with one another. The Davis Peace Project can provide an enhanced common space for the EPTN to help reunite their Tribal members and reduce the chances of land encroachment. This initial project will ultimately lead to more outdoor activities for social gatherings for the EPTN and later strengthen relationships with the five nearby Native communities and the local non-Native community.

Proposal Summary for a Solution: I have been granted approval from Tribal council to implement a collaborative trail maintenance volunteer project that welcomes EPTN back to their land reservation. Since this project will be conducted on private Native land, no permit is needed. The goals of the project are to 1) clear and maintain a three-mile trail through the land reservation for hiking/walking that will preserve the land's natural beauty with signage to mark culturally important plants and historic sites and 2) construct a 12ft wooden octagon gazebo that will provide a central space outdoors for community members to congregate safely. The chosen path will be used during the EPTN's annual Pequot Warrior Race, which memorializes the historic Pequot Massacre in 1637 and invites non-Native and Native communities to explore

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their land in a similar manner as their ancestors. Additionally, this path leads to historic homesteads and stone walls that were uncovered by the Eastern Pequot Archaeology Field School and the University of Massachusetts, Boston, revealing Pequot history during early 16th century colonization.

Goals: Immediate Goals: 1) Reconnect EPTN members back to their land and each other by promoting internal healing and cultural pride with a safe and accessible trail and an outdoor gathering space; 2) Pave and maintain a three-mile trail throughout the reservation that leads to a gazebo while maintaining the land's natural beauty; and 3) Construct a gazebo as a central location for Tribal members to meet on reservation. **Future Goal:** 1) Strengthen Native ties within Southeastern Connecticut by creating outdoor social events after each PowWow to honor traditional Native practices; and 2) Enhance number of EPTN members' participation to increase chances of gaining their federal recognition.

Logistics:

- **Budget:** It costs \$5,775 for an all-inclusive, preassembled Gazebo Kit¹ and \$1,200 for two loads of gravel for the area around the gazebo and the entrance of the trail.² Tribal Council member Mitchel Ray, main EPTN member collaborator in this project, suggested \$500 for paid Trail and Ground Prep Work labor; \$200 will assist the Tribal Nation to create booklets to advertise the new installations at their PowWow. Travel reimbursements and food for Tribal members will be \$400. Approximately \$1,200 will be given to Lan-Huong for rent and food costs.

- **Timeline:** 12 total working weekends. June 8th and 9th involves ground prep work near the entrance of the trail (tree removal and ground preparation) to prepare for the gazebo. July 20th (weekend before PowWow) involves constructing the gazebo. August 10th involves completing and maintaining the trail. Tribal members and I will advertise the trail hike through the project for a culminating event where community members are invited to walk on the trail at their annual PowWow in late July.

- **Involved Tribal members:** EPTN Mitchel Ray, Derrick Strong, Natasha Gambrell, and Tjamel Hamlin. The EPTN Tribal Council has sustained relationships with their Mashantucket Pequots and Golden Hill Paugessett cousins to borrow heavy landscape machinery.

Outcomes: EPTN members will return to their sacred land because this project will promote cultural pride and identity within members who have not returned in many years or have difficulty walking. Building this path and gazebo will increase the number of EPTN members' participation, so it will show the BIA and United States government that the EPTN can be a self-sustaining governing nation. Among the Native Tribes, the project will encourage collaboration that has been fragile for many years. Additionally, the initiative will lead to outcomes for future projects such as nature and historic walks for the local non-Native community to participate in.

Qualifications: As ethnobotany and anthropology majors, Lan-Huong has studied EPTN history for three years. It began with an EPTN community garden project during her sophomore year in 2016 with Connecticut College Professor of sociology Ronald Flores. While planning for the Pequot Warrior Race, Lan-Huong volunteered to assist clearing a path in the woods with Tribal members. During her time studying abroad, Lan-Huong volunteered with an indigenous community to clear and maintain rainforest paths. Additionally, Tribal members have abundant knowledge and experience with trail clearing and maintenance as they independently maintain their land reservation's landscape.

¹ According to Bayhouse Gazebos and Barns

² According to HomeAdvisor, a landscape installation company, provides 1 ½ inch CR gravel stone \$525.95 per load