

Patsiata Tribal Oversight Committee

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NATIONAL RECOGNITION FOR PATSIATA (OWENS LAKE)

The Patsiata Historic District was officially recognized for its cultural and historical importance when it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places on March 3, 2025. The district includes Patsiata (Owens Lake) and the many shorelines formed as lake levels fluctuated over the past 14,000 years. For the Nüümü and Newe (called the Paiute and Shoshone by anthropologists) with traditional roots in Payahuunadü (Owens Valley), Patsiata has been the center of culture and way of life since time immemorial. The listing celebrates the lake's role in stories, songs, and ceremonies, both in the past and continuing into the present-day lives of Indigenous People.

Covering 186 square miles, the Patsiata Historic District is the largest single National Historic District in California. Most of the district is managed by California State Lands (CSL), the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP).

The nomination process, officially begun in 2017, was led by the Tribal Historical Preservation Officers (THPOs) of the five Tribes whose homelands encompass the district: Kathy Jefferson Bancroft of the Lone Pine Paiute Shoshone Tribe, Danelle Gutierrez of the Big Pine Paiute Tribe of Owens Valley, Sean Scruggs of the Fort Independence Indian Reservation, Barbara Durham of the Timbisha Shoshone Tribe, and the late Monty Bengochia of the Bishop Paiute Tribe. THPOs Mandi Campbell of the Timbisha Shoshone Tribe and Darren Delgado of the Bishop Paiute Tribe joined the effort in recent years. Several agencies provided support for the lengthy process, including the Great Basin Unified Air Pollution Control District, the LADWP, the CSL, the Native American Heritage Commission, the California Office of Historic Preservation, and the State Historical Resources Commission.

One of the major challenges was addressing nomination criteria that had been originally designed for historic buildings and archaeological sites rather than Indigenous connections to the land. In fact, sharing the Indigenous perspective was one of the motivations for the effort. As Fort

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Independence Tribe THPO Sean Scruggs has stated, "Tribes must bring their perspective forward in a way that helps everyone understand that the world is not ours, it is a gift that we must care for now so that future generations can live and survive in the future.... The nomination discusses how we view the physical world at creation, how we live in it today, what we want it to be like tomorrow, and what we want it to be like once we leave this world."

Lone Pine Paiute Shoshone Tribe THPO Kathy Bancroft notes, "This is the first document about the history of the area that comes almost completely from the Indigenous voice." The nomination describes tragedies and massacres left out of standard history texts, but it also highlights the Indigenous People's eternal relationship and interdependence with a sacred and extremely important place. In fact, the Indigenous name of the district, *Patsiata Tübjiji Nüümü-na Awaedu Ananisudüheina*, cannot be translated directly into English, because in the Nüümü language, it conveys not just a simple geographic location, but the deep and complex interrelationship between people and the landscape, throughout history and culture.

As Big Pine Paiute Tribe THPO Danelle Gutierrez has said, "It is so important that these stories are told, so we don't forget what Patsiata has done for us. And what she still can do for us, if she's treated with proper respect and management. It's hard to see her disrespected and desecrated, my hope is to get water fully flowing in her again, and to be the lake she is meant to be."

Mandi Campbell, Timbisha Shoshone THPO, says, "We the Timbisha Shoshone believe it is time that the true story is told, not only for our generations to come but for everyone. To hear the story from the Indigenous People themselves." Bishop Paiute Tribe Darren Delgado adds that, "It's also an honor for us to be able to help advocate for the lake, and help agencies consider what it would mean to take care of the lake."

"We are the voice of Patsiata, we are telling her story and we are living proof that we are here to care for our ancestral lands," added Sean Scruggs. "We hope that the National Register listing prompts people from all over the world to respect the lake, its history, and its future."

The THPOs imagine that if Patsiata were to speak, she might say, "Who are these outsiders who are cutting off my water, from the springs of the mountains and the creeks coming from far north that feed me, to be a magnificent lake, that provides sustenance to all? The Indigenous People of this place, who remain on these lands, still see me as alive, from my underground waters that still flow, and have hope for me to become healthy again. That's why they will always speak for me."

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Photo credit: Kathy Jefferson Bancroft



Photo credit: Sean Scruggs



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