

**For Immediate Release:**

**Contact:  
Matt Mais  
Yurok Tribe  
(707) 482-1350**

## **Yurok Tribe Studies reintroduction of California Condors**

There is no simple step on the long, arduous path to the successful reintroduction of California condors.

“There is an enormous amount of work that must be done to determine if the environment in Northern California can once again sustain a condor population,” said Chris West, the Yurok Tribe’s Senior Wildlife Biologist.

In addition to filling this important role in nature, the condor or prey-go-neesh has an essential purpose in the cultural stories and sacred traditional ceremonies still evident in the Tribe’s contemporary society.

West, who has worked with California condors for more than ten years and Tiana Williams, a Yurok tribal member and Harvard graduate, are studying the possibility of reintroducing the critically endangered bird in Yurok Ancestral territory through a \$200,000 grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Historically, the California condor ranged on the Pacific Coast from Northern Baja California to British Columbia. Currently, there are only 172 birds in the wild, and all live in central and southern California, Arizona and northern Baja California.

To reintroduce condors, first and foremost, it must be determined if this region still contains suitable habitat for the indigenous birds to feed and nest.

In Big Sur, which has the most comparable habitat to the Yurok ancestral territory of all existing release sites, condors have nested in both caves in cliffs and burned out cavities in large redwood trees. Both of these resources are plentiful amongst the diverse habitats and pristine landscapes available in Northern California.

The special ecological niche that the California condor occupies is currently void in Northern California. Feeding exclusively on carrion, including anything from rotting deer carcasses to dead, stranded whales, the birds are equipped with extraordinarily strong, sharp bills which can tear into the toughest animal hide. Condors can open carcasses that other scavengers cannot, increasing feeding opportunities for other animals and decreasing the time rotting carcasses persist in the environment, lessening the time that potentially toxic or diseased material is available to poison or infect other wildlife.

In order for successful condor reintroduction to occur food sources must not only be available, but nontoxic as well. Lead and organochlorine pesticides such as DDT, are likely responsible in large part for the near extinction of the condor and must remain at low levels in the area where the bird would potentially range.

“If these preconditions are not met, and do not have the potential to be met, then a self-sustaining wild population, which is our goal, becomes much less likely,” Williams said.

DDT breaks down into DDE, both of which drastically decrease eggshell thickness in birds resulting in egg mortality. Best known for nearly wiping out the bald eagle, its ban in the 1970s has reduced its level enough in fish to allow eagles to breed successfully. Far ranging pinnipeds, like the California Sea Lion, often range far enough to reach Central and South America where organochlorine pesticides are still used. Organochlorines eventually settle on the ocean floor, but still enter food chains that don't affect fish and eagles, but do include many marine mammals. The fat soluble chemical concentrates in blubber and makes marine mammals “biological transport reservoirs” which can move high doses of contaminants hundreds or thousands of miles. This spring West and Williams collected blubber samples from dead, beached seals and sea lions to examine the level of DDT in the mammals' tissue.

During the summer, the two biologists took dozens of blood samples from turkey vultures, a surrogate for condors, to appraise the amount of lead present in the birds.

“Turkey vultures are a good gauge to determine how much lead a carrion consuming bird might have,” Williams said.

Condors, turkey vultures, and many other species ingest lead when hunters, using lead ammunition, leave lead laced gut-piles from field dressed game in the forest. Scavenging animals ingest the lead laden guts, which frequently kill condors. Many hunters are now choosing to use more wildlife-friendly bullets, which are as accurate and have as much stopping power as traditional lead ammunition.

“The truth is, hunting is good for reintroducing condors. An increase in hunting would be even better because it would boost the availability of food for the birds,” West said. If hunters leave gut piles from animals shot with non-lead ammunition, it makes great food for condors. “On the off chance that an animal shot with non-toxic ammunition escapes from a hunter, it can be a healthy food source feeding a group of condors for days,” West added.

Lead bullets are effective because they mushroom and break apart inside the animal on impact, increasing damage. The lead first shatters into fast flying shards, which continue to reduce to dust and can be found at a radius of up to a foot and half from the wound channel inside the animal.

Modern copper bullets, with the help of new technology, have just as much stopping power as lead ammunition. The bullets open up on impact, yet remain intact allowing almost complete mass retention. This leaves bigger holes in targets while producing as much shock force and greater penetration than lead bullets of a similar caliber. Entrails removed from game hunted with such ammunition and left in the field have not shown adverse effects on wildlife.

“Since the demise of the California grizzly and the extirpation of wolves from the West, humans are the only predators in the wild that attempt to take down

large prey such as elk, which is one of the best things humans can do for condors if done in a wildlife-friendly way,” West said.