

Honoring Long Man Protects Long-Cherished Source Water

Who is Long Man? To Cherokee people, Long Man - Ganvhidv Asgaya is a person who shares medicine, food, and health, critical life resources. Long Man is the river whose head is in the mountains and whose feet are at the sea. To Cherokee people, the river has always offered water to drink, cleanliness, sustenance, and many cultural rituals tied to medicine and emotional health. For the last three years, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians has created a special celebration of their relative, Long Man.

The Honoring Long Man (or Long Person) Celebration is a re-awakening of traditional values. It is a communal gathering, a river clean-up, and a spark for learning. Each year, Cherokee and non-native people join hands across cultures to embrace the Oconoluftee River, clean it, plant trees, and learn the science and heritage of the river.

Honoring Long Man began in 2021 when a young Cherokee man, Micah Swimmer carried his children's concerns for river litter to the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians' administration. His idea for a river clean-up fell upon the open ears of Juanita Wilson and the idea blossomed into far more than a river clean up. Juanita reached out to Elaine Eisenbraun at Nikwasi Initiative – an organization focused on cultural preservation. Elaine reached out to Gail Lazarus at American Rivers – the quintessential river protection organization in the United States. A river of ideas began flowing between people who would transform a simple river clean-up into a precious journey deep into the heart of river conservation.

Cherokee people are one with the rivers, but as with so many pieces of their heritage, much of the river knowledge was washed under a rock by the removal and boarding school era. The developers knew that to truly re-affirm the power and spirit of the river would require education, community, and activity. As is so often the case, when those three elements came together around a nucleus of caring, magic started to happen.

Community:

The first Honoring Long Man Celebration took place in the autumn of 2021. From the first few people with the sparks, the community grew to include such groups as:

Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI)

Office of the Chief, Training & Development, Recreation, Natural Resources, Emergency Management and other agencies)

Nikwasi Initiative

American Rivers

North American Indian Women Association (NAIWA)

American Indian Mothers

New Kituwah Academy

Cherokee Central Schools

Cherokee Preservation Foundation

Revitalization of Traditional Cherokee Artisan Resources (RTCAR)

Cherokee Bottled Water

Mainspring Conservation Trust

NC Arboretum

Asheville Greenworks

Casablanca Digital Media

Each community partner brought different expertise and resources. The North American Indian Women Association prepared a traditional breakfast for all participants, Cherokee and non-native. Over breakfast in the community building, a prayer was offered and Chief Sneed spoke to the crowd about river traditions of the people and the revitalization of river health, which coincides with human health. The Snowbird Community (a Cherokee collective located over the mountain from Cherokee village) ran a concurrent program in their own town.

The Chief's office provided paid leave to Tribal employees who participated in the event. The EBCI Natural Resources Department brought maps and equipment (sacks, gloves, grippers, sharps containers). American Rivers supplied logistics and a template for river clean up. Nikwasi Initiative planned, encouraged safety and shared tree planting resources. RTCAR helped students with tree planting. The New Kituwah Academy brought students who chatted to one another in their native language as they planted trees to shade the river. A campfire at the Oconaluftee Island Park was the center for a lunch after the clean-up. Emergency Services picked up bags and piles of trash.

Outputs:

Upon closure of the initial Honoring Long Man Day, everyone knew that the spark of an idea traveling from child to father to government had turned into a movement. Seeing the waves of people sporting their river-blue t-shirts with the Honoring Long Man Logo made the impact and permanence of this event clear to everyone.

In subsequent years the event grew with additional speakers and food. In year two, tribes from around the United States were encouraged to participate with their own parallel Honoring Long Man event on the same day. 120 enrolled Cherokee members worked alongside dozens of students and partners. Several tons of trash were collected from one very special river. In year three, the NC Arboretum took a lead role in the event and raised additional funds to support the planning and logistics. This year brought 150 registrants in Cherokee and 36 in Snowbird. The Cherokee Central School brought additional students so that there were 108 students and teachers for a grand total of 294 Honoring Long Man participants. This year 1,683 tons of trash were removed from the river. Native plants were distributed to 150 people for planting around the region.

A professional video was created to spread the word about our connection to rivers and how they can be stewarded by a small group of local people who grow communally as their river is restored. The video can be viewed here:

<https://ebci.com/government/news/honor-long-man-river-cleanup/>

The project has become integral with the EBCI Natural Resources quarterly Oconaluftee River Water Quality Update Report

Outcomes:

The annual growth and development of this event reveals a replicability that can help additional tribes and communities build resilience around their rivers. Already this has expanded to the Snowbird Community and to tribes as far away as the western states.

Students always benefit from hands-on experience. Their time identifying macroinvertebrates, planting trees, and collecting trash will live with them for lifetimes

and assure that hundreds of future adults never allow trash to enter the rivers in the first place.

A community event that brings children and adults together to improve the ecosystem is a model that will become ever more crucial in the future. By 2030, populations of older adults and children will be roughly the same size, together comprising 22% of the population. While many places find challenges in integrating their communities, Honoring Long Man has proven the process. Together, all people will converge to save our rivers. The Communities for All Ages report put out by Temple University's The Intergenerational Center, indicates the long-term outcomes of this will include:

- Improved well-being of all age groups
- Increased social capital
- Increased capacity to address issues such as river sustainability from a multi-generational perspective
- Responsive and comprehensive systems to support diverse issues

Most importantly, a clean free-flowing river will be the centerpiece of Cherokee life

The proximity of the EBCI Oconaluftee River Water Quality Updates with this community event helps the full population become engaged with water quality in the river.

Cherokee Culture and Tradition is experiencing a reawakening. It will lead to a more concerted Cherokee community that can effectively care for their rivers collaboratively.

And Micah Swimmer who planted the seed of this event says, "It is important as Cherokee people to remember the respect we have for the water. That is our medicine. Nothing survives without water."

Honoring Long Man Photos

The below photos represent the engagement that this program is having in the community. This is an enormous river cleanup that is infused with spiritual, educational, and community values. (The photos do not include much of the extensive youth engagement out of respect to limiting the public youth exposure.)





