

Washoe Displacement from Tahoe as a Result of Tourism

Arjun Mediwala
arjunmed20@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Lake Tahoe, known in Wašiw as *Dáʔaw*, is the ancestral homeland of the Washoe Tribe, and its portrayal is more complicated than its status as a tourist icon suggests. For thousands of years, the lake has been a cornerstone of Washoe life: fishing, hunting, and spiritual traditions have all depended on this storied site. While early 19th–20th century industrialism accelerated the displacement of the Washoe Tribe, tourism has more significantly impacted the Washoe by perpetuating the cultural and physical aspects of their displacement. The Washoe have undertaken various forms of resistance to preserve their culture and the sacredness of the Lake.

INTRODUCTION

“Washoes believe Lake Tahoe is a part of them. Whatever happens to the lake is going to happen to us.”
—Mahlon Machado, Washoe Community Council Member, N.D.¹

When Californians and Nevadans plan summer and wintertime excursions, one location often comes to mind: Lake Tahoe. The lake, one of the largest and deepest in the United States, is located in the Great Basin region of the Sierra Nevada and is portrayed as a natural gem of modern recreation. But the lake, known in Wašiw as *Dáʔaw*, is the ancestral homeland of the Washoe tribe, and the portrayal of the tribe’s sacred lake is much more complicated than its status as a tourist icon suggests.² For thousands of years, the lake has been a cornerstone of Washoe life: fishing, hunting, and spiritual traditions have all depended on this storied site.

Tahoe’s identity shift away from sequestered tribal land to a well-recognized landscape begins with the first documented encounter between the Washoe and explorer and politician John C. Frémont. Frémont’s 1844 expedition through the North California region and eventual contact with the Washoe at the Great Basin of the Sierra Nevada region occurred later than most 19th-century interactions between explorers and other indigenous communities across the United States.³ This belated contact with the Washoe is often attributed to the Great Basin’s sheltered position within the Sierra Nevada mountain range. The Washoe did experience displacement as a result of westward movement driven by Manifest Destiny, but the major disruptions to their community stem from the Comstock Silver Rush and, more significantly, modern efforts to exploit Washoe territory: tourism.

This paper argues that while early 19th–20th century industrialism accelerated the displacement of the Washoe tribe, tourism has more significantly impacted the Washoe by perpetuating the cultural and physical aspects of their displacement. Although this essay aims to substantiate this point, it will also outline the various forms of resistance that the Washoe have undertaken to preserve their culture.

Key to understanding this argument is the tribe's identity prior to their integration into the United States industrial complex and Tahoe's significance as both a sacred Washoe site and tourist destination. To establish the Washoe tribe's historical independence and isolation, this essay will analyze the linguistic aspects of the Washoe language that classify it as a language isolate. After relaying the account of John C. Frémont's 1844 expedition that passed through Washoe territory, the paper will focus on the commodification of Tahoe through 19th and 20th-century commercial industrialization and emphasize how those developments led to tourism in the area. The paper will culminate in a discussion of Tahoe's privatization and tourism before documenting how the Washoe have resisted encroachment on their land.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a chronological and comparative historical lens in order to evaluate the impact of both the historical Comstock Silver Rush and modern-day tourism. By drawing on primary source photographs, books, news articles, interviews and a variety of secondary source scholarship, the paper shares the cultural resilience of the Washoe people. The structure of this paper begins with and ends with a quote by a member of the Washoe community in an effort to center this history around the voices of the Washoe people.

THE WASHOE WAY OF LIFE

"Our elders tell us we have been here since the beginning, and we are still here in our lands."

—Anonymous, Washoe Tribe, N.D⁴

When visiting the Lake Tahoe area, visitors may notice the rows of mansions that claim the shoreline and the casinos that dominate the region's commercial hubs. This appearance entirely conceals the Washoe tribe's ties to the land and presents Tahoe as a touristic paradise. Tahoe's modern appearance, in reality, is a reflection of relatively recent developments in the area; in contrast, scholars estimate that the Washoe have lived at the Lake since about 4,000 BC, and "[T]he Washoe themselves believe they have been [at the lake] since the beginning."⁵ In reflecting on *Dá?aw's* importance to her people, Washoe councilwoman Helen Fillmore explained how "Like most native peoples [*sic*] our lifestyles revolved around the environment; the people were part of the environment, and everything was provided by the environment."⁶ Because the lake has always been such an essential part of Washoe life, the tribe has prioritized sustainable practices to maintain it. In an interview conducted with tribal member Manuel Bender, he explained how from a pool with five fish, only two fish should ever be killed. This sustainability was and continues to be a core feature of the Washoe way of life.⁷

THE WASHOE LANGUAGE

Understanding the Washoe language's history reveals just how long the Washoe have occupied the Great Basin area. For decades, the Washoe language, written by the Washoe as Wašiw, was grouped in the subsection of the Hokan Language Family. However, in the latter half of the 20th century, linguists increasingly identified it as a language isolate. Washoe's grammar structures were the pieces of evidence that best illustrated its isolation, as outlined in *A Grammar of the Washo Language* (1964) by William H. Jacobsen Jr., wherein he emphasizes the language's unique verb structures, vowel alternations and, most crucially, its lack of shared cognates with other languages.⁸ In 2013, Mikhail Zhivlov, a linguist at HSE University in Moscow, Russia, further scrutinized the proposed connection between the Hokan family and Washoe. Zhivlov offered evidence that the previously proposed connection was likely the result of borrowing as opposed to long-term interaction with or evolution from related or geographically adjacent languages.⁹

The fact that Wašiw is an isolate evinces the historical independence of the community. Language is a core aspect of cultural identity, and given that the Washoe language likely took thousands of years to develop, their culture at least partially resisted external influence for much of pre-19th century history.¹⁰ This independence and lack of parallel development with nearby societies placed the Washoe in an especially vulnerable position to become victims of 20th-century industrialism and tourism.

JOHN C. FRÉMONT'S ACCOUNT OF CONTACT

John C. Frémont was a United States military officer and explorer who departed on multiple government-funded expeditions to document the western territories of the United States. During one journey that took his party through the Sierra Nevada, Frémont made the first documented contact with the Washoe tribe. In his account, Frémont observed behaviors that corroborate the Washoe's isolation: the Washoe did not know how to ride or domesticate horses, and their language was wholly unfamiliar to the explorers, who by this point had grown familiar with the neighboring Shoshone language.¹¹

Frémont also recorded the Washoe's affinity for pine nuts and how interactions with the Washoe often initiated with friendly pine nut offerings and attempts to trade, indicating that, to a degree, the Washoe had already learned to navigate contact with outsiders without compromising the vitality of their culture. The impact of this interaction did not lead to immediate war, or even rapid displacement; rather, "as soon as Frémont's journals were published and read, Washoe people soon became part of the American lexicon; they were 'known'."¹²

THE BURGEONING COMMODIFICATION OF TAHOE

“In a month the news went about that the richest diggings of all had been found, and the stampede of miners started that way. By January there were over five hundred miners on the scene. That was the beginning of Virginia City.”

—Colonel James Dixon, Miner, N.D.¹³

The displacement of the Washoe tribe truly began because of the Comstock Silver Rush. When a nearly two-and-a-half mile deposit of high-grade silver was discovered in Virginia City, an influx of prospectors rushed to the Sierra Nevada region—as a result, “Virginia City boomed for nearly 20 years.”¹⁴ It was thanks to Virginia City that Tahoe became leveraged as a resource pool for local mining infrastructure. In a timespan of just 20 years, the Comstock Lode “consumed 600 million board feet of lumber for the mines and 2 million cords of firewood for running the steam engines in the mines and mills,” and a majority of this demand was harvested from the Lake Tahoe region.¹⁵ This logging damaged the Washoe supply of pine nuts and invariably altered their way of life.¹⁶ In a plea to then-President Benjamin Harrison, Epesuwa of the Washoe asked the U.S. government to slow logging efforts to preserve the tribe’s pine nut supply, saying that “this food from the pine nut trees is what my people eat.... It is the same as our mother’s milk....”¹⁷

The burgeoning commodification of Tahoe extended its influence to even the lake’s fish population. Loggers dumped wood pulp and other pollutants into the lake, such that “on some days, the water became too thick for even fish to swim through.”¹⁸ As a result, the Washoe’s food supply diminished and they were obliged by the federal government to relocate some of their population onto 156.33 acres of land. This land, filled with poor-quality soil and located near the Carson Valley east of Lake Tahoe in 1917, had been purchased by the government for the Washoe in an attempt to entice them to relocate.¹⁹ This ultimately caused the Washoe to drift farther from *Dá?aw*.²⁰

THE RISE OF TOURISM IN THE LAKE

By 1880, all the silver ore had been stripped from the Comstock Lode and Virginia City, which once boasted a population of more than 30,000, became a ghost town.²¹ With the Great Basin region now without a draw, investors looked to its potential as a scenic getaway. In the coming decades, San Francisco’s wealthiest elites built “ornate summer estates” in Tahoe and developers took advantage of increasing tourist interest in the Great Basin area by purchasing acres for resorts. Notable among these developers included Elias J. Baldwin, a Californian businessman who purchased nearly 138 acres upon which to create a “resort [that] was secluded, pricey, and attractive to the wealthy San Franciscans he hoped to serve.”²²

Tourism rapidly grew beyond just San Francisco’s elite following the completion of the Lake Tahoe and Company Transportation line in 1900, which linked the Southern Pacific Railroad to Tahoe’s waterfront.

Now, the general public could enjoy Tahoe's blossoming amenities.²³ These developments—and the Washoe's relocation in 1917—ultimately solidified the Washoe's displacement from Tahoe by privatizing property and elevating property costs to inaccessible levels.²⁴ Ultimately, it was these deep-impact changes, rather than the Comstock Lode's short-term disruptions to Tahoe, that damaged the Washoe the most.

THE AGE OF RESORTS IN TAHOE

"Tahoe is surely not one but many. As I curve around its heads and bays and look far out on its level sky fairly tinted and fading in pensive air, I am reminded of all the mountain lakes I ever knew, as if this were a kind of water heaven to which they all had come."

—John Muir, Environmentalist, 1915²⁵

Tahoe's trend towards privatization continued well into the 20th century. In the 1920s, the U.S. Forest Service owned one-fourth of the land in the basin, and "Most of the lakefront property remained in private [corporate] hands." In fact, the Forest Service lacked the sufficient funds to acquire more land owned by the Tahoe Lumber and Fluming Company and the Hobart Estate during the 1930s. The land owned by these private parties was eventually sold to George Whittell who, unsurprisingly, added a new resort to the ever-growing list of Tahoe tourist attractions.²⁶ By this point, Tahoe was openly marketed as a "Gem of the Sierra" a title that conveyed glamorous beauty and wholly ignored the Washoe sustainable practices and careful stewardship that had previously characterized Tahoe and which had preserved the lake.²⁷

Perhaps Tahoe's most significant evolution came from an unlikely place. Tourism had been increasing for years until the Great Depression stymied Americans' ability to travel for leisure. In an attempt to relieve the economic downturn from the Depression, the State of Nevada legalized gambling, and this evolution drove year-round traffic to Tahoe and its adjacent casinos, even during winter, a season that was previously considered Tahoe's slowest time of year.²⁸ The best evidence supporting Tahoe's adaptation to the gambling laws comes in the form of the Stateline Country Club, one of the first locations to take full advantage of the new gambling laws and which was filled with slot machines and big-name performers.²⁹

As the United States enjoyed the benefits of a booming economy following the conclusion of World War II, automobile ownership and other advancements in transportation, "such as the opening of Highway 50 over Echo Summit year round, helped influence resorts to provide accommodations year round." Much like with the previous successes of the railroad, new highways made it such that Tahoe could be accessed by the average American.³⁰

In contrast, the Washoe had less access than ever to their land. As resort slot machines chimed and Americans beheld the beauty of Tahoe for the first time, Washoe children were forced into the ongoing Indian Boarding School Program throughout the region. This program aimed to erase Washoe ancestral identity from Washoe youth by assigning them American names, clothing, haircuts, and by restricting the practice of indigenous traditions.³¹ In fact, by 1926, nearly 80% of indigenous youth across the United

States were forcefully enrolled in boarding schools supported by the program.³² Despite the overwhelming amount of investment in Tahoe at the Washoe's expense, the tribe was not without recourse. In the coming decades, the Washoe would attempt—at times successfully—to reassert their cultural presence at Lake Tahoe through cultural preservation efforts and land reclamation initiatives.

THE WASHOE RESIST—REFORMATION EFFORTS IN THE 20TH CENTURY

Washoe attempts to reclaim their land and reform laws impacting them showed early promise but often faced legal hurdles in court. For instance, following the addition of federal legal provision P.L. 280, select states were granted jurisdiction in Indian territories. Nevada, a state not required to enforce P.L. 280, nevertheless capitalized on this development in 1955 by increasing intervention in local Indian affairs.³³ Naturally, the state's actions disempowered the Washoe Tribal Council, and future attempted legal battles for land reclamation efforts paid the price. This is best illustrated by *The Washoe Tribes of the States of Nevada and California v. The United States* (1951), a lawsuit forwarded by the Washoe which requested \$42.8 million as restitution for hunting and fishing disturbances, land dispossession, and the extraction of Washoe natural resources. Consistent with other rulings against the Washoe in the mid-20th century, the Washoe lost the lawsuit because the court ruled that "Great Basin communities were too culturally alike to be identifiable as a unique tribal entity."³⁴ What these repeated legal blows demonstrate is that Washoe resistance was often mired in court and that the battle to reclaim their culture and land would not be swift.

The Washoe's challenges also came in the form of disagreeable land settlements. In 1970, P.L. 91-362 passed and declared that the United States held in trust for the Washoe Tribe 80 acres of land in Alpine County, California—the land was rocky and wholly unsuitable for farming. Many tribal members perceived this action as a petty attempt to "settle" the damages that both industrial efforts and tourism had inflicted on Tahoe, and so they often held a low regard for this act. In fact, Fred Dunam, a Washoe tribal member, claimed that he would rather move to Alcatraz than live on the land.³⁵

The tourism industry had normalized the erasure of the Washoe from the story of Tahoe by privatizing beaches and by portraying the Lake as a natural wonder, and now the federal government had silenced acts of indigenous resistance through minor acts of land restitution. In 1968, one other notable act of restitution occurred through the Indian Claims Commission, which gave the Washoe around \$5 million for damages accrued through tourism and industrialism. This number was significantly lower than what the Washoe requested for compensation—the tribe's lawyer George F. Wright argued the Washoe should have been awarded \$89 million dollars. Following this settlement, the legal battles of the Washoe temporarily halted, but they continued to resistance through alternate means.³⁶

PRESSURES TO ASSIMILATE

"My grandfather used to say in the years to come things are going to change. It isn't going to be like this. You have to learn to get out and live among white people. You have to know their ways."

—Belma Jones, Washoe Elder, 1992³⁷

In the mid to late-20th century, a combination of boarding schools and the need for economic sustainability placed a heavy pressure on the Washoe tribe to assimilate into Western society. Thus, many Washoe tribal members adapted to Tahoe's tourism cycles by adopting jobs as fishing and hunting guides and traditional Washoe basketry evolved into tourist souvenirs.³⁸ This cultural assimilation had the effect of removing the Washoe tribes' perception of their own lands by erasing or retooling their culture.

Language preservation was vital in combating cultural assimilation, and such efforts as the Great Basin Native American Language (GBNAL) project of the 1980s were imperative to not only Washoe cultural health, but the well-being of all Great Basin tribes. This program allowed Nevada public schools to hire Native Americans teachers fluent in at least one of the four Great Basin languages: Northern Paiute, Southern Paiute, Washoe, and Western Shoshone.³⁹ By making it easier for fluent speakers of these languages to be hired, the Nevada Department of Education hoped that they could increase the number of Great Basin language speakers while simultaneously revitalizing Native culture in the region. Informal language revitalization efforts also took place via language classes offered by the Reno Sparks Colony. These attempts not only encapsulated Washoe efforts to resist cultural displacement, but several other Great Basin tribes were represented through the project's efforts.⁴⁰

DE'EK WADAPUSH AND TOURISM'S DISREGARD FOR THE SANCTITY OF LAKE TAHOE

"[De'ek Wadapush] is one of the linchpins in the cosmology of the tribe."

—Brian Wallace, Former Washoe Chairman, 2007⁴¹

De'ek Wadapush, known in English as Cave Rock, is a landmark regarded by the Washoe as one of their most sacred locations. This 3-million-year-old volcano core is often regarded as "a place of origin for the creation of the surrounding landscape that became the home of the Washoe people."⁴² In Washoe culture, only certain members of the Washoe tribe, mainly Washoe Doctors or Shaman, may enter the location. Therefore, when tourists began scaling Cave Rock as a recreational endeavor, the Washoe vehemently objected.⁴³

Yet despite Washoe objections, Cave Rock was disregarded like many other sacred Washoe sites and had a road built around it and a hole bored through it. As tourism in Tahoe continued to rise, Cave Rock became an even more contested site, and non-Washoe organizations attempted to prioritize recreational access to it over the Washoe's spiritual access.⁴⁴ In 2003, the US Forest Service banned climbing at Cave Rock, and though the Washoe agreed with the ban, Access Fund—a non-profit climbing organization—pressed forward with a lawsuit to keep climbing accessible at the location.⁴⁵ Although both the Reno district court and Nevada's 9th Circuit Court upheld the ban, the sacredness of Cave Rock continues to be disregarded due to hiking activity, fishing, and sightseeing, all activities that the bans did not restrict.⁴⁶

This case offers a staggering glimpse into the contention over Washoe territory and recreational amenities, as it served as the first time when a tribe's spirituality was upheld over recreational access to public land.⁴⁷ Although the ban did not accomplish as much as the Washoe hoped it would, it signaled the beginning of amendments benefitting the Washoe and their connection to Lake Tahoe.

WA SHE SHU CASINO: AN ADAPTATION TO TOURISM

In 2016, the Washoe Tribe opened the Wa She Shu Casino, located just outside of Gardnerville, NV, in partnership with the Poarch Band Creek Indians (PBCI). Former Chairman of the Washoe Tribe Neil Mortimer celebrated the casino's opening, explaining that "Opening a casino and partnering with the Poarch Band of Creek Indians is another step toward the Washoe Tribe's long term goal of economic self-sufficiency."⁴⁸

The Washoe and PBCI's investment, estimated to be about 8 million dollars, aimed to provide a stream of income for the Washoe tribe and demonstrated an ongoing ability to adapt to tourist demands. Although the COVID-19 pandemic derailed the economic gains of the Wa She Shu Casino and led to its permanent closure, the Washoe both adapted to and profited from tourism, representing a momentous shift in the dynamic between the Washoe and the land it had seemingly lost the power to control.⁴⁹

LAND RECLAMATION EFFORTS IN 2026

As recently as February 2026, the Washoe acquired nearly 10,000 acres of land in the Lake Tahoe region, making this purchase one of California's largest land buybacks. This effort was funded by the Wildlife California Conservation board alongside numerous private donations. No voice captures this momentous occasion better than Washoe Tribe Chairman Serrell Smokey: "This land purchase is good medicine for our people. This is a small start to healing from generations of historical trauma, and the benefits will go on for many generations to come."⁵⁰ This purchase has since tripled the Washoe's land holdings and reconnects Washoe youth with their ancestral lands. In comparison to the aforementioned P.L. 91-362, where the Washoe acquired a meager 80 acres of land in Alpine County, this land buyback represents a significant turnover of land back into tribal hands.⁵¹ Although the Washoe may never fully reclaim *Dá?aw*, this buyback demonstrates movement towards Washoe sovereignty once again.

CONCLUSION

Comparing the damages caused by the wave of industrialization brought about by the Comstock Silver Rush and 20th Century tourism may seem challenging, as exploitative mining efforts seem as though they would have more long-term impacts on the health of the Washoe people. In reality, tourism has been the gradually growing force that has driven Washoe displacement.

Crucially, it is important to note that tourism is not a net negative for the Washoe people. Even though tourism counters the Washoe's emphasis of their connection to the lake the tribe has adapted to tourism in

order to sustain themselves and their efforts to fund land reclamation efforts. Through the Wa She Shu Casino especially, the Washoe tribe successfully adapted to tourism, despite its closure.⁵²

Tourism is often overlooked as a form of cultural displacement because it develops slowly: it may begin with debates over fishing rights, then evolve into privatization efforts, and ultimately erupt into outright displacement of marginalized peoples. The Washoe's unique trials and tribulations as they have worked to reclaim their land showcase that despite their historic isolation, they have been persistent in reacting to encroachment on their territory. The story of Lake Tahoe is not finished and the Washoe are actively reasserting their role in the Lake's history and beauty.

While existing scholarship has extensively examined the impacts of the Comstock Silver Rush and the ongoing effects of modern tourism on the Washoe people through environmental damages, this paper contributes to existing research by using cultural displacement as a primary factor in comparing the two. Future research could poll tourists and examine the impact of Washoe-led reclamation efforts on the understanding of the history of the lake.

"Protecting the lake and surrounding homelands have been and continue to be a primary cause for my people"

—Dr. Lisa Grayshield, Washoe Tribe, N.D.⁵³

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