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Preserving and Protecting Natural and Cultural Resources at the Local Government Level to Build Community Resilience

Ask nearly any emergency manager or first responder what their priorities are when disaster strikes, and they will answer “life safety, incident stabilization, and property conservation.” The preservation and protection of natural and cultural resources is often only a footnote when it comes to response and recovery. Yet, our way of life is tied to the natural world around us, and our personal and community identity lives within our culture. A growing body of evidence demonstrates that communities are more resilient in the face of disaster when they prioritize these vital resources.

Del Norte County, CA is situated “where the redwoods meet the sea,” and holds within its borders two Wild and Scenic Rivers, a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage site, and other sites of natural and cultural significance. This has been the home of the Yurok and Tolowa people since time immemorial, and the land is now shared with others including those of Hmong and Latinx ethnicities. This region has a past steeped in disasters, including tsunamis, wildfires, severe storms, and landslides. Now, as the growing effects of climate change are increasingly visible it is more important than ever that tangible, intangible, and natural heritage is defended.

The Natural and Cultural Resource Preservation and Protection Program (NCRP3) seeks to institutionalize and operationalize the protection and preservation of natural and cultural assets in the face of disasters within Del Norte County. Relationships with cultural stewards and heritage custodians have been strengthened through two NCRP3 projects – the development of an NCRP3 Disaster Plan and an associated tabletop exercise that will help familiarize the NCRP3 Response Team (currently being recruited) with their roles. It is the first of its kind positioned at the local level of government and hopes to be an inspiration to other emergency management practitioners.

Presentation Theme: New Program Practices for Local Emergency Management

Collaborators, Advisor(s) and Department(s) that assisted with this research: This project's Planning Team was comprised of members representing Del Norte County, California's cultural stewards and heritage custodians, including those from Del Norte County Office of Emergency Services, Del Norte Association for Cultural Awareness, Elk Valley Rancheria, Resighini Rancheria, Tolowa Dee-ni' Nation, Yurok Tribe, and the Latinx community. Technical assistance was provided by Tidal Basin Government Consulting and the Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative.