Tour the Talking Stones

We invite you to use the map in this brochure to take a self-guided tour of the Talking Stones, which you will find throughout the Whilamut Natural Area of Alton Baker Park.

"Choose a Talking Stone to be your companion in this land. Care for it, guard it, as the Kalapuya did from the beginning. Protect them and honor the legacy of the Kalapuya heritage in which we all share."

- Lisa Ponder

Talking Stones History

A partnership between the Kalapuya people and the Citizens’ Planning Committee for the Whilamut Natural Area of Alton Baker Park (CPC) began in February of 2000. The CPC collaborated with Kalapuya elder and storyteller Esther Stutzman to formalize the Talking Stones project. Names and locations for the stones were chosen by Stutzman, who performed ceremonies of welcome for each boulder to honor the land where it sits. Carved by Lisa Ponder and Mark Andrew, the Talking Stones are works of art, important symbols of Kalapuya cultural heritage, and a celebration of Kalapuya language.

In 2003, the first 11 Talking Stones were placed in the 237 acre Whilamut Natural Area of Alton Baker Park to honor traditional Kalapuya stewardship of the land. In 2011, four additional Talking Stones were placed in Springfield, sponsored by the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT).

Today, the Talking Stones collection consists of fifteen basalt boulders, carved with Yoncalla Kalapuya words and their English translations. Their purpose is to revive Kalapuya language and honor indigenous culture through symbols that reflect the importance of traditional hunting and fishing grounds.

The Talking Stone engraved with the word “Whilamut” (pronounced “wheel-a-moot”), meaning “where the river ripples and runs fast,” sits downriver from the Knickerbocker Footbridge, where the river still runs fast. Some linguists theorize that the name “Willamette” may have derived from this Kalapuya word.
The Kalapuya: First Human Inhabitants

“We have always been here.” Repeated and passed down for generations, this phrase has come to symbolize the enduring presence of our area’s indigenous Kalapuya people and their connection to what is now called the Willamette Valley.

Kalapuya people have always fostered a close connection with the land and its inhabitants. Historically, tribes created stable communities in the Willamette Valley by building permanent structures, hunting wild game, and harvesting native plants for food and medicine. They used dugout canoes for transport and trade along the Willamette River. Annual controlled burning yielded a variety of ecological benefits, including soil regeneration, removal of undesirable vegetation, and renewal of food plants.

Artifacts in the Willamette Valley dating back 14,000 years indicate the Kalapuya people have lived in what is now Western Oregon for thousands of years. Explorers estimated the population between 1805 and 1830 to range from 8,500 to 9,200, but it was perhaps as high as 15,000 before first contact with European fur traders in 1812. In the 1830s, a devastating malaria epidemic killed 90 percent of the population. During the four years between 1851 and 1855, most remaining Kalapuya people were dispossessed of their indigenous homeland by the United States government and forcibly removed to the Coast Reservation in Western Oregon. Today, Kalapuya descendants are primarily citizens of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde and the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians, and are working to restore a cultural presence in the region.

Kalapuya Language

Kalapuya communities originally consisted of more than a dozen tribes. Linguists have identified several Kalapuya dialects, distinguished by geographic region, as of 2020: Northern Kalapuya (Atfalati or Tualatin), Central Kalapuya (Santiam or Lakmayut), and Southern Kalapuya (Yoncalla). Current tribal members are engaged in efforts to develop fluency among remaining Kalapuya families. Renaming East Alton Baker Park the Whilamut Natural Area of Alton Baker Park and siting the Kalapuya Talking Stones were two of their early efforts. Publication of a Kalapuya dictionary was completed in November 2021.

For more information about Kalapuya linguistic research visit: native-languages.org/kalapuya.htm

Park hours are 6 a.m. to 11 p.m.
For more information call 541-682-4800 or visit eugene-or.gov/parks.