

Students Help Tribe Document Its Culture

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About an hour and a half southwest of the Tulane campus the landscape is as much water as it is land. This is the home of the Pointe-au-Chien Indian Tribe and the backdrop for a course that allowed Tulane students to help the tribe trace its roots and document its culture.



Bayous and marshes form the landscape for South Louisiana's Pointe-au-Chien Indian Tribe. (Photo by Ian Batherson)

Students enrolled in Laura Kelley's service-learning course, "Living History," had an opportunity to assist the Pointe-au-Chien Indians in illustrating how the Gulf of Mexico oil spill continues to affect the life of the tribe by threatening the fishing grounds it has worked for more than a century.

"One group of students investigated the impact of the oil spill from every different angle," says Kelley, an adjunct professor in the [history department](#). The students requested government documents and compiled oral histories to show how the spill

was affecting the tribe, ultimately putting together a 500-page report.



Tulane students get a tour by boat as they work on oral histories to document how the Gulf oil spill is affecting the tribe. (Photo by Laura Kelley)

The report strengthened the tribe's claim for subsistence compensation from BP, which would have the oil giant pay tribe members based not only on the fact that they commercially fish the seafood-rich waters of south Louisiana, but also feed their families with what they catch.

Students also helped the Point-au-Chien with documentation associated with the tribe's application for federal recognition from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Since 1978, groups requesting status as a sovereign Indian tribe must satisfy seven criteria, including evidence of a community dating back more than a century.

To help with what Kelley calls a “long and arduous process,” students conducted kinship studies and produced databases that show the connections and ancestry of the 682 members of the tribe.

Kelley says she saw her students move beyond simple documentation and begin to understand the tribe's struggles.

“I think the students really appreciated being able to work on something that they knew was going to have some real, long-term impact for the tribe,” she says.