



## Eastern Band Cherokee Passes Youth-Led Historic Rights of Nature Resolution

**Cherokee, NC** (January 8, 2026)- The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI) Tribal Council unanimously approved a **youth-led Rights of Nature (RON) resolution** recognizing legal rights for **Longperson (the waterways)**. Council members stood to vote and applauded the North American Indian Women Association Daughters (ND) for their advocacy efforts. Longperson, the interconnected waterway stretching over 790 miles, with its head in the mountains and its feet in the sea, was also present, held in pottery by Beloved Women over a quarter-century old.

The Rights of the Longperson Resolution makes EBCI one of the first nations in North America to legally recognize water as a living relative with the right to exist, flourish, regenerate, and flow freely.

This passage marked:

- The **first all-female-led effort** and **second youth-led RON resolution** in the United States
- The **first waterways east of the Mississippi River** and the **second-longest waterways** to have its rights formally recognized
- An extraordinary show of public support, with **council chambers overflowing** into the lobby and **nearly 10,000 viewers watching online the day of the vote**

The Cherokee have always understood Longperson is more than a river. Cherokee youth are raised in a relationship with Longperson, knowing it nourishes and heals their communities and relies on the Cherokee to steward it. Today, Longperson is facing mounting threats, including pollution, erosion, development pressures, habitat loss, and climate change, underscoring the urgency of this resolution.

The resolution represents both a response and a restoration, reviving cultural law while bringing Indigenous values into modern governance. Over the past 18 months, Cherokee youth gained RON knowledge through national forums and collaborations. They sat with elders, cultural knowledge holders, tribal leadership, and the community for research and education, all just to draft this legislation.

"I'm honored to have stood beside my ND sisters today and see healing for the waters, ourselves, and our people start with this resolution," Jasmine Smith, ND Co-founder/Chairwoman, stated. "This initiative taught ND that **success lives in the groundswell of community and collaboration**. We're grateful for all the support both within our EBCI community and beyond our modern boundary lands. I'm thankful for tribal leadership making RON work a priority and reducing environmental problems we will inherit as our nation's future leaders."

The resolution affirms Longperson's inherent rights, but ND isn't stopping there. They stated a commitment to ongoing advocacy for Longperson rights, with the intention of establishing a Tribal RON Task Force to guide implementation and ensure continued engagement of community voices.

Resolution support came from multiple tribal nations, RON organizations, national nonprofits, and Indian Country legal experts, with growing interest from national environmental and Indigenous media.

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**National American Indian Women's Association Daughters** is a 5-year-old youth-led organization that empowers young Indigenous women through leadership, advocacy, and community engagement. For more information or interviews, please contact Jasmine Smith at [naiwadaughters@gmail.com](mailto:naiwadaughters@gmail.com)