



# FIRE AND CULTURE

How we can use fire as a tool to nurse our forests

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The News-Review

**H**umans have experienced fire on all different levels. From the cultivation of fire thousands of years ago, to laughs shared around a campfire and the firefighters who battle the blaze. Humans have a complicated relationship with fire, yet rely so heavily on it.

It's a symbol for destruction, but also an indicator for renewal.

In 2020, Oregon saw a record of more than 1.2 million acres burned in the Labor Day fires. The most notable for Douglas County was the Archie Creek Fire

which burned 125,500 acres, devastating the community. Flash forward to the summer of 2024, a new record has been set at 1,559,207 acres being burned across the state as of Sept. 10, according to the Northwest Interagency Coordination Center and Oregon Department of Forestry.

However, is it possible to fight fire with fire to ensure a healthy forest for years to come?

## A TIME IMMEMORIAL PRACTICE

For centuries, Native Americans in wooded communities relied on fire for healthy forests. They used fire as one of the many ways to manage the land.



Burning was, and continues to be, an important practice to the people and the land.

"We didn't own the land, the land owned us," Jesse Jackson, education programs officer for the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians said. "We were stewards of the land and with the connection with the Creator and a religious belief that our connection to the land and our management of the land earned us our existence and the blessings that we got from the Creator."

Burning was central to what Jackson described as their seasonal rounds, where in winter months, they lived in the low valley, and in the summer and spring, they left the lower lands for higher land.

"We burned before we leave," Jackson said. "We usually had a five-day ceremonial fire that was started by our elders and then delivered by blessed children of our tribe that would go out and then light these fires immediately before we leave, and so then we know when we return that the fire will have subsided."

Burning allowed for non-native plants to be mitigated and allowed for native plants to thrive, especially food and medicinal plants. Plants such as camas, acorns, cat's ear lilies and yerba buena, Jackson said, were very important to the Tribe.

These plants thrived when burning was consistent and done at the right times. The plants could breathe and reach sunlight, and some thrived when fire was set upon them. Jackson said when a tree is stressed, they may put out seeds that are the answer to that stress.

"If you have a burnt environment and the acorns come off of a burned tree (then) the likelihood that those acorns will live in a burned environment is much more," Jackson said.

Once settlers descended upon the land, these burning practices subsided. The oak savannas that were once maintained throughout the land, grew to build large fuel piles. The forest's health declined and competing non-native plants became invasive, choking out native plants. These fuels have created the perfect recipe for fires to burn extremely hot and fast.

Kyle Reed, wildfire mitigation specialist of Cow Creek Tribal Fire Management, said hot and dry weather is not unusual for the Umpqua Valley.

"It has a major effect on those fuels," Reed said. "Which is part of the reason why we're at where we are right now (in fire season)."

With the amount of fuels on the ground, Jackson said a fire can cook to nearly kiln temperatures. For prescribed burning, burning in the summer is minimal and has to be done with perfect weather conditions.

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"If you burn during the summer, there's too much fuel," Jackson said. "It, for lack of a better term, nukes it. It cooks it like kiln temperatures. It has so much fuel and cooks it so hot that it literally kills the ability for life to exist for a long time (in the soil)," Jackson said.

Jackson said if prescribed burning is done at the right times and ways, then there is still a positive outlook for the future of the land and fire.

#### WORKING WITH FIRE:

##### HOW WE CAN USE TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

The Cow Creek Tribal Fire Management is a newly formed entity with the goal of putting a team together to protect tribal properties and members, focus on wildfire mitigation and work toward using tribal Indigenous burning practices to bring the local forests back to a healthier state.

"There's a reason that the Indigenous people did them, right," Monte Bryan, fire chief of Cow Creek Tribal Fire Management said. "They lived on the land and they knew how to be good stewards of the land and I think that as those practices come back and we're able to evolve them and use them again, it should improve the health."

Cow Creek Tribal Fire Management's goal for the future



(Right) Prescribed burn on July 1, 2024.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CSANYI MATUSICKY

(Left) Burned trees on Aug. 22, 2024 in the Umpqua National Forest.

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(Top and Bottom) Prescribed burn on July 1, 2024.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CSANYI MATUSICKY

is to both use wildfire mitigation efforts to protect homes and structures without forgetting about the natural resources that need to be protected.

“You know we’re seeing these urban conflagrations time and time again and that’s where a lot of the funding is being focused to try and protect homes and communities. At the same time, though, we can’t lose focus on the rest of our natural resources because they need attention too,” Reed said. “So again, that’s part of the goal here is to bolster local capacity for the tribe and neighboring agencies to help out wherever we can.”

Other entities, like Pheasants Forever, a national nonprofit focused on habitat conservation, dedicate themselves to practicing burning as a way of restoration by putting the fire in the hands of private landowners.

Csanyi Matusicky, habitat conservation specialist and wildlife biologist with Pheasants Forever, created the Umpqua Prescribed Burn Association, the second such association in Oregon. The goal? To bring community members of every background – whether it be farmers, students, tribal communities and anyone else interested in burning – together to nurse the land back to health with fire and bring the oak savannas back.

They formed in May 2024. On July 1, they had their first prescribed burn.

“We were so hungry and the Umpqua is so hungry to have a fire back on the ground, you know, because it’s all of these fuels, this whole landscape,” Matusicky said. “It’s all so ready to burn. And because we’re here, because there’s such an anthropogenic intrusion into this landscape, it’s just volatile.”

Matusicky explained how we’re living in a natural world that has a natural pattern of events, and when that pattern is disrupted, these fuels continue to build up.

“Each time it doesn’t burn, it builds up another tier and then it becomes more and more volatile and then at some point, at the tipping point, we have these catastrophic wildfires,” Matusicky said.

With resources minimal in comparison to the amount of land and forest that spans Douglas County, organizations like Pheasants Forever and Cow Creek Tribal Management are proving to be valuable in the development of a healthy forest.

“This is a fire culture, both historically and traditionally,” Director of Forestry Tim Vredenburg said in a press release from the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians. “We know that these forests and waterways cannot be healthy without healthy fire management. We strive to honor those Cow Creek Umpqua traditions and use a holistic approach to habitat restoration and forest resiliency.”

With tribal and governmental leadership coming together, the forests may have a healthy future.

“I don’t think we’re past the point of no return,” Jackson said.