



FOCUS ON INDIGENOUS PARTNERS:

## GROWING RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE KLAMATH TRIBES

In early 2020, the Klamath Tribes (Tribes) joined the Indigenous Peoples Burning Network (IPBN) as its newest member. This partnership in south-central Oregon builds upon years of work among the Tribes, the Fremont-Winema National Forest, The Nature Conservancy's (TNC) Sycan Marsh Preserve and others. It is our hope that the collaborative forest restoration underway on the national forest, co-management of fire at Sycan Marsh, and the Tribes' goal of increasing its fire management capabilities will increase in strength and impact through the support of the IPBN.

### 150 Years of History Underpins the Partnership

The history of the Klamath Tribes, the Fremont-Winema National Forest and Sycan Marsh sheds light on why this partnership is so compelling.

**1864** By treaty with the U.S. government, the Klamath, Modoc and Yahooskin peoples (now called the Klamath Tribes) ceded more than 15 million acres of aboriginal territory to the government, entering the reservation era and making lands available for settlement east of the Cascade Mountains. The negotiated reservation was 1.9 million acres in size.

**1887** The Dawes Allotment Act enabled the federal government to sell "surplus" portions of Indian reservations to non-Indian buyers. The west side of today's Sycan Marsh went into private ownership through the allotment process. The Klamath Tribes' reservation shrank to 865,000 acres.

**1913** Logging began in the Klamath Basin, including on the reservation, administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Tribal members became prosperous from revenues generated by logging, cattle ranching and freighting.

**1940s** Tribal members not only served as soldiers in World War II, they shared their wealth by voluntarily buying some airplanes for the U.S. military.

**1954** The Klamath Termination Act ended the federal status of the tribe. Tribal members willing to withdraw received payment, and the reservation was dismantled. Only some small cemeteries were retained by the Tribes. Through condemnation, much of the land became the Fremont and Winema National Forests.

### What is PERFACT?

Promoting Ecosystem Resilience and Fire Adapted Communities Together is a cooperative agreement between The Nature Conservancy, USDA Forest Service and agencies of the Department of the Interior. The agreement supports the Fire Learning Network (since 2002), Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges (2008), Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network (2013), Indigenous Peoples Burning Network (2015) and other efforts that bring people together to collectively identify and meet our wildfire challenges.

*Photos—Left:* Katie Sauerbrey (black helmet), an RxB2 Burn Boss, provides detailed instructions on the patterns and timing of ignitions before a cross-boundary prescribed burn.

*Right:* The forestry crew of the Klamath Tribes and staff from The Nature Conservancy's Oregon chapter and the IPBN visit a 600-year old ponderosa pine tree at Sycan Marsh, part of the Tribes' ancestral territory.



Klamath woman grinding wokas /slulpalc/ on a mealing stone.

*Edward S. Curtis (1923)*

*Courtesy of the National Anthropological Archives,  
Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History*

- 1980** TNC bought land at Sycan Marsh, with the goal of protecting a key wetland along the Pacific Flyway. Today, TNC manages 33,000 acres at Sycan Marsh, including fire-dependent upland forests.
- 1986** With the Klamath Restoration Act, the Tribes' status as a federally recognized tribe was restored. The land was not returned to the Tribes, but later legal decisions affirmed that the Tribes never relinquished members' rights to hunt, fish and gather on land that became the Fremont-Winema National Forest. Today, land holdings of the Tribes total 304 acres and the Fremont-Winema National Forest totals 2.3 million acres.
- 1995** The Jim Castles Applied Research Station was established at Sycan Marsh. The station provides facilities and a substantial land base for conservation-related research to inform restoration and stewardship efforts. The research station began to attract scientists across academic, government and private sectors. Their work continues to bolster "best available science" available for NEPA planning of projects on the Fremont-Winema National Forest.

**1999** The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, the USDA Forest Service (USFS), the state of Oregon and the Klamath Tribes signed a consent decree to resolve shortcomings in consultation and information-sharing about habitat management for bull trout. This set expectations for cross-boundary collaboration in management of the Upper Klamath Basin.

For a more complete history, including the Modoc War, visit the websites of the [Klamath Tribes](#) and the [Fremont-Winema National Forest](#).

## 21st Century Progress

- 2002** The Fire Learning Network (FLN) was established through a cooperative agreement between TNC, the USFS and the Department of Interior's Office of Wildland Fire. The goal was to build landscape-level partnerships to restore ecosystems and their fire regimes to within their historic range of variation. Supported by successive cooperative agreements, hundreds of partners continue in multiple networks today.
- 2005** Five Oregon landscapes were active in the FLN, including the Upper Sycan Basin.
- 2010** A Master Stewardship Agreement was signed by the USFS, Klamath Tribes, Lomakatsi Restoration Project (as a restoration contractor) and TNC. Extended through 2023, the agreement affords the Klamath Tribes a role in management of the Fremont-Winema National Forest through a series of forest restoration projects encompassing 750,000 acres that were part of the Klamath Reservation prior to termination.
- 2012** Data collection began on historic forest conditions that, combined with data on moisture deficit dynamics, shaped the restoration prescriptions for land under the Stewardship Agreement. The data will inform forest restoration and climate change resilience across the Tribes' ancestral territory for years to come.
- 2015** The IPBN was created as an outgrowth of the FLN, with founding members in the Karuk, Yurok and Hoopa Valley tribes. Its purpose is to support a network among Native American communities that are revitalizing their traditional fire cultures in a contemporary context.
- 2017** Sycan Marsh staff convened the inaugural workshop in a series that now connects mainstream fire practitioners and Indigenous people with fire scientists on an annual basis. Participants continue



to broaden concepts of restoration and advance opportunities for co-management of fire in the Upper Sycan Basin.

- 2019** Collaborators in the growing fire management and research community conducted 2,800 acres of cross-boundary fire management at Sycan Marsh and the Fremont-Winema National Forest. Fire managers from TNC, the USFS and the Oregon Department of Forestry conducted the burn while researchers collected 250 GB of data for fuels mapping and fire behavior modeling.
- 2019** TNC staff hosted a two-day meeting at Sycan Marsh with the Klamath Tribes Natural Resources Department, to discuss shared interests in fire management and to tour the land together. With approval from the Klamath Tribal Council and support from the IPBN, participants started planning classroom and live-fire training at the preserve for spring 2020. to help TNC get burning done at the Marsh while enabling the forestry crew to build and maintain NWCG fire qualifications.
- 2019** Five staff members of the Klamath Tribes Natural Resources Department traveled to California to meet with IPBN members from the Yurok, Hoopa Valley and Karuk tribes. Together they observed a controlled burn being conducted in Karuk ancestral territory.
- 2020** Safety precautions related to COVID-19 required postponing the spring fire training, but the training and burning will be conducted as soon as it is safe to do so.

## Sustained Relationships of Goodwill Underpin Today's Partnership

While relationships are central to every fire partnership, the history of colonization and Native American communities requires that partnerships with tribes be built over years of trustworthy performance and reliable goodwill. Here are a half dozen of the people who have built the foundation for this partnership.

**Don Gentry, Tribal Chairman.** Don is the elected leader of the Tribes' contemporary government as well as a life-long keeper of traditional tribal culture. Don's support of the growing partnership is rooted in the wellbeing of the Tribes. "We have embraced a history, a culture, and a need for forest management to create a sustainable forest landscape adapted to the needs, demands and objectives of the Klamath Tribes and the forest itself that provides for our culture, water, food, medicine and materials for survival as well as employment and economic gains for our people."

**Craig Bienz, Sycan Marsh Director, TNC.** After serving as the Tribes' Natural Resource Director for 20 years (1979-1999), Craig became the Sycan Marsh Director for TNC. His successes in advocating for the Tribes' long-term rights to manage natural resources (including testifying before the U.S. Supreme Court), learning to speak the Klamath language, and living in the area for many years have provided a foundation of trust. "As an NGO with a commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion, we are excited about how Sycan Marsh can advance this inclusive partnership."

**Steve Rondeau, Natural Resources Director, Klamath Tribes.** Steve's personal background as a member of another tribe shapes his vision for empowering future stewards of the Tribes' ancestral landscape. Steve says his role is to prepare tribal staff to one day spearhead management across their ancestral territory.

**Judd Lehman, District Ranger, Fremont-Winema National Forest.** Given the extent of the Tribes' ancestral territory administered by the USFS, the partnership would not thrive without Judd's openness and commitment to collaborative approaches.

**Katie Sauerbrey, Sycan Marsh Preserve Manager and TNC Burn Boss.** With a background in federal firefighting and prescribed burning, Katie's vision for the preserve goes beyond land management. "As the current preserve manager, I personally recognize that the time that I manage these lands is a tiny speck in relation to time immemorial. It is with that lens that I aim to honor the stewards of the past and manage the preserve in a way that will set it up for the stewards of the future."

**Wauseka Brown, Lead Forestry Technician, Klamath Tribes.** Most of the members of the Tribes' forestry crew are tribal members who have lived and breathed their homelands since they were born. Under the leadership of Wauseka Brown, the crew collects data on historic and current forest conditions, lays out and completes forest restoration treatments and assesses results. The crew is taking first steps to become co-managers of fire at Sycan Marsh.



Staff members from the Klamath Tribes Natural Resources Department and TNC's Sycan Marsh Preserve visit leaders in the IPBN from the Yurok, Hoopa Valley and Karuk tribes. By chance, the Mid Klamath Watershed Council was conducting a controlled burn in Karuk ancestral territory that day. © TNC

## Western Science and Indigenous Knowledge Guide the Work

Both the culture keepers of the Klamath Tribes and academically-trained scientists recognize the inter-connections among earth, air, fire and water. For the Klamath Tribes, these are not only physical elements, but central forces that shape both physical and spiritual relationships as well as community wellbeing.

In no place are these relationships more closely tied than at Sycan, where a large wetland is surrounded by fire-prone uplands. As water from snow and rain flows from the uplands to the wetland, the moisture in the soils and vegetation affects when and how the marsh will burn. The interplay of fire and water affects how much biomass is consumed during a burn, the vegetation that grows afterwards, and which animals will thrive there. For the Tribes, the abundance of plant and animal life shapes the availability of native foods, medicines, materials for construction and domestic use, and regalia species used in ceremony.

At Sycan Marsh, the Jim Castles Applied Research Station provides facilities for scientists and meeting space to share research findings and restoration strategies. Now it is also a place where the forestry crew of the Klamath Tribes and TNC explore next steps. TNC has long grounded its work in the scientific method of Western science. Due to Craig Bienz's cross-cultural awareness and science expertise, however, many of the research projects at the preserve are also related to species and ecological processes that are important to the Tribes.



Reed College professor Aaron Ramirez and a student measure soil and pine litter to determine impacts from prescribed fire. © TNC (Craig Bienz)

In the language of fire science, baseline studies at Sycan center on historic forest reference plots stratified by water balance deficit, and on extensive bird inventories. Additional studies include fire effects on fuel consumption, arboreal evapotranspiration in relation to thinning and burning, 3-D fire behavior modeling using LiDAR and imagery from unmanned aerial systems (drones), and research on water and fire dynamics.

As the partnership with the Klamath Tribes grows, we anticipate that questions related to cultural revitalization will begin to shape additional research. For example, under what moisture conditions should the partners conduct burning in the wetlands to increase the abundance of wokus, or Rocky Mountain pond-lily, that is an important native food source? How does the timing of controlled burning for fuel reduction compare to the timing of the Tribes' traditional burning calendar? How can fire prescriptions based on historical reference conditions be adjusted to meet local needs under climate change, whether for timber production or to secure populations of regalia species?

While Western science specializes in teasing out measurable causes and effects, indigenous knowledge brings together thousands of years of observation and metaphysical awareness for a holistic understanding of how all things are related. Mary Huffman, a scientist and director of the IPBN, believes that "somewhere in the middle of inviting both approaches, even if they don't completely jibe with one another, we arrive at greater truths that speak to our shared obligations in stewardship of Sycan Marsh and the surrounding landscape."

For more about the Promoting Ecosystem Resilience and Fire Adapted Communities Together cooperative agreement between The Nature Conservancy, USDA Forest Service and agencies of the Department of the Interior, contact Marek Smith at [marek\\_smith@tnc.org](mailto:marek_smith@tnc.org).

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