

How We Use TREX

Aiy-yee-kwee, I come from the ancestral village of Morek, along the Klamath River, on the Yurok Reservation. I would like to share with you how we use TREX to ensure the continuance of our culture and protect cultural resources.

Our culture is fire dependent. Our people are hunters, gatherers, and basket-weavers.

Yurok baskets are known worldwide as works of art, and for their fine craftsmanship. Some baskets can actually hold water. We use hazel sticks as the frame of nearly all of our baskets. Hazel must be burned in order for it to be useful as a basket weaving material. If hazel is not burned it grows into a bush, useless for basket weaving. When hazel is burned in the early spring, or fall, it grows back straight up out of the ground, long and supple. That is what we use for basket weaving. We use it to make baby baskets, burden baskets, eel traps, cooking baskets, eating bowls, basket caps and ceremonial baskets.

Some baskets, such as the baby basket and burden basket, are made with hazel only; we use hazel for the frame and also to weave with. Weaving sticks must be very pliable, yet strong.....fire provides this attribute. Fire actually changes the DNA of hazel, giving it more tensile strength.

Some baskets, such as cooking and eating baskets, we weave together with spruce roots, and use bear grass as a white overlay to create a design. Bear grass is gathered in the high country, and it too must be burned before we can use it .

We also use bear grass in ceremonial dance regalia, not only on the young girls' basket caps, but on their buckskin dresses as well.

Before fire was outlawed in the early 1900s Native people had a prescribed fire regime that kept the land in balance, and enhanced conditions that promote the growth of culturally desirable species. This land management practice also provided hospitable habitat for wildlife. The fire suppression era changed all this.

Five years ago we had no hazel sticks to weave with; this was the way it had been for many years before that as well. Impenetrable brush has grown up on the land, our traditional food sources, such as acorns and deer have been severely impacted, and the threat of wildfire is of great concern.

Restoration of the land, and preservation of our culture, is a number one priority for people living on the Yurok Reservation. We MUST put fire on the ground if we are to continue the tradition of basket weaving.

We must clear the understory of brush and open up the prairies. We need to burn under the tan oak trees to rid the acorns of the weevil infestation. The edible and medicinal plants need room to grow, and sunlight to reach the forest floor. The deer need a place to forage.

This is the task we have set before us. This is the task that The Nature Conservancy and TREX enables us to embark on. So far we have burned close to 300 acres. This year, for the first time in my life time, we had enough hazel sticks for everyone to gather as much as they needed! There is a basket class taking place in Hoopa and Weitchpec. The next generation of weavers is learning how to gather and weave!

We notice deer returning to the places that we've burned. We eat deermeat, use their hide for ceremonial dance regalia, the horns for tools, and sinew to make sinew backed bows.

A local guy reported seeing two woodpeckers on one of the units we burned. I haven't seen a pileated woodpecker in my life, except on the ceremonial dance regalia made by our ancestors. One morning, driving to work I saw a fisher near one of the burn units, a rare species in the Pacific Northwest. When fisher were plentiful they were used in the Brush Dance, a dance still held by the local tribes to heal a sick child.

The animals are returning! Returning fire to the land lures them back. They have food to eat, room to move, a place to raise their young.

Traditional food sources, such as wild potatoes are also starting to flourish, as are plants we use for medicine. Wild iris, which we use for cordage now grows in abundance.

Two weeks ago we took a group of students on a hike to teach them how to identify and use many of the plants that our ancestors used. We took them to a place that had been previously burned to show them how fire benefits the land. They were able to see for themselves the many different kinds of culturally significant plants that flourish when treated with prescribed fire.

As we build capacity in the local community to put fire on the ground in a safe way, we ensure the continuance of our culture.



Margo Robbins
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Yurok Tribe

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My grandson sleeps in a baby basket made with sticks harvested from one of our burn units.