

# Indigenous Peoples Burning Network

The goal of the IPBN is to achieve fire-related cultural restoration—knowledge and practices—in large landscapes to perpetuate traditions and quality of the environment.

## Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges and Family-led Burning

The Cultural Fire Management Council hosted the sixth Yurok TRES this fall in Weitchpec, California, and members of the IPBN were an important part of the Klamath River TRES. The Yurok TRES is known for its emphasis on cultural burning, while also enabling participants to progress in their NWCG qualifications. Presentations and discussions revolved around both sophisticated cultural fire management systems that succeeded long before the industrial revolution and burns conducted according to NWCG standards using modern equipment. Areas to be burned were selected to benefit cultural values—improved quality and quantity of traditional food sources such as acorns and berries,

medicinal plants, cordage, basketry material, and habitat for animals used in traditional foods and ceremonial practices—and to provide training opportunities, improve water quality and restore prairies. Prairies are “the footsteps of the Creator,” and essential habitat that will entice the return of elk to homelands. Elk have been missing from many such places where trees and brush have invaded prairies and meadows with the cessation of cultural burning. This fall a Yurok cultural fire practitioner observed elk grazing, for the first time in many years, in an area burned in a previous TRES. A tribal member who worked on that TRES said that “for our elders, this is like a dream come true.”

Tribal members also conducted five family-led controlled burns this fall. In the traditional fire culture of the Yurok, Hoopa and Karuk Tribes, various families have long-standing responsibilities to care for specific places on the landscape. Family-led burning supports this system, providing for controlled burning in multiple places to support an abundance of foods, basketweaving materials and cultural lifeways. The tool cache provided by the IPBN, and training among families, is enabling families—including four this fall—to safely revitalize this practice in a contemporary context.



Planning for her future: the Yurok, Hoopa and Karuk Tribes' Healthy Country Plan will guide restoration of traditional fire practices in the landscape.

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## What Makes the Indigenous Peoples Burning Network Unique?

As we build interwoven networks through PERFACT, the IPBN's contributions revolve around revitalizing traditional burning practices that sustained ecosystems for millennia, in a contemporary context. The IPBN is guided by Native American cultural practitioners, who emphasize these and other principles:

- We provide a support system among Native American communities for restoring traditional burning practices. We do this because we have a responsibility to our home places, the land and the people.
- We recognize that fire and water are interdependent, together with soil and air.
- In each landscape, network activities are guided by traditional law and practice.
- We protect the intellectual property rights of our tribes.
- Our elders and cultural practitioners mentor tribal youth in traditional fire practices, while also preparing them for fire-related employment in contemporary fire management.
- We use traditional eco-cultural indicators to plan, carry out and evaluate our fires.
- We incorporate reverence, prayer, ceremony, and tribal interaction with the land before, during and after fires.
- We aim to revitalize and maintain the social structure of each tribal community, respecting the territorial rights of families and the roles of certain individuals who receive extensive training in cultural burning.
- We assist agencies and non-governmental organizations to manage fire through tribal perspectives, integrating tribal values and priorities in wildland fire management and research.

## Recognizing Indigenous Fire Systems as Legitimate in Contemporary Fire Partnerships

Participants in the Yurok-Hoopa-Karuk landscape have completed a Healthy Country Plan in 2017. The plan, now undergoing final editing, outlines their priorities for revitalizing fire culture over the next three to five years. While reviewing the plan, it became clear that indigenous fire systems could be recognized by mainstream fire agencies as legitimate and sufficient for inclusion in contemporary fire management agreements. In this landscape, for example, the indigenous fire

system includes the functions of fire governance, accountability, planning, operations, safety, training, monitoring and evaluation, as do contemporary agency systems. The depth, specificity and seriousness of this system is not well known in the mainstream fire community. If better recognized, an indigenous fire organization operating by traditional principles could be included in a Local Area Operating Plan. Exploring what would be required for such inclusion was identified as an area for further work.



Student art from the acorn festival depicts how acorns are integrated into human health and culture.

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A pile burn by a private property owner in Round Valley is a prelude to planning a broadcast burn. Individual landowners here are interested in developing partnerships to overcome barriers in fire planning and permitting. © Chris Baldo

## Revitalizing Cultural Fire

Indigenous fire systems around the world are maintained by passing down traditional knowledge and practices from generation to generation. Sacred knowledge is often not written down, but rather held in the telling of stories and in memory. Knowledge and practice are inseparable: if cultural fire isn't practiced, knowledge is lost and fire culture fades. This is why leaders in the Yurok-Hoopa-Karuk landscape have identified advancing intergenerational learning as a priority.

Members of the IPBN worked to advance intergenerational learning in local communities in a range of ways this fall. A senior basketweaver continued to coach a group of young women in cultural burning and basketweaving as part of her work in assisting families to achieve self-sufficiency. The Hoopa Elementary School held its second annual acorn festival, with students and families celebrating acorns as a nutritious food source, and the fire needed to maintain healthy oak trees.

Community structures are being adjusted as well. For example, a group of professional women met with their tribal chair and fire and forestry departments to push for burning several culturally significant areas that

had been identified. The knowledge exchange that ensued explored the juxtaposition of traditional fire culture with contemporary tribal administration (for example, fire-related funding coming to the tribe through the Bureau of Indian Affairs doesn't provide for cultural burning). The immediate outcome was that the fire department burned one cultural area that week, using funds for fire training. With support from the tribal council, the group formed a Cultural Burning Committee to move things forward.

*"We burn because we have a sacred obligation to the land and our people."*

### Round Valley—Progress in a Dispersed Community

Working with community engagement expert Jana Carp, we now understand that the residents of Round Valley and the Round Valley Indian Tribes form an asset-rich but socially dispersed community in which collaboration may best develop according to family and friend networks. Success is most likely to arise from individual landowners completing one controlled burn at a time according to shared values. Landowners have identified formal fire planning and permitting as hurdles

that are holding them back. They are interested in building relationships with partners to marshal the necessary resources to get burning done.

Following this assessment, we visited two potential burn areas with a small group of people—a landowner who wants to burn his property, a rancher who wants to work with the Mendocino National Forest to burn his grazing allotment, two core team members from the nearby FireScape Mendocino FLN landscape, and fire and fuels staff from the Forest Service and CAL FIRE. This group will work together to help one another plan and conduct two burns, and a third landowner has expressed interest in joining the group and burning on her property.

### Network Expansion

Participants from the Yurok, Hoopa and Karuk tribes developed a plan to expand their support network to additional tribes. In discussions about advantages and cautions about expansion, one cultural practitioner observed, "Our prayers are for the world, not for only our land." While members wish to ensure that the IPBN has strong roots before it stretches out too far, they want to use their family connections, old trade routes and the traditional bartering system to help build the support network.

The group identified several tribes and geographies for exploratory discussions. These include two tribes in Washington that are actively revitalizing their fire cultures and five tribes in Northern California where participants have existing family connections. Several Pueblos in New Mexico that manage fire-dependent forests, which also protect the water supply for Santa Fe and Albuquerque, are also being considered.

In addition, PERFACT staff began an informal inventory of Conservancy chapters already in dialogue with tribes about stewardship of Conservancy lands. To date this has identified opportunities for collaboration in California, Florida, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon and Washington. These relationships are in various stages of development, from early conversations to well-developed partnerships.



The Indigenous Peoples Burning Network is supported by *Promoting Ecosystem Resilience and Fire Adapted Communities Together* (PERFACT), a cooperative agreement between The Nature Conservancy, USDA Forest Service and agencies of the Department of the Interior. For more information, contact Mary Huffman (mhuffman@tnc.org).

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