

Onward: The Native Stewards of the Amah Mutsun Land Trust and CAL FIRE Burn Together

By Joanna Nelson, with insights and review from CZU CAL FIRE and the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band

This piece was written before the CZU Lightning Complex fire on California's central coast, which burned over 86,000 acres. We would like to acknowledge the communities impacted, the tireless work of first responders, and what it will take to recover from the loss. The Amah Mutsun Land Trust staff, themselves, had tools and equipment burn in the fires (where they live and store equipment on State Park land while doing stewardship). It is the author's view that it will only become more and more important to turn to Indigenous land management and cultural fire to guide the way forward.

I am an independent, non-Indigenous scientist and researcher at LandSea Science. For seven months, from summer 2019 to spring 2020, I worked with the Amah Mutsun Land Trust (AMLT), an Indigenous nonprofit organization created by the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band (AMTB). The Mutsun name for their traditional lands, which are in the Monterey Bay area, is Popeloutchom.

Their mission, as described on their website, has four parts:

- Conserve and restore Indigenous cultural and natural resources within the traditional territories of the Mutsun and Awaswas peoples.
- Steward our lands and waters; combining traditional resource and environmental management with contemporary approaches—ensuring a resilient future for all inhabitants of Popeloutchom and fulfilling our obligation to Creator.
- Research and teach the ways of nature—returning to the path of traditional ecological knowledge that our ancestors followed for thousands of years.
- Learning and Teaching—The Amah Mutsun Land Trust will continue on our path of knowledge, engaging in research and education that cultivates a greater understanding of our relationship with Mother Earth and all life.

During my time with the AMLT, I was fortunate to witness a developing, early step in collaborative burning and expanded burning in California—or, as I learned at Klamath Prescribed Fire Training Exchange (TREX), “putting good fire on the land.” The Native Stewards of the AMLT have both fire certifications and a deep cultural history of fire. The AMLT however, as a small nonprofit land trust, couldn’t cover liability for burning and hit a hurdle in moving their burn forward.

The following story is a celebration of the relationships and collaboration on the ground that opened doors for good fire in central coastal California in the spring of 2020.

Creating Collaboration for Good Fire

The direct ancestors of the AMTB have been putting good fire on the ground for hundreds of generations (likely over 800 generations). This history of fire was broken by the past 250 years or so of colonization in which fire was outlawed and all Native spiritual and Earth-tending practices were violently interrupted. With the AMLT, the Native Stewards continue their stewardship and use of fire—without federal recognition of the tribe (as is true for many California tribes) and without ownership of land. All of their good work is



Gabriel Pineida is a squad boss with the Native Stewardship Corps, serving as a leader and mentor. The back of his uniform shirt shows the goals of the AMLT, in an ongoing circle: “Research and Education,” “Conservation and Restoration” and “Indigenous Stewardship.”



The Native Stewards of the AMLT are tending the land of their traditional territory, here as sawyers and swampers building burn piles on slopes in San Vicente Redwoods in preparation for collaborative burning with CAL FIRE. © Peninsula Open Space Trust

done through partnerships and relationships. One project the Native Stewards are completing is fuel reduction and pile burning on a 110-acre unit in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

On the timescale of just one lifetime (mine), I've studied fire ecology for 20 years. I have been studying fire around the world—in California where I'm from; in Greece at the University of Athens and in the surrounding region of Attica; and in rural, interior Alaska. In Alaska I began to understand the links between climate change, wildfire patterns and subsistence livelihoods, working with researchers, managers and Indigenous tribal-council members in Koyukon Athabascan groups.

After decades of studying wildfire patterns and post-fire ecology, the first time I put good fire on the land was in October 2019 at the Klamath TRES. It was life-changing. Since then, I've burned with the AMLT and California State Parks' collaboration, and was looking forward to burning again here in the Santa Cruz Mountains. We built piles, and were ready to burn them, and that's where AMLT ran into the liability hurdle mentioned above.

Although there is emerging legislation in California—such as Senate Bill 901 "Wildfires" that passed in August 2018 and Governor Newsom's mandates around fire—to make

burning more possible for trained landowners and crews outside of the California Department of Fire and Forestry (CAL FIRE), one problem that still remains is obtaining insurance coverage for liability. Either insurance premiums are prohibitively expensive, insurance to cover fire-lighting doesn't exist (yet), or the liability is just too much to take on (e.g., in this area of California, where land and mega-home values are high). You light a fire, you're responsible for whatever happens in that fire, including the consequences of escape. Liability concerns led the executive director of AMLT to conclude that the small nonprofit organization could not lead burns yet. CAL FIRE, as a state agency, can shoulder more liability, and therefore conduct burns. However, CAL FIRE doesn't have the capacity to do all the burning that needs to happen. This is where collaboration comes in.

Partnerships Matter

It would be more effective to prevent catastrophic wildfire in California if multiple trained groups could burn in parallel with CAL FIRE—and certainly with continued braiding of knowledge between Indigenous cultural burning practices and state-agency prescribed fire practices. CAL FIRE is supportive of efforts for private landowners to do more burning, and TRES is one of the opportunities that CAL FIRE is engaged in. The Native Stewards have participated in the Klamath and Yurok TRES and have worked collaboratively with California State Parks on land stewardship and prescribed and cultural burns.

The AMLT has built on existing good relationships to move forward. As one example, Chairman Valentin Lopez connected with CAL FIRE personnel through the Santa Cruz Mountain Stewardship Network a network of landowners and stewards "committed to working together to help cultivate a resilient, vibrant region." In a previous engagement, in 2015, CAL FIRE invited the Native Stewards to start a prescribed fire in a traditional way, with ceremony and with the fire-by-friction of elderberry wood and buckeye wood sparking a coal. Then CAL FIRE ran the burn.

This year, in a phone call with a CAL FIRE division chief and a forester, we learned that CAL FIRE could fit the needed burn days into their schedule. Acknowledging that CAL FIRE would take responsibility for the burn, designate a burn boss, and choose a crew (they chose a California Department



Nico Costillas adjusts the chain tension on the AMLT chainsaw he uses. Maintaining and adjusting tools is part of in-depth knowledge of the work, ensuring safe working conditions.

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of Corrections inmate crew), AMLT offered additional capacity: a trained Wildland Firefighter Type 2 crew, ready to contribute well. They said, “yes,” which was a big victory, but not the last hurdle. CAL FIRE wasn’t going to be able to fund the work of the AMLT crew. To fund the Stewards’ work, I went to our conservation partners with the news that we could serve as active participants on the burn, and was able to secure funding.

Burning Together

The burn days cleaned out fuels to help prevent catastrophic fire, contributed to research on releasing mature trees from competition, and increased collaboration on burn piles with CAL FIRE for the first time. And as tribal Chairman Valentin Lopez said, “It’s very important to our tribe to do research regarding populations of native plants, insects, birds and four-leggeds, before fire, and after.”

At the start of each day, the Native Stewards and AMLT co-workers, following the direction of tribal elders, made an offering and a prayer. We shared an orientation and safety talk and then we were ready to move forward with the burn.

The project was a success. That first day, we burned with a CAL FIRE engine crew. On day two, we burned with Captain Brian West of CAL FIRE and an inmate crew. Days three and



A glimpse of the collaborators, including CAL FIRE Captain Brian West (who assessed the Native Stewards’ high skill level in the field conducting prescribed fire), the Native Stewardship Corps, and author Nelson Joanna, after a solid day of burning piles safely.



Packed up after a good day’s work, Gabriel Pineida and Natalie Pineida carry tools and gear out of the fuel-reduction site and back up the hill.

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four, Captain West returned and because he had assessed our group’s capabilities on the previous day, he suggested we choose an area of piles we could manage well and go for it. As a CAL FIRE captain, Captain West determined our crew’s ability, made a judgment call, and gave us a certain

amount of freedom and leeway. The Native Stewards and I included this recognition in the “positives” in the after action review for that day. We do this work cooperatively; by gaining more experience working together, we build our trust with each other.

The Path Ahead

This experience showed again that positive steps in fire-lighting happen in the relationships on the ground. The Native Stewards of AMLT moved forward with a new step in burning with CAL FIRE. What keeps opening up the path ahead? There are so many growth edges and leaps forward. We need to include respecting Indigenous leadership and cultural-burn practitioners; creating prescribed burn associations (which are in progress in the Monterey Bay and already established in other areas of California) to support, educate, and potentially insure each other in collectives; and understanding of what emerging legislation means in practice, translated into land care. Because good land care involves good fire at the right place and at the right time.

MORE ONLINE

Amah Mutsun Land Trust

<https://www.amahmutsunlandtrust.org/>

California Department of Fire and Forestry (CAL FIRE)

<https://www.fire.ca.gov/>

LandSea Science

<http://landseascience.com/>

Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges (TREX)

<http://nature.ly/trainingexchanges>

Santa Cruz Mountain Stewardship Network

<https://scmsn.net/>

More on burning in this landscape:

"The Land Makes it Right: Reframing Our Ideas About When Burning is Possible"

<https://fireadaptednetwork.org/the-land-makes-it-right-reframing-our-ideas-about-when-burning-is-possible/>



Monitoring several burn piles in progress. This low-intensity smolder is part of tending the land with good fire, as the piles burn completely.

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This story was originally published on the Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network (FAC Net) blog. FAC Net posts new stories about aspects of community wildfire resilience weekly; visit fireadaptednetwork.org/subscribe to have them delivered right to your inbox.

Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges are part of *Promoting Ecosystem Resilience and Fire Adapted Communities Together*, a cooperative agreement between The Nature Conservancy, USDA Forest Service and agencies of the Department of the Interior. For more information about PERFECT, contact Marek Smith at marek_smith@tnc.org.

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