

Indigenous Peoples Burning Network

The mission of the Yurok-Hupa-Karuk IPBN is to revitalize the implementation of cultural burns in native communities through the cultivation of an intertribal support system in which traditional ecological knowledge is shared and our rights are protected.

Native American people walk in two worlds: their ancestral tribal world and the contemporary world, which is led by other people. When we first started creating a network centered on fire management from an indigenous peoples' perspective, we laid out some principles for how this would be different from other fire-related partnerships. Some principles, like self-determination are universal to indigenous peoples around the world; others, like preparing the next generation of cultural fire practitioners are specific to the local landscape. For the IPBN, these principles mean operating our network from the indigenous perspective first, and designing connections with partners where there is synergy for reaching our vision.

Healthy Country Planning

Earlier in 2016, Blane Heumann, The Nature Conservancy's Director of Fire Management, introduced us to an indigenous conservation plan from Balangarra, Australia. The plan was developed using Healthy Country Planning, a culturally-based planning approach adapted from other formats by Aboriginal peoples in Australia. There, local people have been "caring for country" for 40,000 years, and fire plays a big part. After a work session

with this method in June, Margo Robbins of the Cultural Fire Management Council and Mary Huffman of the Fire Learning Network staff traveled to Darwin, Australia for 10 days of training to learn more.

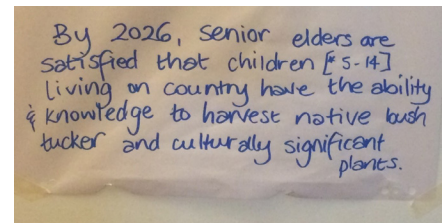
"Two things really hit us," said Margo, "Aboriginal people there have rights to use fire that aren't recognized here and their plans talk a lot about sustaining culture into the future." Healthy Country Plans put the culture of Native people and their homelands as a top priority.



At first Healthy Country Planning looks like ordinary adaptive management planning, but anybody who opens up a Healthy Country Plan will feel right away that it is something different. The focus is on living culture, revealing different ways of thinking and speaking through the words of indigenous peoples who have deep connections to their homelands.

"In Healthy Country Planning, Mary observed, "nobody has to ignore important spiritual relationships and nobody has to put on somebody else's planning jacket that doesn't fit their way of being." To emphasize local ways of thinking, a plan can incorporate the local indigenous language(s), and be translated later for a broader audience.

We anticipate that our Yurok-Hoopa-Karuk Healthy Country Plan will inform other land management plans with indigenous perspectives. These plans include federal forest management plans, and the Community Health and Wildfire Protection Plan for Yurok ancestral territory.



A culturally-based goal for Kakadu National Park, developed during training in Healthy Country Planning in Australia. The goal recognizes the importance of native foods (tucker), future generations living on the land, and evaluation of progress by elders of local Aboriginal clans. In contrast, a typical management plan crafted in the U.S. might read something like, "By 2025, 85 percent of the historical resources in the park are documented and protected."

After the workshop, Margo and Mary joined two staff members from the Conservancy's Northern Australia program for a 3-day driving tour of southeastern Cape York. Spending time in the field with indigenous ranger groups and partners who are advancing cultural burning showed us how Healthy Country Planning is being put into action. We learned that elders in that part of Cape York are teaching younger generations to light cool fires either before the hot, dry season or just before the arrival of rain storms, a practice called "storm burning." We learned that ordinary people can take care of the land with cool, patchy fires. Cool



During training in Healthy Country Planning, Margo Robbins of the Yurok Tribe (center) participates in the fire management work group, together with a coach (right) and Aboriginal people from two clans in Northern Australia.

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If Native people choose, their Healthy Country Plans can be a tool for elevating the strength and clarity of their voices in shaping the management of large ancestral territories. For example, in the Yurok-Hoopa-Karuk landscape, reservation lands encompass roughly 155,000 acres, while the Forest Service manages most of the 1.8 million acres of combined ancestral territory. Planning meetings usually include discussions of sacred places, practices and knowledge, but to protect intellectual property rights, participants decide what is appropriate to share in the final document. In this way, Healthy Country Plans can bridge to other management plans, such as USFS Forest Land Management Plans.

fires are necessary to maintain native plants for wallabies, kangaroos and other native animals. Cool burns reduce the “rubbish” but don’t affect the canopies of the trees which are important to shade both animals and understory plants in this hot climate. What’s more, the elders light the fire when only some species of grass will burn, leaving unburned plants for food and cover for animals. Later after the burned grasses have greened up, the elders return to burn the remaining unburned plants. A hot burn that consumes the entire understory and damages tree canopies is considered very bad practice.

Staff from Cape York Natural Resource Management, Ltd. showed us how they are connecting indigenous people who want to advance their ability to “care for country,” including cultural burning. Partners are making extensive use of video and websites to enable local people to tell their story of fire recovery, document Healthy Country Plans and connect people working on similar efforts across Australia. We will continue our relationships with these practitioners, who will continue to provide inspiration and guidance for the expansion of our Indigenous Peoples’ TREX and the Indigenous Peoples Burning Network.

The second session of Healthy Country Planning in the Yurok-Hoopa-Karuk landscape will take place over three days in the first months of 2017. The draft plan will then be reviewed in a large workshop that community members from all three tribes will be encouraged to take part in.

Family-Based Burning

The most important outcome of the June Healthy Country Planning workshop was an increased emphasis on family-based burning. In the ancestral territories of the Yurok, Hoopa and Karuk Tribes, controlled burning was traditionally done according to family lines. Participants in the workshop identified a goal of building the capacity for 40 families to do cool- fire controlled burns in the coming three



Low-intensity controlled burns conducted under the Six Rivers National Forest’s Roots and Shoots Program combine mainstream fuel reduction with improving conditions for culturally significant species. Photo: USFS

years. To this end, the Cultural Fire Management Council hosted a fire training in November, where 10 people received training. Network advisors are also in dialogue with the California Air Resources Board to discuss how air quality plans could support traditional burning practices.

Legal Framework

A review this fall of policy and key legal cases involving treaty rights for natural resource management suggests that they typically address Native Americans’ rights to hunt, fish and gather in their ancestral territories. At this first level of investigation, rights to actively manage habitat (such as controlled burning to perpetuate resources) for areas that are within ancestral territories, but off reservations, do not appear to be well-explored.

The Presidential and Secretarial Orders of 2009 and 2016, which direct federal agencies to consult with tribes, emphasize the need for meaningful government-to-government consultation, including fire planning and management. It appears that it would be helpful to have a small project that enabled tribes in the IPBN to describe how they would like fire-related consultation to be conducted.



In November the Warrior Institute held a field learning day for youth, providing occupational training in fire. © Margo Robbins

Expanding the Network

In a series of meetings in New Mexico in December, the IPBN staff lead explored the possibility of expanding the IPBN to one or more landscapes in the state. There is high potential for working with two tribes to advance controlled burning in an indigenous context. Work with these tribes would dovetail with the large multi-party watershed project, the Rio Grande Water Fund.



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