The Yurok Tribe of Indians in the Klamath Mountains of northern California is hosting a ten-day prescribed fire training exchange. The Tribe’s Cultural Fire Management Committee has prepared a series of burn units that, once burned, will help produce better basket-making materials. Long known for their incredible basketry skills, the Yurok use numerous native plants found along the Klamath River to construct and color their baskets. The Yurok have managed culturally important plants like hazel (Corylus cornuta) with fire for millennia.

The training exchange started with a boat ride down river along the Klamath, where resource managers from the Tribe pointed out different vegetation communities, discussed observed changes since the removal of fire from the landscape and also identified village sites and places where traditional dances and other important ceremonies still occur. At one point, the boat beached along a stand of willows and one of the women disembarked, reached into the water and pulled out some of the long, thin, red roots from the shoreline willows; cutting them with a knife she talked about how these would be used for baskets. In addition to the orientation boat ride and tours of the planned burn units, the training exchange management team also spent a day with tribal leaders hearing about the different management and cultural practices of the Tribe. The meeting opened with a song and dance, and a prayer of thanks, followed by a welcoming presentation from the chair-man of the Tribe.

Firefighters from federal and state agencies and NGOs as well as the Tribe’s fire crew are taking part in this exchange. Participants will be working with Tribal elders and learning about the history and cultural practices of the Yurok, as well as hearing from local scientists, ecologists and private land owners who are cooperating with the Tribe.

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