

Managing the Land for Living Culture

Healthy Country Planning to revitalize fire culture in the Yurok, Hoopa and Karuk Tribes

“The discussions we have through Healthy Country Planning often reveal pieces of information that help us better understand who we are and what we are supposed to be doing to maintain physical and spiritual balance in our lives.”

Margo Robbins, Cultural Fire Management Council

This document is told through the voice of Margo Robbins. It was made with support from Nature United.

BACKGROUND The Yurok, Karuk, and Hoopa people have co-existed along the Klamath and Trinity Rivers for thousands of years. We are three distinct tribes with very different languages, yet we share many of the same cultural beliefs and lifeways. The Yurok, Karuk and Hoopa people are basket weavers, hunters, gatherers, fishers, and spiritual people.

As stewards of the land, our ancestors used fire to maintain balance and keep things plentiful and healthy. After thousands of years of careful stewardship, this balance was interrupted by an era of fire suppression imposed by others.

Cultural practitioners from the Hoopa, Yurok and Karuk Tribes came together to affirm and utilize

our sovereign right to use fire the way it was given to us. We developed a plan to bring back our fire culture and meet our sacred obligation to care for the land. We were supported by representatives from Nature United’s global affiliate The Nature Conservancy, who also helped establish a network to support burning which led to the creation of the Indigenous Peoples Burning Network.





PROCESS After considering different types of plans, the group decided on Healthy Country Planning, appreciating how the resulting plans were focused on living culture, beautiful, and concise.

About 25-30 cultural practitioners from the three Tribes were identified to take part in the planning meetings, attending workshops between 2016-2018 to define values, identify threats affecting our values, and develop strategies to fix the issues at hand. There was one co-lead from each of the Tribes along with facilitators from the Fire Learning Network, a network that helps people work together to increase the capacity and social capital needed to build ecosystem and community resilience. The Nature Conservancy’s Fire Director helping to guide us through the process.

OUTCOMES This is the vision that came from the planning process. It shows what the future will look like when fire culture is revitalized:

“When our work is successful, life will be thriving with deer, birds, mushrooms, open prairies, grasslands, and clear creeks. There is laughing. Children are playing all over. All of the brush is gone and we can see the river. The land all the way down the road has been burned. It is like the pre-contact landscape, and we are able to truly live off the land. We get that humble and respectful feeling. Our prayers with our ancestors are heard because our connection with the land is growing stronger and stronger. These prayers are carried by the smoke and answered by the fire. People are leading, and the agencies support it. A little ways back and a long ways out, we have the knowledge to make rain.”

These are the Values identified in the Healthy Country Planning process (specific things that are important to protect and enhance):

- Physical and spiritual balance of the universe
- Traditional fire practitioners
- Right to use fire
- Fire maintained landscapes
- Cultural perpetuation
- Economic security
- Physical and spiritual wellbeing

The three Tribal groups intend to monitor and evaluate this plan from year to year, keeping it fresh and inspiring by incorporating lessons learned along the way. Evaluation methods will vary from group to group, from complex data analysis, to simpler methods such as answering the following questions: Did we implement the strategies outlined in the plan? Were the strategies effective, do basket weavers have enough hazel sticks? Have we created any new jobs for community members? Has the number of family burns increased? Are government agencies more supportive of cultural burns? The answer to these questions is YES, so far!



CONTACTS FOR PLAN

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TOP TO BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT Dr. Frank Kanawha Lake, member of Indigenous Burning Network advisory team, sharing cultural burning practices with his son Leland. © TREX Coaches Network; Participants gather for a briefing associated with a cultural burn © TREX Coaches Network; Elizabeth Azzuz and Margo Robbins lighting fire using traditional wormwood torches. © Jared Childress; Margo’s grandson in baby basket © Serena King; Creation place of the Karuk Tribe with smoke from cultural burn. © Will Harling