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For this edition of the G&G Storyteller we would normally be covering Pow Wows, Rodeos, Basketball Tournys, and many other Indian Country events that take place throughout the summer. However, this year, with the hot weather of summer upon us, we decided to turn the focus to a topic not normally discussed, but one many are actually impacted by in some way or another and that is, Tribal Fire Management. For the first two stories we will look at Traditional and Contemporary uses of Fire by Tribal Nations, whether that be cultural burning to enhance an ecosystem for cultural resources, or prescribed burns being utilized by the forest service to combat wildfires. We then look at Native American Firefighting and the numbers of people and crews serving our Tribal Homelands and environments. Our last story then focuses on the devastating wildfire that is continuing to impact the Mescalero Apache Reservation in South Central New Mexico.

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For millennia, fire was integral to many Indigenous peoples' way of life. Native Americans, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians used fire to clear areas for crops and travel, to manage the land for species of both plants and animals, to hunt game, and for many other important uses. Fire was a tool that promoted ecological diversity and reduced the risk of large wildfires.

Throughout California, Indigenous nations have used fire for thousands of years as a tool to steward the land, and still do today. Cultural burns passed down through generations have benefited both land and people, by improving soil quality, and spurring growth of certain plant species, creating a healthy landscape. Some tribes in the western states also used fire to ensure growth of straight and slender types of specific plants used for making woven baskets, or to provide habitat for certain bird species whose feathers were used for ceremonial dress. In the Eastern United States, oak and chestnut trees are the result of targeted burning to achieve specific nut crops.

Native Americans in the Great Lakes region have used fire for many generations. Damon Panek, of the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore states that prescribed fire has been used, "... to improve habitat, increase blueberry production, and clear the understory of vegetation." In the northern Great Plains, unlike in other parts of the country, tribes lit large fires instead of smaller, contained burns, to drive animals such as bison herds in a specific direction. Fire was even used to herd grasshoppers as a food source. In the Northern Rockies, the Salish, Pend d'Oreille, Fires were traditionally used to reduce the risk of more serious fires, support certain vegetation used for food and medicine, and to provide better quality grazing land for horses, and more. In Hawaii, Native Hawaiians reshaped the vegetation in drier lowland communities on all the major Hawaiian Islands, up to about 1800. In these ecosystems, Hawaiians used fire to clear land for agriculture, to support shifting agriculture, and for cultivating tanglehead, which was used to thatch their houses. Traditional Indigenous fire management in the Jemez Mountains in New Mexico and Mogollon Rim in Arizona have increased fire resilience in the Southwest Region which is extremely prone to large wildfires because of a dry climate.

The Gwich'in, in the eastern Interior portion of Alaska, actively used fire to clear forest underbrush which helped in finding and pursuing game, to influence movements of fall hunts, and to kill standing timber to create fencing for caribou.





“Cultural burning” refers to the Indigenous practice of the intentional lighting of smaller, controlled fires to provide a desired outcome, such as promoting the health of plants and animals that provide food, clothing, ceremonial items and more. According to Frank Kanawha Lake, a research ecologist with the USDA Forest Service, and a wildland firefighter of Karuk descent, “[Cultural burning] links back to the tribal philosophy of fire as medicine. When you prescribe it, you’re getting the right dose to maintain the abundance of productivity of all ecosystem services to support the ecology in your culture (National Park Service).” Modern fire suppression policies and urban development disrupted these natural processes. The overgrown underbrush and the devastating impacts of climate change are making wildfires more frequent and severe across the West and around the world.

For the Karuk and other tribes in Northern California, their livelihoods and traditions were closely linked to fire for millennia. But after European contact, they were harassed, jailed, or worse for practicing traditions that involved maintenance of the land with fire. Now, California and other Western states are seeking a return to those traditional practices as they try other approaches to controlling wildfires, a victory for the Native Americans who have long fought for the right to burn.

In 2021, the U.S. Forest Service burned nearly 2 million acres of federal land in prescribed fires, more than ever before. And it has promised to continue expanding the burns, managing more than 50 million acres with fire over the next decade. That’s a large shift for Native American fire practitioners. The state of California adopted a strategic plan for wildfire resilience with the goal of expanding prescribed burns to 400,000 acres yearly by 2025. The plan calls for improved tribal engagement and expanded use of

cultural burns, where tribal organizations use fire intentionally for ceremonies, subsistence, and managing vital cultural and economic resources. “When I think about the past century of ineffective fire suppression policies, you know, they didn’t listen to the Indian voice enough,” said Dirk Charley, a member of the Dunlap Band of Mono Indians. “When we go out and work the land, it’s always done with respect for the people whose land we’re on. We work closely with local tribes and walk the sites with them. Cultural burning, for me, holds a distinct purpose: to connect with communities, bond over our families and friendships, and nurture our ties to the land and our culture,” he said.



The first Native American firefighting crews date back to the 1930s during the era of the New Deal. During that time, the newly created Indian Division of the Citizen Conservation Corps (ID-CCC), also known as the Indian Emergency Conservation Work (IECW) program, employed tens of thousands of Native American and Alaska Native workers, some of whom would learn firefighting as part of the corps’ forestry efforts on Tribal lands. In 1982, the Fort Apache crew at the White Mountain Apache Reservation became the first fully certified Native American IHC. Today, Fort Apache is one of seven IHCs proudly supported by the BIA, each hosted by a different Tribal community. They Include:

- Chief Mountain IHC - Blackfeet Indian Reservation; Browning, MT
- Fort Apache IHC - White Mountain Apache Reservation; Whiteriver, AZ
- Geronimo IHC - San Carlos Apache Reservation; San Carlos, AZ
- Golden Eagles IHC - Sycuan Indian Reservation; El Cajon, CA
- Navajo IHC – Navajo Indian Reservation; Fort Defiance, AZ
- Warm Springs IHC - Warm Springs Indian Reservation; Warm Springs, OR
- Zuni IHC - Zuni Indian Reservation; Zuni, NM

In 2023, there were over 2,633 wildfires that originated on Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) protected lands or nearby private land, resulting in approximately 192,800 acres burned. In 2023, the Indian Country Wildland Fire Management program encompassed:

- 2,828 firefighters and 901 (hired as needed) firefighters.
- 7 Interagency Hotshot Crews; 4 Tribally managed and 3 BIA crews.
- 9 helicopters, 6 single-engine air tankers, 2 single-engine water scoopers and 3 Air Attack Platforms
- 3 Fire Fleet Centers (located in Eagle Butte, Jicarilla, and Missoula) that provided service to approximately 249 engines of various models and types, including other fire apparatus in support of programs such as Interagency Hotshot Crew, fire helicopters, etc.
- 40 wildfire prevention programs, including 22 Tribally managed programs, that serve 1,102 communities.



Many in Indian Country have probably heard of the recent Ruidoso, New Mexico wildfires that have grown to over 25,000 acres and have devastated portions of the Mescalero Apache Indian Reservation. Since Monday, June 17, more than 8,000 residents in Southern New Mexico have been evacuated from their homes due to reports of two wildfires: The South Fork fire near Ruidoso, New Mexico, and the Salt fire, 7 miles west of Mescalero, New Mexico, on the tribe's reservation.

In the week following, the fires destroyed 1,400 structures, caused power outages, and even killed two people. The South Fork Fire began June 17 and burned nearly 18,000 acres. As of the latest estimates earlier this month, it was 87% contained. The Salt Fire a few miles south of there started the same day, burning nearly 8,000 acres of Tribal land on the Mescalero Apache Indian Reservation. It was 84% contained as of July 4. Thunderstorms and rainstorms also caused major flash flooding that impacted community members. Since June 29, the National Weather Service has received reports of 41 flash flood events that stranded drivers, carried houses and destroyed bridges, among other destruction in southeast New Mexico.

On June 20, President Joe Biden issued a disaster declaration for parts of southern New Mexico, freeing up funding and resources to combat the fires. More than 1,110 people have staffed these fires. New Mexico Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham also declared a state of emergency for Lincoln County and the Mescalero Apache Reservation. The Bureau of Indian Affairs stated "The identification of the point of origin and all evidence and data support

lightning as the cause of the fire, Human activity and factors did not contribute to the cause.”

On June 23, the F.B.I. said that it was offering a reward of up to \$10,000 for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the “person or persons responsible for starting” the South Fork fire and the Salt fire, the other major fire in New Mexico.

Tribes have been utilizing fire for millennia and will continue to do so for forest fire and Natural Resource Management into the future. This summer be sure to have fun while recreating but also to be safe. Thank your firefighters both Tribal and non-Tribal and those brave Hotshot Crews. Not only are they protecting our communities and Tribal Homelands, they are also putting their lives on the line to prevent the spread of these fires and to keep us all safe.

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