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FIRE MAKES US HUMAN

Olivia Chase (Hoopa Valley Tribe, Tsnungwe Descendant)

In early 2024, Indigenous students at Cal Poly Humboldt established the Cultural Fire Club. The Club is working to create an inclusive space for diverse students to enter into the fire field, which has been historically uninviting to many demographics. The mission of the Cultural Fire Club is to center Indigenous fire stewardship practices, as well as uplift Indigenous students of any academic background into working with fire. The club also aims to create a bridge between Western understandings of fire science and Indigenous perspectives that may be left out of curriculum for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students alike. A recent fundraiser includes creating a stockroom of fire grade equipment that will stay with the club for generations of students and participate in training to get Indigenous youth fire certified.

I was inspired to be the founding member of this club because I often feel intimidated entering fire spaces as a young, queer, Indigenous woman. I wanted to create a space with diverse leadership, as fire has always been wielded by diverse people in our communities. I want to put fire back into people's hands, especially Indigenous peoples. I wanted to speak about fire with love and learn from it as a living force rather than an enemy. I want to see our lands heal and see us heal alongside it.

The following article discusses the importance of Indigenous peoples rebuilding a relationship with intentional fire as both a means of mitigating catastrophic, climate change induced wildfire as well as a means of Indigenous sovereignty and futurity.



I'll never know how to talk about fire without also talking about the whole world. I suppose that is the nature of fire, it spreads wherever there is a taking to it, and goes wherever wind blows. Fire is a flow of energy, a result of a chain of events, fire is a story and a spirit. To ever really control a fire is impossible. You cannot control a fire the way you cannot control a person. All you can do is guide it, and you can only do that if you listen to it and try to understand it.

Indigenous people across the globe have been listening to fire for time immemorial, studying it through trial and error, observation, and experimentation. The fact that lightning strikes the ground and starts fires has always been true, but the idea that this is cause for fear and destruction has not. According to recent research, "Indigenous cultural burns are fires intentionally set to enhance the quality and abundance of habitats and species vital to Indigenous cultures, and they were once ubiquitous across California." (Martinez et al, 2023). If fire will come whether you like it or not, how do you live in a fire prone area such as California? The answer has not always been a militaristic response, wherein the fire is the enemy, and humans attack it at its flanks until it's defeated. No, the so-called California landscape has adapted to disturbance such as fire, because it is as regular and indifferent as things like rain and wind. In fact, "Prior to European invasion, Indigenous peoples in what is now known as California burned extensively as part of sophisticated and place-based ecological and spiritual practices refined over millennia." The grasses, the trees, the animals, the humans, we adapted with the landscape; we adapted with the fire. It shaped the hillsides, it shaped the prairies, it shaped the oak woodlands, it shaped our baskets, it shaped us.

Human fire on the landscape was used as a method of agroforestry unrecognized by white settlers. Rather than working against the nature of an ecosystem to create a controlled, crop yielding or livestock supporting environment, the methods of nature were instead harnessed to enhance the plants and animals already living there.

In our oak woodlands of Northern California, a creeping fire devoured the young saplings growing in the understory, as well as the litter and duff that parasites often nest in. This kept the big trees, which could withstand such low intensity fire, bigger through less competition for light and water, and more spread apart. When fire inevitably came, flames didn't usually get up high, but when they did, they couldn't transfer from tree to tree and light the whole forest aflame. Indigenous people of the oak woodlands of California chose

their favorite trees, the oaks, madrones, and other fruit bearing trees and raised them into old growths by using fire. These old growths produced large, pest-free, nutritious fruits like berries and acorns that could sustain their cultures for millennia. But it wasn't just the food trees Indigenous people burned for. The open space and plentiful food brought in the animals and the game too. Indigenous people could hunt nearby in the prairies that were opened with fire. The water in the rivers was also higher when there were less thirsty saplings sucking up the groundwater, and the water could find its way into the streams instead. The salmon then had plenty of water to swim in and the people ate the salmon. The willows and other pliable plants grew straight after a fire and the people picked them to weave baskets. The people used fire to cook their acorns, salmon, and deer meat in baskets with water from the river to eat at their ceremonies. The whole world, held together by fire, or better yet by the people guiding fire. The uses of fire by our peoples were countless, deeply understood, and a cornerstone of our existences.

Someone once told me our people believe that if we live out of balance and fail to carry out our responsibilities as human people, the world will be swallowed up by fire. Every summer I look outside, and I see red skies. I hear about the fires destroying homes and taking lives. And I remember that my people have lived in "fire country" for more than 12,000 years. How is it that we never had to flee from fire, but now we fear we will have to? To me, it is clear we have not been carrying out our responsibilities to the world. It is our responsibility to put fire on the land, it is our responsibility to keep the understory clear and our trees far apart, it is our responsibility to weave baskets and cultivate acorns. It is our responsibility to be here. This land needs us. The History of racist policies, the history of incarceration, the history of slavery, the history of mass murder, the history of settler colonial violence and the history of genocide must be addressed. The history must be known. Genocidal history must be recognized as the reason our forests are burning to ash. The genocide of Indigenous people is the genocide of the land, the genocide of the land is the genocide of us. Margo Robbins, a Yurok elder and renowned cultural fire practitioner, said in a recent article, "People have become disconnected with the land and fire. And they've kind of forgotten, or perhaps because this has been a generational assault on who we are, perhaps they never knew who we [were] and who we're meant to be... Fire has the ability to reestablish that connection." (Buono, 2020).

When I see fire agencies tell elders, women and people of color that they have to meet certain physical standards, or tell us that racist and misogynistic culture within their workspaces don't exist, or that it's okay to treat the land like an enemy, or to require us to pay a lot of money and spend a lot of time away from home if we want to see the day we can put fire on the ground, I see that as a continuation of genocidal practices against our land, and against us. When I see Indigenous people on their own ancestral lands starting fires and being charged with arson, a felony, I see the genocide of the land; I see the genocide of us. When I see the slogan "only you can prevent wildfires" I see the genocide of the land; I see the genocide of us.

If you take fire off the land, what does that make us? Fire made us every step of the way. Can we call ourselves human if fire is something to fight versus something to respect and understand?

Fire is a reaction. It is the consequence of a series of actions. Fire will be big and deadly if we do not steward the land, and fire will be purifying and creative if we guide it with careful hands. Fire is a messenger. It tells us how we treat the land- it tells us how we treat ourselves.🔥

Works Cited

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Karuk Women's+ TREX Art by Vikki Preston