

Following the smoke: working with traditional American Indian basketweavers

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This article will discuss “Following the Smoke,” a project which was initiated during 1997, and highlights the mutual opportunities and benefits of working with traditional native practitioners for the management of ethnobotanical resources important to traditional cultural values from an agency’s and cultural resources specialist’s perspective. The project area is located along the Klamath River in northwestern California within Six Rivers National Forest and the ancestral territory of the Karuk tribe. This undertaking has been accomplished through a cooperative partnership between the Karuk indigenous basketweavers, Six Rivers National Forest, the California State Office of the Bureau of Land Management, Karuk Tribe of California, and the California Department of Transportation.

Background

“Following the Smoke,” a Passport in Time (PIT) project, has been held yearly over the last eight years (Figure 1). Passport in Time is a national volunteer program of the U.S. Forest Service where volunteers are offered the opportunity to participate in a myriad of cultural resource projects, primarily archaeological and historical, across the nation. During 2004, 70 volunteers and agency personnel from across the United States had a unique opportunity to camp for a week in northwestern California with traditional Karuk, Yurok and Hupa basketweavers and collect, process, and learn to weave basketry materials. Over 600 individuals have participated in this event over the last eight years. Other activities include a demonstration brush dance, traditional singing, a drum-making demonstration, eating traditional foods such as salmon and acorn, beargrass braiding, net weaving, visiting a ceremonial dance pit, and a presentation by renowned elder traditional herbalist and basketweaver Josephine Peters

This project serves as a celebration of Native American traditions, particularly the activity of gathering weaving materials. Kathy Heffner, Tribal Relations Program Manager for Six Rivers National Forest, describes the importance of gathering in her report, *Following the smoke* (Heffner 1985). She writes: “Ultimately, perhaps the most important function of gathering, either by individual or family tribal units, is that it reinforces the bonds of Indian heritage and tribal identity. It is an ongoing and evolving cultural activity.”

In a *News from Native California* magazine article on the program, Thelma McNeal, a Karuk indigenous basketweaver, commented, “These gatherings are wonderful for getting people together and learning. I think it helps people understand a little bit about the Indian way. It wasn’t just easy. You don’t just go out and pick some sticks and make a basket.” Participants in



Figure 1. "Following the Smoke," 2002.

this project work side-by-side with basketweavers in gathering and processing the materials collected. They gain an understanding of the complexities and time involved in gathering and processing materials and weaving a basket.

The participants and volunteers who attend every year perform tasks in collecting basketry materials and preparing beargrass and hazel areas to be burned. The Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management have ongoing programs of burning these areas to enhance basketry materials and reduce fuel loads in order to reduce the threat of destructive fires. The work by the volunteers saves the government money by not having to pay government employees for site preparation before the burns. The removal of heavy fuel loads by the volunteers allows for a cooler fire, which enhances the hazel and beargrass and does not kill the plants. The volunteers have also constructed fire lines around ethnobotanical areas to control escapes of fire from the area to be burned (Figure 2).

As Karuk indigenous basketweaver Millie Black-Graber points out, "Fire doesn't just enhance the basketry materials; it's healthy for all the forest." By increasing understanding between different cultures, building strong relationships, and opening the lines of communication, the partners and participants involved in "Following the Smoke" have discovered and have become advocates expressing that preserving local culture and local forests go hand in hand. "Following the Smoke" has provided a means for a dialog and actions for preserving both American Indian culture and healthy forests. "Following the Smoke" gets its name from the local basketweavers' past practice of combing the fields in search of flexible bear grass shoots after controlled burns by the government.

The traditional baskets produced by the Karuk, Hupa, and Yurok basketweavers are world-renowned for their quality and beauty and are an integral part of their cultures (Figure 3). The basketweavers themselves are national treasures, and our national cultural heritage would suffer if this art were lost. Again, this program offers a unique opportunity for the public to interact with these traditional practitioners.

In selecting participants and volunteers for this project, the basketweavers select those individuals who they believe will best understand and promote the messages presented at "Following the Smoke" (Figures 4 and 5). They select many teachers and representatives of organizations and state and federal agencies who they believe will become advocates for



Figure 2. PIT volunteers building fire line.



Figure 3. Basketry.



Figure 4. Basket weavers.



Figure 5. Weaving baskets.

managing ethnobotanical resources and reintroducing fire into the ecosystem. It is estimated that yearly the volunteers donate approximately 3,000 hours of time, valued at \$25,000. The traditional materials collected and processed by the volunteers remain with the basketweavers.

This project has received more applications than any other Passport in Time project in the nation for seven out of the eight years it has been offered. Approximately five to six times more applicants apply as can be accommodated each year. Jill Osborn, National PIT Coordinator, stated that this project has generated more positive mail relating to cultural resources to the Chief of the Forest Service in Washington D.C. than any other project in the 14-year history of Passport in Time.

This project has received national and state attention for the positive image portrayed by the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management in working with traditional American Indian basketweavers. The program has been highlighted in three articles in *News from Native California*, a statewide magazine highlighting news of California Indians (Ortiz 1998, 1999). "Following the Smoke" was also recently featured in a video entitled "California legacy: now and forever" narrated by actor Peter Coyote. This video was developed for use in fourth grade curriculum in the study of California Indians. The intent of the video is to highlight that traditional American Indian culture is alive and thriving in California.

Gathering, processing and managing basketry materials

One of the main activities during the week-long project is the collection and processing of basketry materials. The plants and other materials gathered by the volunteers include sticks and design materials. The sticks are the foundation materials for making baskets and include hazel, willow and ceanothus. The materials which are utilized for the design elements are beargrass, woodwardia fern, maidenhair fern and porcupine quills. These are not the all-inclusive materials for traditional Karuk, Yurok and Hupa basket weaving but are the materials available at the location and time of season for the project.

Hazel: The sticks of the hazel are used as the foundation for the basket. It is considered the best and most desired material. Burning or clipping is necessary to produce new, pliable, straight shoots. The sticks are gathered the second year after burning. It is best collected in early spring when the leaves are just coming out, because the sticks peel easily at this time. Small-diameter sticks are used for the smaller baskets. Larger sticks are used for baby-carrying baskets and eel and fish traps.

Willow: Willow shoots are collected along rivers and creeks, and like hazel it is the foundation for the basket. Willow is not as strong as hazel but is easier to obtain. It also benefits from burning and can be cut back to stimulate new growth. During March and April, willow is at its optimum for collection and for ease of peeling its bark layer. Willow roots are also collected and utilized in the construction of a basket. The roots are dug out of the ground or sand, peeled and then quartered before drying. Over the last two years, volunteers have also assisted Frank Lake, Yurok, from Oregon State University, in his doctoral dissertation work associated with willow stands along the Klamath River.

Ceanothus: Also called tick brush or deer brush, its slender, fine sticks are utilized in fancy baskets. The shoots are at the optimum for collection in early spring but can be collected through late August.

Beargrass: It is best collected in the mountains in the shade under trees; the higher the elevation, the longer and stronger the grass. Beargrass needs to be burned at regular intervals to

produce healthy, straight and pliable material. The best quality of grass is pulled from the center of the clump. The young shoots are used as an overlay on the twining element in baskets to make white designs. It is also braided and utilized as adornments on ceremonial dance dresses. It is generally picked in late summer.

Woodwardia fern: The fern is gathered at any time other than the early spring months. It is cut off carefully, close to the ground, so as to not destroy the plant. It is stripped of its leaves, and then the stem is lightly smashed in order to remove, intact, the two long fibrous strands within the stem. These strands are then dyed from the bark of the alder tree, producing the red color in the design element of a basket.

Maidenhair fern: The stem of the maidenhair fern is used as the overlay material to create the black design in baskets. It is also called five-finger fern and black fern. Although very plentiful, it is often extremely difficult to collect, as it is located in creek beds that are very rough and rocky. The stronger, blacker stems are found at higher elevations. It is at its peak quality for collection during June and July.

Porcupine quills: Dyed porcupine quills provide the bright yellow overlay for the designs in the baskets. The quills are plucked from the hide of the porcupine, and then the tips of the quills with the barbs are burned off. The quills are then dyed, utilizing wolf moss or Oregon grape, to obtain the yellow color.

Other cultural materials gathered and processed

Several other ethnobotanical resources have been gathered and processed during the project, including soap root and maple bark.

Soap root: Soap root plants were collected and utilized to make soap root brushes. The fibrous hairs around the bulb of the plant were cleaned and utilized as the bristles of the brush. The bulb of the plant was boiled, and then a glue-like substance was extracted and applied to the end of the brush to hold the brush together and make the handle. A finished brush looks very similar to a whisk broom.

Maple bark: Long sheets of bark were peeled vertically from maple trees. The next step required peeling long, narrow strands of the underside of the bark. The final step in processing was laying the bark out to dry. The strips of bark were then utilized in making a maple bark skirt, similar in appearance to a Hawaiian palm or grass skirt.

Results and benefits

The obvious benefits of this project are the value it has for the interpretation of indigenous traditional cultural values and its educational value to the public and agencies for the importance of managing traditional ethnobotanical resources on public lands. Also, the agencies involved in this program have gained strong allies from the traditional American Indian community in presenting to the public the importance of reintroducing fire back into the ecosystem. Over the last century, federal land managing agencies within the United States have suppressed fires to the point that forested ecosystems have changed and built significant fuel loads which are now creating devastating forest fires throughout the western United States. This fire suppression attitude also impacted the availability and quality of ethnobotanical resources, as many of these resources are dependent on annual or biannual low-intensity or cool burning. Some critics of federal agencies believe the intent of reducing fuel loads in forested ecosystems

is a guise to implement commercial timber harvesting. The public's trust in tribes and especially American Indian traditional practitioners has assisted federal agencies in gaining trust for reintroducing fire into the forested ecosystem.

Archaeologists working with traditional practitioners on this project have benefited in learning more about the identification of material cultural remains associated with traditional gathering areas and anomalies previously found and recorded on archaeological sites or as isolated finds. For decades, archaeologists were identifying river-worn rocks as metate blanks and ecofacts in areas where the rocks had to be transported away from river and stream channels. These water-worn rocks had no physical sign of cultural use; thus the names of metate blanks and/or ecofacts. Working with the basketweavers and visiting traditional gathering areas that have been utilized possibly for hundreds of years and processing these materials with them, we now know the function of these artifacts. They were and are utilized for smashing soft ethnobotanical materials, like woodwardia fern, to extract the fibrous strands within. No wear is found on the artifact, as pounding and grinding do not occur as with acorn or seeds with a mortar/pestle or grinding slick/hand stone.

This project also provides an opportunity to meet and gain significant knowledge from traditional practitioners, such as Josephine Peters, an elder Karuk/Shasta/Yurok herbalist and basketweaver. Josephine is a renowned basketweaver; yet more recognized as a traditional herbalist and authority on folk medicine. She works internationally as a traditional healer and works often with hospitals and medical doctors examining the possible use of traditional medicinal plants in the fight against diseases, such as AIDS and cancer. She lectures often at medical colleges across the country and hosts medical students for summers in her home; in fact, one attended "Following the Smoke." Besides treating members of local tribes, she is sought out by medical doctors to collaborate in treating patients. Josephine has participated and lectured every year at "Following the Smoke" on the use of plants as traditional medicines. This relationship resulted in the Forest Service and statewide California Indian Basketweavers Association entering into a challenge-cost-share agreement to document Josephine's knowledge on traditional herbs and medicinal plants as well as a history of her life. The project is nearly completed and will not only document the plants that are utilized and how they are prepared, but will also document their prescriptions for use as medicines.

Conclusions

"Following the Smoke" is an example of how traditional cultural practitioners, agencies, cultural resource specialists and the public can all benefit and work together to understand and enhance significant traditional cultural resource values. The project received national recognition on August 6, 2004, as an example of an exceptional Federal preservation project. "Following the Smoke" received the President's Advisory Council on Historic Preservation Chairman's Award. The award was presented at an Advisory Council meeting at the governor's mansion in St. Paul, Minnesota. On November 17, 2004, "Following the Smoke" will also receive a California Governor's Historic Preservation Award at the capitol in Sacramento.

References cited

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