

## Alarmed by Scope of Wildfires, Officials Turn to Native Americans for Help

Indigenous groups have a long history of intentionally setting fires to keep ecosystems healthy. Policymakers are now more interested in the practice.



By Jill Cowan

Published Oct. 7, 2020 Updated Oct. 26, 2020

LOS ANGELES — When Belinda Brown was a child, she would rise early in the morning every spring and fall to help her father and grandfather light the fields of the XL Ranch Indian reservation outside of Alturas, Calif. She would take a metal rake to the grasses and watch as flames spread.

“Fire was absolutely a part of what we did all the time,” she said. “It wasn’t a fearful thing.”

Long before California was California, Native Americans used fire to keep the lands where they lived healthy. That meant intentionally burning excess vegetation at regular intervals, during times of the year when the weather would keep blazes smaller and cooler than the destructive wildfires burning today.

The work requires a deep understanding of how winds would spread flames down a particular hillside or when lighting a fire in a forest would foster the growth of certain plants, and that knowledge has been passed down through ceremony and practice. But until recently, it has been mostly dismissed as unscientific.

Now, as more Americans are being forced to confront the realities of climate change, firefighting experts and policymakers are increasingly turning to fundamental ecological principles that have long guided Indigenous communities.

“I keep saying we’re getting that ‘I told you so’ award,” Ms. Brown, a member of the Kosealekte Band of the Ajumawi-Atsuge Nation in Northern California, said with a weary smile. “My prayer is that ignorance won’t stop us again.”

**CALIFORNIA TODAY:** Top news and features from across one of America’s largest and most dynamic states.

Sign Up

Today, she is the tribal partnerships director for the Lomakatsi Restoration Project, a nonprofit organization that works with tribal communities in Oregon and Northern California to make life in forested areas more sustainable. That includes efforts to repair fire-adapted ecosystems, many of which, she said, have gone too long without burning.



Belinda Brown, the tribal director for the Lomakatsi Restoration Project, doing prescribed burn maintenance around her home. Lomakatsi Restoration Project

Ms. Brown appeared recently in front of a Zoom background showing blue sky. In reality, she was speaking from inside an office in Modoc County, a region that was engulfed in smoke.

More than five million acres have burned on the West Coast this year, including a staggering four million in California, where four of the five largest fires ever recorded here started in August or September.

Officials and experts have coalesced around the need to abandon longstanding policies requiring that every fire be extinguished and to significantly increase the use of prescribed burning. The practice involves determining which areas are overgrown and when conditions like wind direction and air moisture are right to intentionally ignite less intense fires that can be carefully managed.

In the southeastern United States, prescribed fire is already used to treat millions of acres every year, which experts have credited with sparing communities from the kind of devastation that has become a tragic routine in California.

But it has been difficult to introduce those practices in the West, where the landscape and climate are essentially incomparable.

Dar Mims, a meteorologist for the California Air Resources Board and an expert on prescribed burning, said that perhaps the biggest challenge for the state's policymakers has been convincing the public that burning large swaths of land on purpose is the best way to keep them safe, when they have been told for generations to fear fire of any kind.

This challenge is compounded by the fact that many have been allowed to move into areas that are at risk of burning, with the expectation that their property will be protected at any cost.

"It's like making the battleship turn," he said. "It takes time."



A home destroyed by the L.N.U. Lightning Complex in August. Four of the five largest fires recorded in California happened this year. Ian C. Bates for The New York Times

Still, officials and Indigenous community advocates have described this year as a wake-up call.

Last month, Senators Ron Wyden of Oregon, Joe Manchin III of West Virginia and Maria Cantwell of Washington introduced legislation that would fund significantly more prescribed fire.

In California, Gov. Gavin Newsom has acknowledged that the state's forests should be better maintained, even as he pushed back against President Trump's characterizations that destructive wildfires are the result of insufficient work by state officials to keep forests cleared.

Mr. Newsom has touted a new partnership with the United States Forest Service, which controls most of the state's forest land, with the goal of treating one million acres per year, including with prescribed fire.

All of that, officials have said, will require building better coordination with tribes.

"Our commitment at the Forest Service is to work with tribal partners to achieve healthy and resilient landscapes," Barnie Gyant, deputy regional forester for the Forest Service's Pacific Southwest Region, said in a statement. "Native American tribes, tribal governments, traditional practitioners and their communities bring thousands of years of traditional ecological knowledge to our partnership."

They are not starting totally from scratch.

Lomakatsi, for instance, has for years worked with the Forest Service, as well as other nonprofit groups like the Nature Conservancy, tribes and private landowners, on long-term projects aimed at restoring large areas, typically tens of thousands of acres across multiple jurisdictions.

The organization hires and trains workers, including young Native Americans, who help treat about 16,000 acres per year with a combination of fixes including prescribed fire, native grass seeding and strategic tree thinning — which can even make some money back, if the logs are sold.



A member of the Lomakatsi Restoration Project conducting a prescribed burn to enhance a culturally important oak habitat in southern Oregon's Colestin Valley. Lomakatsi Restoration Project

Marko Bey, the organization's executive director, said much of his job involves cobbling together millions of dollars from funding sources to pay for the projects. Recently, it has become easier to make the case that sustainability efforts are a good investment.

"Fire suppression is an open checkbook," he said.

Still, for many Native Americans, the recognition is a kind of bittersweet validation.

Over the course of California's long colonial history, native Californians were violently and systematically stripped of the ability to tend the land they had lived on for centuries as white settlers pursued gold, timber and territory.

This dark history unfolded while modern firefighting agencies and techniques were formed under the heavy influence of Europeans who wanted to maximize timber hauls, said Mary Huffman, director of the Indigenous Peoples Burning Network.

"We developed this real commitment to keeping fire out," she said, "and of course that was completely backwards from what Indigenous people had done for thousands and thousands of years."

A 1920 article written by William B. Greeley in *The Timberman* dismisses light burning as practiced by "the Indians in various western pine forests long before the advent of the white man" as fallacy — propaganda that, if heeded, would lead to the destruction of lucrative trees.

Bill Tripp, the director of natural resources and environmental policy for the Karuk Tribe Department of Natural Resources, wrote in a piece for *The Guardian* that Karuk people were shot for burning as recently as the 1930s.

The idea of prescribed burning remained polarizing for decades, as federal and state firefighting agencies were built up around the idea that wildfire was an enemy to be defeated using military-style tactics, not a tool that could help prevent destruction.

The efforts to suppress wildfires, particularly in the American West — as seen here in Oregon in 1955 — have often resembled military campaigns. J R Eyerman/The LIFE Picture Collection, via Getty Images

Dr. Huffman said it was important to distinguish between the heavily regulated prescribed burning purely to mitigate the risk of destructive wildfires and the cultural burning that has been practiced by Indigenous people around the world for a variety of purposes.

But the two share important commonalities: “They know exactly why they’re burning, how they’re doing it and who’s doing it,” Dr. Huffman said.

That means knowledge of specific terrain is crucial, which underscores a clear advantage Indigenous fire officials have over firefighters coming in from other states or even overseas.

Danny Manning, assistant fire chief for the Greenville Rancheria, who also works as a cultural specialist with the Forest Service, said he had noticed shifts over roughly the last decade in the relationship between federal and tribal fire officials.

“There used to be stubbornness on both sides and now it’s different,” he said. “The tribes out here are getting a lot more organized, too.”

Mr. Manning, whose ancestry is Mountain Maidu, Navajo and Sioux, has spent his career fighting fire in the summers and doing cultural and prescribed burning in the fall and spring. When it is fire season, he will work for 14 days straight and then return home for a rest.

As of a few weeks ago, he said he had been out seven times this year.

“It’s been more intense every fire season,” he said. “Everybody’s looking at them and seeing we need to do something besides put them out.”