

RODEO-CHEDISKI: TRIBAL LOSS

Paul Keller

Even before the devastation of the Rodeo-Chediski Fire, unemployment among the 12,000 members of Arizona's timber-dependent White Mountain Apache Tribe was 60 percent. Arizona's Navajo and Apache Counties were already the State's most impoverished. The tribally owned and operated Sunrise Park Ski Resort had also been hit hard by drought-affected snow seasons. After the 2001/2002 ski season, the resort was again in the red.

Economic Loss

Then, in June 2002 up roared the Rodeo-Chediski Fire, a monster conflagration that scorched about 467,000 acres (187,000 ha), including more than 200,000 acres (81,000 ha) on the Ft. Apache Indian Reservation—half of the tribe's timber lands. Ben Nuvamsa,

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Aftermath of the Rodeo-Chediski Fire on the White Mountain Apache Tribe's ancestral lands. The fire destroyed valuable timber and damaged sacred sites with deep spiritual meaning for the Apache people. Photo: Tom Iraci, USDA Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Region, Portland, OR, 2002.

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supervisor of the Fort Apache Agency, USDI Bureau of Indian Affairs, put the value of the timber lost at \$237 million.

The tribe's two sawmills—once employing 450 people—were soon closed. Although the tribe intended to salvage as much timber as possible, the losses seemed likely to affect other mills in the region as well. “The Rodeo-Chediski fire has become a new crisis we must face,” said tribal member Colette Altaha. “With no logs to saw, with no timber to harvest, we’re facing some new realities here on the reservation. It’s unreal; it’s frightening.”

“Our economic mainstay is gone,” confirmed Apache tribal member

Jacob Henry. “We’ve relied on this timber economy for so many years. But in time we will recover and go on to something else that will bring this tribe back up.”

Spiritual Loss

The Apache people lost more than the dollar value of their trees. Their ancestral homeland also has a vital spiritual significance. These cultural values were also lost.

“This is our home,” said Apache Tribal Chairman Dallas Massey. “It is very special to us. It is a very special place. I know the scar from this fire is going to be with us for a very long time. The fire has damaged so many of our sacred sites.”

Up on the Mogollon Rim to the north of the reservation—on nontribal lands—450 homes were destroyed by the Rodeo-Chediski conflagration. Luckily, no homes on the reservation were lost. Yet, at a postfire community meeting, several tribal people spoke of losing their home.

“The magnitude of this fire destroyed our house. Our dwelling,” said Ronnie Lupe, Apache tribal council member. “While all the rest of the communities beside the north end of our reservation have long since rebuilt—have long since gone on with their lives—our anguish and anxiety will have just begun.”

Tribal member Jacob Henry said that



Sign on the Ft. Apache Indian Reservation expresses tribal gratitude for the wildland firefighters who battled the Rodeo–Chediski Fire. Photo: Tom Iraci, USDA Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Region, Portland, OR, 2002.

Apaches view their tribal lands as something that they cherish, take pride in, and want others to see and experience.

“But today,” he explained, “That is gone. No matter what words are said or how people put it, I will never see this again—not in my lifetime. Where my people have traditionally gone to find inner peace with the creator—either through Christianity or our traditional religion—these places are no longer there.”

Signs of Hope

Yet there were also signs of gratitude and hope. During the fire, tribal members expressed thanks for the bravery of the firefighters who risked their lives to protect ancestral lands. Moreover, a tribal history of active

management kept the fire in some areas from spreading into communities and burning more homes (*see the sidebar on page 12*).

After the fire, tribal members empathized with nonreservation communities to the north, where so many homes were lost. “Yes, we have suffered a great deal from this fire,” said Jacob Henry. “But so did the communities of Forest Lakes and Heber–Overgaard. Let them know the Apache people are praying for them. Hopefully they will recover. The scar of their suffering will heal. We need to walk this road of recovery together.”

Members of those communities expressed similar regret for the tribal

loss. “We recognize the tremendous loss to the Apache Tribe in terms of the timber,” assured Gene Kelley, mayor of Show Low. “But we must not forget that the forest is also very sacred to the tribe. This is a loss that we—as non-Indians—will never be able to totally analyze and understand.”

The Apache people are certain to recover, but it will take time. “We are a proud people. We are a compassionate people. But we are also very strong at heart,” said tribal council member Ronnie Lupe. “It will take us more than 150 years to completely recover from this fire. Our economy has been destroyed. Pray for us.” ■

Apache Fuels Management Success

In a lead editorial on June 27, 2002, at the height of the Rodeo–Chediski Fire, the *Arizona Republic* told of ferocious fire runs south of Show Low, AZ. Local communities were threatened, the paper noted, but each time “the flames met forest land managed by the Apaches and instantly died.”

What was the secret to Apache success?

In the 1940s, Harold Callender, a forest manager for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, was assigned to the Ft. Apache Agency in Arizona. He understood that the local ponderosa pine forests were fire-adapted, thriving under a regime of frequent low-severity fires. Callender started an aggressive program of prescribed burning on Apache tribal lands, a tradition that continues to this day.

“He took a lot of criticism back in those days,” said Jim Youtz, supervisory forester for the Fort Apache

Agency. “At that time, he and his policies were viewed as very radical.”

Since 1945, the Apaches have conducted commercial logging and forest thinning followed by prescribed burns on an average of 30,000 acres (12,000 ha) per year. They understand the importance of landscape-scale treatments for restoring historical ponderosa pine forest conditions. Where treatments had recently occurred, the effects of Rodeo–Chediski were less severe.

Land management officials believe that these treatments, coupled with around-the-clock fire-fighting efforts, helped keep Rodeo–Chediski out of the forested Pinetop–Lakeside communities near Show Low, saving the homes of some 10,000 residents.



Precommercial thinning helped deprive the Rodeo–Chediski Fire of surface and ladder fuels. The fire through this unit stayed on the ground and the trees survived. Photo: Tom Iraci, USDA Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Region, Portland, OR, 2002.