



The Gift of Fire

By Germaine White
SPRING 2007

Editor's Note: The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation in northwestern Montana have produced an award-winning fire education project called "Fire on the Land." The project has been developed with a unique cultural perspective that is explained in more depth by Germaine White below. The project was inspired by a desire to combine traditional views and knowledge of fire with scientific fire management to create a more powerful, culturally grounded appreciation of fire. The different features of the project are designed for everyone from elementary school students to fire professionals, containing traditional stories, historical photographs, interviews with elders and fire managers, as well as materials related to modern fire management. Perhaps, the greatest contribution of the project is providing a different voice on the role of wildland fire on the land in our society.

Project Description: Fire on the Land

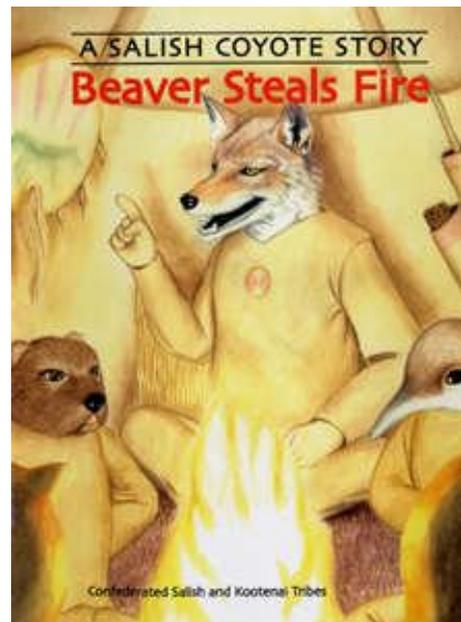
The landscape that European-Americans first saw when they traveled west was not a natural terrain in the sense of being untouched by humans. It was a cultural landscape in which the plant and animal communities had been shaped in large part by at least fourteen thousand years of burning by Indian people.

The DVD contains a powerful telling of Beaver Steals Fire, an ancient Salish tale.

Nationally, fire historians are just beginning to examine this use of fire. Understanding how and why Indians burned and the impact that Indian burning had on ecosystems is crucial if today's managers are to restore fire. Indeed, it could be argued that true restoration is not possible unless we understand how, when, and why Indian people used fire.

Several years ago, the Salish and Kootenai Tribes were awarded a grant by the National Interagency Fire Center-BIA to develop educational materials on the Indian use of fire in the northern Rocky Mountains.

The goals of the project were to restore an appreciation for the depth and complexity of the Salish, Kootenai, and Pend d'Oreille's use of fire and to improve the Tribes' and other land management agencies' ability to implement prescribed burn plans in the Northern Rockies by increasing the public's knowledge about the major role that fire has played in the forest ecosystems of the region.



Under the grant, the tribes interviewed tribal elders, reviewed existing oral history archives, and conducted in-depth historical research to produce an integrated set of educational materials. These materials include (1) a storybook; (2) an iconographic storybook DVD; (3) an interactive DVD on the Indian use of fire, fire ecology, and modern-day fire management activities on the Flathead Indian Reservation; and (4) a web site.

It is hoped that these materials will increase public acceptance of prescribed fire on the Reservation by helping to inform both tribal and non-tribal people about the historic use of fire by Indians and how the native plant and animal communities that we have inherited are the legacy of those fires. In the end, it is our hope that the materials will benefit the Tribes' natural resource programs as well as its cultural resource goals both on and off the Reservation.

The Gift of Fire

**By Germaine White
Information and Education Specialist
Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes
Natural Resources Division**

According to the traditional beliefs of the Salish and Pend d'Oreille of western Montana, in the beginning the Creator put Xwixweyul, the animal beings, on the earth before humans. But the world was cold and dark because there was no fire on earth. The animal beings knew that one day human beings would arrive, and they wanted to make the world a better place for them and for themselves, so they set off on a great quest to steal fire from the sky world and bring it to the earth. The story reminds us that, while fire can be a destructive force, it is also a gift to us from the Creator.

As Salish and Pend d'Oreille people, our view of fire was and is quite different from the modern western view. In our tradition, fire is a gift from the Creator brought to us by the animals. We think of it as a blessing that if used respectfully and in a manner consistent with our traditional knowledge, will enrich our world. This belief explains our long tradition (12,000 plus years) of spring and fall burning and of adapting to, rather than fighting against, lightning-caused fires.



Salish Fire Starters Depicted in Fire on the Land DVD.

Researchers have documented dozens of reasons why tribes started fires (Lewis 1973). Prior to the 1850s, our ancestors burned the grasslands and forests to increase plant foods and medicines. They set prairies and mountainsides ablaze to increase forage for game animals. They used fire to

create drivelines and game surrounds, improving their chances at hunting. They lit fires to open trails and to keep them groomed. They employed fire in warfare, both offensively and defensively. They used it to communicate over long distances. They fireproofed camps with it and used it to reduce the presence of rattlesnakes in their camps.

For thousands of years our people lit fires in the Northern Rockies, so much so they doubled the frequency of natural fire in many places (Barrett 1982). So profound was this influence that landscape ecologist Doug MacCleary has written "there is no question that enormous areas of the forests and grasslands we inherited were very much cultural landscapes, shaped profoundly by human action... The wildlife communities that characterized these cultural landscapes... were in large measure products of thousands of years of human intervention. And it will take continued human intervention to maintain them."

Little appreciated today is the fact that tribes had practiced the art of managing landscapes with fire for millennia. The contrast with modern land managers, whose use of fire goes back a few decades, could not be sharper. The Salish and Pend d'Oreille had a single person who had the responsibility of overseeing the use of fire on the land. That person was called Sxwpaám. He had an intimate relationship with and knowledge of fire because of the extensive burning that he did during his lifetime and because he had apprenticed under the Sxwpaám who came before him, learning the knowledge that had been gained over many generations. Our knowledge about fire then was based on a collective, tribal knowledge that stretches back perhaps seven thousand years. So our people understood as well as any group of people could understand how fire works in natural systems and how to use it in a beneficial way.

Yet, once non-Indians arrived, tribal people were persecuted for lighting fires. A December 21, 1875, newspaper account in the Missoula Pioneer details how, at the beginning of November of that year, 183 lodges of Pend d'Oreille Indians were crossing the Rocky Mountains in the northeast corner of the territory. They were traveling east on a buffalo hunt when two of them were shot and killed by "the officers of the International Line" for setting a fire on the plains.

This was a beautiful landscape that early explorers entered. They saw the beauty, but misunderstood it. They saw Indian burning and reacted in fear, at times thinking, "the whole country was on fire." They possessed little or no knowledge about the land and fire's role. As settlements grew, non-Indians came to believe fire was a threat to them and the land. Nancy Turner said in *Indians, Fire and the Land in the Pacific Northwest*, "It is ironic that the landscape so appreciated by the early explorers and colonists actually were created by the very fires they feared and disliked."

And while we have made progress in our understanding of the role of fire, we still have a long way to go. The daily journal accounts of Jesuits living in the Mission Valley in the mid to late 1800s also make vivid how frequent the fires were at that time. The fathers make frequent mention of fires and remark almost daily in the summer about the extremely smoky conditions in the valley. Theodore Shoemaker who worked for the US Forest Service in the early 1900s wrote that "Prior to 1897, and even later in many sections, fires burned continuously from spring until fall without the slightest attempt being made to extinguish them."

Contemporary Fire Management on the Flathead Indian Reservation.

Today, it is common for people to complain about the smoke from even one or two small prescribed burns. Most of those people probably do not know that for thousands of years prior to the last century of fire exclusion it was common for summer and fall skies in Montana and elsewhere in the west to be heavy with smoke.

On the eastern side of the Flathead Reservation, which is home to our tribe, the Mission Mountains rise some seven thousand feet above the valley floor. They form a parapet, a ragged wall of peaks that hold snow much of the year. Below that snow, the slopes are densely timbered. But that blanket of timber is a relatively recent development. Photographs taken from the late 1800s to well into the 1930s show a mountain range that would be unrecognizable were it not for the familiar skyline formed by the mountaintops. In some of the earliest photos, it is apparent that a person could have walked from the bottom of the range to the top without ever passing beneath a tree. Ribbons and patches of trees separated enormous openings created by fire. Today,



it would be impossible to travel any distance at all without being under a dense canopy of spruce and fir and larch and pine. Tony Incashola, one of our Tribal elders tells of taking his grandmother into the Missions to pick berries. This was after nearly one hundred years of excluding fire. They looked for the place their family had traditionally picked for generations. But the trail had grown over, the way was impassible, and the hillsides above, once open and thick with huckleberry, were now heavy with timber, the berry bushes gone.

The story is emblematic of what has happened throughout our aboriginal territory. Many of our traditional medicine and food plants that depend on fire are now difficult to find, while just three, even two generations ago they were plentiful, and many Salish and Pend d'Oreille families harvested them spring, summer and fall. Camping and hunting places that we know were once open because their Salish names describe them that way are no longer recognizable. They are now crowded with trees.

On my last trip into the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area with one of our tribal elders, Harriet Whitworth, we followed the trails she had followed seventy years previous with her mother and grandmother, trails her family had followed for multiple generations. When we arrived at Big Prairie on the South Fork of the Flathead River, Harriet described what it was like when she was a little girl. She said it was a big, open, park-like area where there were enormous ponderosa pine trees, an abundance of grass, and many animals. The place name in our language, lqwlqwlexw, describes the area as having many clearings, a series of prairies in one place, and Harriet talked of how beautiful it was when she was a child. Now there is only a little bit of a camp and small prairie or meadow left, and the big pine trees are crowded with Douglas-fir trees. Being there in that place and listening to the stories of how it used to look just a single elders lifetime ago showed me in a vivid way what it means to exclude fire from the landscape.

Many of the problems we face today in our forests—the risk of catastrophic fire and the very dangerous conditions in the wildland urban interface—have their roots in the dominant society's failure to appreciate the depth and sophistication of the tribal relationship with the land and in particular tribal land management practices. It takes generations to create and maintain large old pine forests and open prairies. We have made a start, but we have a long way to go. A good next step is to acknowledge, appreciate, and most importantly begin to learn from the traditional knowledge that native peoples have about burning. In the beginning, in our belief, it was the animals that gave fire to the people. It is now time for us to return that gift to the animals.

Advances in Fire Practice is a sub-site of [wildfirelessons.net](http://www.wildfirelessons.net) and is focused on bringing efforts and ideas to the forefront that leaders in the fire management, practice, and research communities have identified as innovative and widely applicable. It provides access to critical and proven fire information and resources. Advances in Fire Practice section can be reached directly by going to <http://www.wildfirelessons.net/AFP.aspx> or through the main Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center website at www.wildfirelessons.net.

The Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center actively promotes a learning culture for the purpose of enhancing safe and effective work practices in the entire U.S. wildland Fire community. It is located at the National Advanced Fire & Resource Institute in Tucson, Arizona.

