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TENDING THE WILD

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Cultural Fire on the

- Jared Dahl Aldern

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Dense forest on Dinkey Creek | Photo: Jared Dahl Aldern

The Cold Springs Rancheria of Mono Indians of California, where many members of the Holkoma band of Mono live today, is located in the south-central Sierra Nevada foothills, south of the San Joaquin River and north of the Kings. Due east of the Rancheria, near the center of the Holkoma Mono people's half-million-acre ancestral homeland in the Sierra, lies a creek that outsiders named after a little dog in August 1863. One day that month, a group of non-Indian hunters was surprised by a large, angry grizzly bear. The hunters' pet pug, Dinkey, barked and rushed up to challenge the bear. The grizzly swatted the little dog away, but Dinkey's attack distracted it long enough to allow one of the hunters to grab his gun and shoot the bear. Dinkey died of his wounds from his brief fight, and the hunters named the nearby creek after the little dog to honor its bravery.

As it turned out, those hunters killed seven grizzlies during their month in the Dinkey Creek area, so we know that the Dinkey landscape must have been pretty good bear habitat at the time. Grizzlies require lots of open ground, forests with widely spaced trees, along with some clumps of dense forest – what scientists call heterogeneous structure and spatial distribution of vegetation. This Dinkey landscape of the past would have provided the bears with plenty of cover for their dens and with rich food sources like acorns, berries, and lots of green meadow plants – plant sources that also made for great foods, medicines, and materials for baskets and tools for the Native people of the area.

Today there are no longer any grizzlies in the Dinkey Creek area, and the thickly growing pine trees of the current forest — the result of more than a century of industrial-scale logging and fire suppression — probably could

not support too many grizzly bears. The more open, food-rich country where grizzlies thrived had been sustained by frequent cultural fires that were carefully planned and conducted by the Holkoma people of the area. The Gold Rush and Civil War-era commercial hunters who invaded Holkoma lands in the 1850s and '60s were followed by ranchers, soldiers, farmers, miners, loggers, hydroelectric dam and power-line builders, recreational hunters, anglers, equestrians, boaters, climbers, hikers, campers, and, eventually, forest rangers and firefighters. All these newcomers displaced Indigenous people, and thereby disrupted or destroyed their cycles of cultural fire, profoundly changing the landscape.

Before those changes, the Dinkey landscape – in fact, the whole, forested western slope of the Sierra Nevada – was maintained by strategic cultural burns. Mono and other Native firelighters used local topography, winds, and fuel characteristics to steer and time their fires near their settlements and along an intricate, interlacing trails network, creating a complex, patchy pattern of vegetation along creeks, in meadows, and in the uplands.

Cultural fire is a form of what is now often called prescribed fire, “the knowledgeable and skillful application of a planned ignition in specific environmental conditions (e.g., fuel moisture, temperature, smoke dispersion, topography etc.) to achieve [specific] resource objectives,” in the words of the [Southern Sierra Prescribed Fire Council](#). Indigenous firelighters understand fire in the way that engineers understand electricity: as a dangerous, potentially lethal energy source that can be extremely useful when used carefully in a well-designed, well-planned fashion. Indigenous people have employed cultural fires since time immemorial to sustain plant and animal communities, including especially the cultural assets (food and materials, as well as aesthetic and spiritual resources) within those communities.



Bedrock mortars at Dinkey Creek. The existence of these and many other mortars demonstrates long-term Indigenous residence in a productive landscape. | Photo: Jared Dahl Aldern

Among the many [benefits of well-executed, well-timed cultural burns for land and water](#) are that they can safely and efficiently clear thick, overgrown vegetation from an area. This means that cultural burns can not only reduce the risk of large, out-of-control wildfires, but they can also increase the flow of water in streams and help Indigenous people meet aesthetic and spiritual obligations. Cultural burning results in a forest where people can see the movements of animals such as deer and bear at long distances – and where, conversely, those animals can see the people who watch and, sometimes, pursue them. Thus, [cultural burning helps to facilitate reciprocal relationships](#) between animals and people, gives-and-takes, mutually beneficial exchanges, or, as [Greg Sarris](#) writes, “agreements with humans regarding shared habitats.” When Indigenous people speak of all their relations, they may not be thinking only of relationships with other people. Cultural fire, as an intricate interaction with land and all its inhabitants, is one way that Indigenous people can foster and renew all their relationships.

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Prior to the arrival of Europeans and Anglo Americans, the overall effect of year upon year of cultural burning was a bountiful landscape on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada, one that [John Charles Frémont described in 1845](#) as “copiously watered with numerous and bold streams,” with oak orchards that Frémont described as “cultivated parks,” cedars and pines five to twelve feet in diameter, and abundant grass that was “fresh and green all the year round.”

True as all that may have been in times past, to ask whether there is a place for cultural fire in today's forests – where management plans are dominated by the often-competing demands of commercial resource extraction, high-impact recreational activities, and the preservation of wilderness (all in the face of climate change, fire-suppressed vegetation, drought, insect infestations, etc.) – is to pose a valid question.

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To address that question, it's worth noting, first, that there are many differences in worldview at work here. Many land managers, educators, forest scientists, and environmental activists see the forest as a workplace, a place where a person puts in a good, productive shift and then “goes home”; or as a frontier (a place to “explore” – note one of the Forest Service’s current promotional slogans, [“Discover the Forest”](#)); or as a wilderness absent of humans, except as visitors who, as the Wilderness Act states, do “not remain.” However, every place that scientists, managers, and outdoor recreationists visit, explore, discover, study, or manipulate is a part of Indigenous *homelands*. When Indigenous people travel to those places, they are not merely visiting, exploring, or working, they are returning *home*, reuniting with family, and renewing relationships. For these people, the forest is a literal (not figurative) home, and a *gathering place* in at least three senses – it is a place to gather food, materials, and other resources; it is a place to gather together with friends and relations; and it is a place to gather one’s thoughts, to learn from observation and conversation about many topics, including how to appropriately conduct cultural burns at specific times and places.

The lands and waters that Frémont described in 1845 were not wholly natural, if by natural we mean empty of people and lacking their influences. In fact, that plentiful landscape was a product of Indigenous gatherings in Indigenous homelands for year upon year. Today, it may not be possible to recreate the complete historical landscape in all its details, but in the face of challenges presented by climate change, insect infestations, a punishing drought, and increasing risk of large-scale wildfire, forest scientists are looking to that past landscape – the forest as it existed prior to full-scale fire suppression and overexploitation by livestock owners, timber operators, and others – for a model of a healthy, resilient forest.

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Cultural fire — fire applied at the right time, in the right place, in the right way, and by the right people — has a role to play forest restoration. To draw on the great storehouse of knowledge that tribes possess, however, it will be necessary for the U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, environmental organizations, corporations, and others to learn that information from tribes can come coded in unfamiliar forms. Indigenous knowledge is inseparable from the people who possess it. There is no way to translate directly into a database the narratives about the history of the forest that are told and retold at tribal gatherings.

For productive mutual learning to take place, it will also be necessary to acknowledge and to move toward the repair of past injustices, dispossessions, and thefts perpetrated against tribes. Some scientists maintain that prescribed fire and fuel reduction treatments that are aimed at reducing the risk of severe wildfire should be concentrated near homes, and that “natural” fires of mixed severity should be allowed to burn in “more remote” areas. Such a view ignores the historical and contemporary character of vast forest areas *as home* for Indigenous people, whose cultural burns of various intensities, severities, and extents could benefit, in some cases, from [moderate preparatory fuels reductions or fuel break construction](#). Sustainment of the benefits of cultural burns requires the sustainment of Indigenous people and their jurisdiction over their homelands.



Cold Springs tribal members and staff with U.S. Forest Service staff at Dinkey Creek, August 2016 | Photo: Dirk Charley, USFS and Dunlap Band of Mono Indians.

In the end, successful knowledge exchanges among tribes and other forest experts can only proceed in a sometimes lengthy process of call-and-response, of reciprocal, mutually beneficial teaching and learning, to include plenty of collaborative work out in the forest, where worldview and philosophy meet up with the details and contingencies of practice. The Cold Springs Tribe is now participating in the [Dinkey Landscape Restoration Project](#), a 154,000-acre project in what is now the Sierra National Forest, centered around the creek where a little dog encountered a big bear long ago, an area that, since that time, has been hard-hit by fire suppression, overplanting of pines, drought, warming temperatures, and insect invasions.

Additional participants in the Dinkey Collaborative include other Native American tribes, the U.S. Forest Service, local businesses and landowners, state agencies, and environmental conservation groups. The pace of the forest restoration work has been slower than all of these participants would like to see, as the calls and responses flow back and forth among the various agencies and individuals in a milieu of strict regulations and stricter budgets, but when it hits its stride, the work will involve a careful application of prescribed and cultural fire that will reestablish an open forest, overflowing with acorns, berries, and other cultural resources – a forest similar to the one that existed in the area so long ago.



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