

British Columbia's Indigenous People: The Burning Issue

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Aboriginal people have a long-established and strong connection with the land. Fire has been an historic and harmonious instrument that nurtured this close relationship. There is abundant documentation showing that Aboriginal people have used fire and prescribed burning for thousands of years. According to the late Henry T. Lewis, Anthropology Professor with the University of Alberta, "Indian traditional knowledge closely parallels what fire ecologists have told us for years and what has been rediscovered by modern forestry management" (Lewis 1978). Aboriginal people are intimately familiar with the effects of fires.

An article written in 2004 by Tammy Allison and Henry Michel summarized the teachings of the late Annie Kruger, a former Okanagan Elder and Traditional Fire Keeper for the Penticton Indian Band, who led a workshop and field tour in November 2003. According to Elders, "The Okanagan [Syilx] People existed in a reciprocal relationship with the land. The land provides all foods, medicines, material goods, and shelter needed for survival; in return the Syilx are responsible to be caretakers of the land. This responsibility demands that we ensure all plant and animal communities have their food and that their shelter requirements are met. Fire has been a major component of this responsibility for Okanagans" (Allison & Michel 2004:7).

Controlled burning is an accepted approach for ecosystem management worldwide. The Syilx nation has a tremendous amount of knowledge about their territory (Okanagan). Syilx knowledge keepers, in particular, are well-respected for their knowledge, especially when they do controlled and fuel load reduction burns in their territory. There are prayers and protocols that our ancestors used when doing the traditional burns, which are still carried out today (Richard Armstrong, personal communication, April 2012).

In a 1999 article, Alan Anderson contrasts the systems of knowledge (Aboriginal vs. western science fire management). Most fires that are lit by people of colonial or European origin are "science-based, strategically directed and goal-oriented ... aimed at achieving specific ecological outcomes (Anderson 1999:6). In contrast, Aboriginal people burn more out of "an emergent property, diffusely arising from many uses of fire that serves social, cultural, spiritual, as well as ecological needs" (Anderson 1999:6).



A fire scarred ponderosa pine tree in the South Okanagan. Photo credit: Don Gayton.



Don Gayton (FORREX), with Traditional Ecological Knowledge advice from Richard Armstrong (The En'owkin Centre), has been involved with a recent fire history project to show that the Syilx people once applied controlled burning on a regular basis. That frequent fire regime ended in 1880–1890 as policies against burning were put in place. The fire return interval was further lengthened when fire suppression became effective in the 1940s.

In northern British Columbia, Sonja Leverkus and Lana Lowe have been involved in a burning project. Leverkus states

Historically the Dene people of Fort Nelson First Nation have had an intricate cultural interaction with fire that continues to this day. From the research work of the Fort Nelson First Nation and Shifting Mosaics Consulting, oral stories and traditional fire practices are finally being documented. Fire is an important tool for the Dene as well as a vital part of the ecosystem. Fire brings the Dene together with the landscape they have been part of for centuries. The teachings and lessons learned from our Elders and community members about fire are critical to incorporate in any and all Government fire and ecosystem management and planning. (Sonja Leverkus, personal communication, March 29, 2012)

It is encouraging to know that provincially and upward to the international level, individuals and organizations are making efforts to restore the practice of controlled burning. Burning has been proven through traditional stories and in practical contemporary applications to be an effective tool. As we use it to care for our ecosystems, fire ultimately connects us all.

Author information

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