

## **Tribal-Traditional Ecological Knowledge**

by: Ron W. Goode

Tribal Chairman

North Fork Mono Tribe

An Australian aborigine woman recently addressed a symposium of educators, historians, anthropologists and other native folks, she asked, “Do you know who you are? We know who we are – we are at-one with the land!

Professor Bill Gammage, Australian historian spoke about fire. He said, “the colonists/settlements have always viewed fire as a threat. While the Aborigine sees fire as an ally. Fire is a part of 'Dreaming.' When working the land use a scapula rather than a sword. Burn early versus often.”

He spoke of fire rules: locate the resources; control the fuel; balance the species; maintain the fuel – and thereby, Ensure Abundance. From the his book, *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia*, comes the statement, “The Continent was not natural, the Aborigines made it that way!”

According to Dr. Rebecca Bliege Bird, anthropological researcher from Stanford University, “people effect all other species.” “To manage is a religious philosophy of dominion. An alternative is the Aborigine way of thinking – everything has an inter-relationship, a web of positive and negative species.”

The Martu of Western Australia were forced removed from the land, after thousands of years of living on the land, for twenty plus years from the 1960's to the 1980's. While they were absent from the land, the largest fire ever recorded burned through their land. After they returned and put fire back on the land, a more mature habitat fire regime was re-established and the wild fire size has been kept small.

Dr. Frank Lake, Karuk, United States Forest Service science researcher, Orleans, CA, spoke of cultural resources from his own native cultural perspective, saying that, “in his tribal culture, each child's umbilical cord is placed in a special tree, one for each child. What happens to the tree happens to the child – therefore, the child has a responsibility to take care of the land.”

### Fire on the Land

The controversy regarding how much fire did the Indians put on the land, is a heated topic amongst scientists' of various disciplines. Ecological science studies do not include history of when the native American was living on the land. Most science reports go back a hundred years ago when the “black plague of suppression” was being instituted. However, literary works exclaim, 'fire has always been here and is as important as precipitation and sunlight.'

They all fall short of coming out and saying, 'when the Indian was living on the land . . . ' So let's break it down, pre 1850 for California, the Indian was still living on the land. 1850 to 1910, the Indian was still out on the land, now as loggers, cattle ranchers, goat and sheep herders, and of course gatherers. Documentations' such as the Kinsman Diary of 1873-1894 describe daily accounts of the local Mono Indians activity and their fires. It may be a simple 'two or three smoke sightings today,' to 'there goes those damn Indians again, with their gunny sacks, probably to put out the fire they started.' Or, a local homesteader requesting the Indian cowboys and goat herders to come help put out a wildfire.

For one thing, the Indians knew which trails were best to use to get to the fire and control the fire. At the turn of the century 1900-1920's, the United States Forest Service District Rangers were hiring the local natives and documenting the Indians and their inter-relationship with fire and the land. Between 1915-1925, Professor Gifford, UC Berkeley, not only recorded the history and the culture of the North Fork Mono but also documented stories of the Mono as told by the Mono. Stories of water, fire, cultural resources, philosophy, traditional practices and creation itself.

Then oppression came. Suppression Policy! The Euro-American settler and their philosophical beliefs along with their fear of fire. In 1991, I did a second stint with the US Forest Service as an

archaeologist. I was required to take a new recruit course. A one day session that included a spiel about fire. The comment made was how fire, “was no good.” “There was not anything good about fire!” Wow! I sat there with my mouth open- unbelievable. So I went to the Forest Supervisor and said, “Now I know what the problem is, and where we need to start correcting it.”

Twenty years later, 2010-2012, as we move into the age of collaboration, the controversy of giving the Native American too much wisdom, too much credit, that traditional ecological knowledge is from a practitioner not from a scientist whose been to the best known universities. How can some dumb savage know more about the land than a biologist or ecologist who has studied and published material about what it is going to take to restore, regenerate, rejuvenate our forest and watersheds. You read their comments on Facebook, you read their statements in science reports, how what is being told to the historians, who have befriended the Native American who still practices their traditions and cultural ways. Some of these comments are coming from the same Universities where the historians and anthropologists and ethnobotanist are trying to do their part working diligently and collaboratively with the Native American culturalist.

It is not just certain scientist nor definitely is it all or even most of our biologist or ecologist. There are still many of our agencies; state and federal forestry, national parks, fish and wildlife, fish and game, for some that do not understand how the land was when the settlers got here. In 2010, at Devil's Post Pile Monument, park officials were talking about how the land should be returned to the “wild.” Back to when everything was wild! I asked them, “Do you mean when the Indian was wild, and living on the land?”

In 1834, Bill Walker came through upper Yosemite and described how open it was to travel through the forest and land. He followed a trail that led him and his party from the eastern side to the bottom of the western slope of the Sierras. Trails made by the Indians. John Fremont spoke of the beauty of the land and the Indian in 1844. 1851, Jeff Mayfield described the golden beauty of the San Joaquin Valley in its richness of flowers, grasses and majestic oaks. In 1868, John Muir described the openness of the land and how it was like a “garden of eden” for the Native American who lived out on the land.

Another controversial subject is cultural resources. Not only the parks and forest folks but some of my own Native people, will say, “We want our cultural resources protected.” I've heard it numerous times, at hydroelectric relicensing, at collaborations and at our water summit meetings. Management Plans are always stating how cultural resources will be protected. Protected! Ancestral sites, sacred sites, historical sites, etc., of course they will and are protected. Local, state and federal laws are enacted to protect archaeological sites. While there might be 10,000 sites, probably on each forest district, that is only a handful of the types of cultural resources. The Mono, Miwok, Yokotoch and Paiute utilized over 200 cultural resources and some 100 different food and medicine resources.

Oh, yes, the HPMP's protect the cultural resources too! Protects them because we as Native Americans can not utilize them without a permit, an escort or a pass through the locked gates. The word cultural is in relevance to the meaning 'to cultivate.' To cultivate means to burn, harvest, prod, prune, transplant and any other means of sustaining the abundance of the resource for generations to come.

Tribal Ecological Knowledge is still quite misunderstood

Tribal-traditional ecological knowledge is based on four factors: Philosophy, Practice, Spirituality, and knowledge. Are you in the 'know?' How do you know without scientific evidence or data? For the Native American, to know is not to believe it is so. There is no theory. There is no science report, no science study, no scientific data. But then again, to be in-the-know, one is repeating hundreds if not thousands of years of information passed down many many generations.

When my mother said our people can see the stars in the mid day light, I knew she meant what she said. I asked, “Where do we look?” She turned her head, pursed her lips and pointed upward into

the bright blue sky. Years later, a friend of mine was using a powerful telescope to show children one of the stars in the day time. He could not locate it and told the children that his Indian friend could see the stars and called me to adjust his telescope. I looked up into the sky and turned his telescope and looked into the eye glass at a beautiful daytime star. There was never a question in my mind that I didn't know where it was.

Why? Because our knowledge is based on philosophy. A philosophy that says we are at-one with Mother Earth and Creator. Our philosophy dictates our practice. Our gathering philosophy is our ecological policy. Gather what you need, leave some for the next gatherer, leave some for the animals, leave some for seed, leave some for the bush itself – no one wants to be left naked. It does not matter whether you are gathering acorn, berries, sticks or roots, the philosophy is taught, learned and understood by all because if you live off the land this is what is called sustainability.

Spirituality is not third in order, but is integrated throughout philosophy and practice. The Native American does not just pray for their food, they pray for the spirit of the animal they are going to kill. Pray that the animal will offer itself, which it does. They make offerings, give prayer, and sing songs when they come upon an ancient site, why, because the 'old ones' are still there. They can see you and hear you and you need to be able to see them and hear them. We make offerings to clear our way, to clear our mind and to clear our heart. We talk to the rocks when we enter their domain, give thanks to the plants and trees for their offerings of sustenance and medicine. When you acknowledge the keepers of the land, spirits of the land, the elements, the forest and the 'old ones' they will in turn communicate with you.

This puts you in-the-know. Knowledge is wisdom. When you are in the need to pray do not ask for what you want or think you need, you might just get what you ask for. Wisdom does not come from man, it comes from Creator. When the nay sayer says the Native American does not have the wisdom that historians bestow upon them, they are correct. We are given the wisdom with what we can deal with. Knowledge, therefore, is passed down from the 'old ones,' from the ancestors, from our elders, from our practitioners and from our traditionalist.

With knowledge comes responsibility. Responsibility to use your gifts, share your knowledge and to keep the traditions alive! So as an elder Aborigine said, “healthy country, healthy people.” What he was saying is when we take care of the land, the land will take care of us. Sir Charles of England made a similar statement, “You must first restore Nature's economy before restoring the economy of humankind.” A powerful statement given the world leaders think in economic terms.

Speaking of responsibility, the white fellows of the world have the responsibility of being in charge of fire. While they on a whole are afraid of fire, they have produced the atom bomb and played with fire long enough to create fire strong enough to send a rocket with man to the moon. However, in the native or indigenous cultures you'll find that these folks have already been to the moon. The moon visitors did not bring anything back with them, material or data, that was new to the native people. White man is in charge of fire, the black man is in charge of water, the red man is in charge of the land, and the yellow man is in charge of the wind. This is part of the four directions, but it does not mean these elements are only left to each race, in fact they are all integrated, however, under responsibility each should know their charge.

What is global warming, climate change, drought and dust bowls? These are terminologies, for humankind out of sync. They are not at-one with their own spirits let alone the spirits of the land. Today, forest experts, scientists and ecological experts are saying, “let's let the land go back to when it was 'wild,' when it was 'natural.'” Funny thought, funny statement, in-lieu of the fact the Indigenous people of the Americas, have been here on the land for 14,000 plus years.

The ability to communicate ecologically is not just a native or indigenous relationship but extends to all people, let alone at least to those who open themselves up to spirituality. At best I possess

fifty percent of the power or capacity to communicate in the spiritual world that my ancestors had. For the past five years I have closed the State California Indian Days with a blessing and a weather prediction. Every year I have been accurate in my foretelling of the coming years' weather. Why, because I communicate with the elements, the trees and plants and animals and with Creator and Mother Earth. Not once, but all year long. On September 19<sup>th</sup>, sitting under the Aspens while on a meadow restoration collaboration field trip, the wind told me we were going to have an earlier winter and it was going to be cold. In October, we had our first snow storm and five storms later all before Solstice, we are at 140% snow pack. I am only the conduit that which wisdom is passed along.

To finalize this TEK, I leave you with this story. A story full of power, knowledge and the capacity to communicate with the spirits of the land by our ancestors and old ones. This story was told to me by my father from a first hand account.

My father started making baskets at the age of seven. He was raised by his aunts and grandma's. He did not speak fluent Mono but had a high level of understanding. He ended up being honored by the National Endowment of the Arts as the first California Master Basket maker. My mother was raised by her grandparents. Left school in the eighth grade. Spoke several languages and many dialects. Her grandparents were born in the late 1830's. She was an owl woman, a great horned owl walked along the trail with her when she was five years old. Her grandmother was a shapeshifter, she would hold ceremonies turning herself into a bear.

So the story goes . . . One day my father saw a rattlesnake out in the front yard. He went to get a shovel to kill it. My mother asked him what he was doing with the shovel. He replied, to kill a snake. She asked him to wait. She walked out of the house and went up the snake. My father said it seemed like a long time that the two of them looked into each others eyes moving their heads back and forth. Finally my mother stood up and said, "Captain Waspie is coming. This is her snake. Don't harm it or kill it. She will be here soon and wants to go across the river to see someone. Get ready to drive us." Dad got ready and soon Captain Waspie came up the trail. She lived three miles up on the ridge. Dad drove them over to the Auberry Rancheria to see Mrs. Reily. When they got there, my mom told dad to wait outside, they wouldn't be to long. He did as he was told. The three ladies went into the house and toward the back room. A while later they emerged. My mom instructed my dad to get in the car and drive them home, back across the San Joaquin River. Dad said he asked what they did and my mom told him to hush. Don't ask! We lived about four miles up from the river. Just before they reached the gate, Captain Waspie started talking very loud in Mono. It surprised my dad, he turned about and said, "What?" He looked at my mom and asked her what the old lady was saying. "Shhh" is all my mom said. Then she told him, she's talking to her snakes. She's telling them to start going home on the trail. "Her snakes?" Dad asked. Mom replied, yes, she has two of them, they go every where with her. Dad said he hurried to open and close the gate. He drove extra fast down the road to the house which was a half mile away. As soon as he got in the yard he hurried over toward the trail to see both rattlesnakes on the move. One was already heading down the trail while the other one waited at the trail head for his master. Dad said he felt a cold chill as the old lady went by him. In our culture we do not look people in the eye because old ones like this can do things to you, so he kept his head down as he watched the three of them go home.

*Ron W. Goode*