



UI Extension Forestry Information Series

Culture and Stewardship:

Nez Perce Forest Management and Use

Ron Mahoney and Aaron Miles



In 1992 we published a special edition of *Woodland Notes* to help initiate the Idaho Forest Stewardship Program, our state program that is part of a national effort to incorporate individual and community land ethics into improved, sustainable management of private forests. In an article entitled *What is Stewardship?* I wrote (with Yvonne Barkley) that “*Stewardship is an attitude, a dedication to doing the best we can for the land, whether it be the entire globe, the nation, or our own private land*”. Recently, I have been working on several programs with forester Aaron Miles, a Nez Perce tribal member, and I was fascinated by his comments on how the Nez Perce view land use, and how their culture helps establish their ethics of responsible stewardship. I thought back to my own mixed culture and began to wonder how my own heritage affects my personal view of stewardship and how that comes across in what I write and how I practice forestry. Like many Americans of European decent, I have a mixed heritage of immigrant ancestors that came for opportunity. They fled Germany where they had no chance for land ownership, and left famine in Ireland, Scotland and Wales in search of land to feed their families. Some developed small family farms, some started early sawmills and made the first covered wagons, and others worked in big city factories. I know I tend to see the forest as a garden, beautiful but needing tending and ultimately utilitarian, and this is evident in my advocacy of active, sustainable management and use. It might be enlightening and useful to further explore how our diverse American cultures affects each forest owner and manager, and there have been a lot of efforts and published works by those of European decent in this regard. Here in Idaho, and across the Pacific Northwest, we have an opportunity to learn how culture and history affect and define what

forest stewardship is, and guide management and use, of indigenous people that remain on some of the lands of their ancestry. The Nez Perce Reservation includes about 60,000 acres of forest land that is managed and used for the benefit of tribal members. While some of their activities, such as logging and planting trees, may be more recent, others sustain ancient traditions and an unbroken chain of cultural influence of forest stewardship. In learning what Aaron Miles has to tell us about Nez Perce culture and forestry, perhaps we can improve on what our European cultures alone provide us as we steward our own forest lands in a region where some of the original stewards remain. ~ **Ron Mahoney**

As an undergraduate student at the University of Idaho in Forest Resource Management, many of my professors would prompt ideas and thoughts of what forest resource management would look like if my tribe (the Nez Perce) was the land manager of public land within its ceded territory of the former reservation. The reasons for choosing public lands rather than private or even tribal trust lands are the critical circumstances, the tremendous amount of rules and regulations, and the scrutiny that federal land managers face from environmentalists, the timber industry, and whatever political faction the public could produce. Many federal lands in the Pacific Northwest today were former reservations of Indian Tribes who sold the title of the land to the U.S. Government **but held these exclusive and certain rights to those lands:**

“The right to fish at all usual and accustomed areas with the privilege of hunting, gathering, and pasturing their horses in common with the citizens of the territory,” [paraphrased] is within the Article III section of the Treaty of 1855 signed by headsmen of the Nez Perce and Governor Isaac Stevens. This section is a formal recognition by the United States and

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the Nez Perce Tribe of the Nez Perce way of life and the rights needed to fulfill such a way of livelihood.

Today, the Nez Perce Tribe protects, enhances, and mitigates for loss of habitat, plants, and fish and wildlife species that may have been extirpated due to dams or changes in habitat. Without the species that were here before the coming of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, the Nez Perce Religion of Wahlusut (7 Drums) and way of life is jeopardized. In the ceremonies of Wahlusut, the hunters and gatherers, men and women respectively, are responsible for serving them for sustenance. It is very much similar to communion in Christian religions in that the wine represents the sacrificial blood of Jesus Christ and the bread represents the body of Christ. Similarly, the animals and plants that are a part of the Wahlusut ceremonies represent the sacrifice unto man so that man could survive. The Tribe continues to speak on behalf of those plants and animals sacrificed for our existence.



Often times the media influences public perception of “Tribes” and “tribal people” as preservationists or *hands-off* environmentalists. This misunderstanding is quite contrary to tribal beliefs and traditions among tribes nationwide and namely the Nez Perce. The Nez Perce people have always manipulated or managed their environment to maintain, sustain, and propagate both seral and climax plant communities. For example, a commonly known species called camas was selectively harvested by Nez Perce women. The digging stick they use is designed only to harvest one camas bulb at time. They never created a tool to mass harvest the bulbs but rather a tool that would allow them to selectively pick only a few genetically dominant bulbs while taking mostly the genetically inferior bulbs. This stimulated a bumper crop for the following year after deliberately burning the landscape on the Camas Prairie, the Heart of Nez Perce Country.

Part of the problems in restoration for the Tribe exists with people in federal agencies and conflicts with their trust responsibility to the Tribe and the land. They may not fully understand the land and tribal cultures, being relative newcomers to the Pacific Northwest over a short period of evolutionary time. Other problems to tribal land resource management include fragmented

ownership patterns and obstacles such as roads and fences. The poor land management practices of the past such as fire suppression, high-grading timber resources, and exploitative development still haunt the managers of today. The tribe continues to work on solutions and shares in the conservation burden brought on during the time of unregulated exploitation of the Pacific Northwest as part of the Union.

The Tribe often finds itself in the same category as those ranchers, farmers, miners, loggers, and others who have been here since the mid 1800’s as “Lords of Yesterday” as author Charles Wilkenson puts it best. These are people who depend on the resources such as timber, water, mining, agriculture, and others for their economic stability and spirituality. Because larger corporate America views these occupations as outdated, dying cultures futilely trying to hang on to their very existence, we have not figured out a way for all of our livelihoods to coexist with one another, and survive the onslaught of new people with contrary values.

Will today’s land managers be able to honor those people who have “first in right, first in time” and uphold the laws that dictate the West? For without the rancher, farmer, or Indian, what would the West be? We all continue to strive to maintain our ways of life not just for the current generation but 7 generations removed from us. It is my hope that cultural barriers can be broken so that we can fight the bigger fight to save the ecological integrity and diverse cultures of the West.

~ *Aaron Miles.*

This information first appeared in Woodland NOTES, Vol. 14, No. 1.

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