

The Decade that brought Hope

by

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with Judy Fort Brenneman

I had been gone for a long time, serving in the military, studying at university. I was home now, and I stood at the edge of what had been a wetland, shocked and dismayed.

I remembered as a child coming here with friends and family to gather the things we needed. I remembered the laughter and stories we shared as we worked. The smells and tastes of everything that surrounded us then were still sweet on my mind.

Now, Himalayan blackberries and other exotic species had invaded. The water snakes had all but disappeared, and water fowl were nowhere to be found.

Since the earliest of times, we humans have created safe havens for ourselves by understanding and using the world around us. For the original essential tribal Peoples in California, that includes wetlands.

A multitude of resources grow in and rely on California wetlands. Food, clothing, shelter, toys, medicine, ceremonial regalia, and inspiration all reside in and rise from the wetlands.

Stories told for generations and written histories both document how lush these lands once were: migrating birds darkened the skies; lakes and streams were fat with teeming fish; vegetation was well-tended and prolific.

The relationship of people with their environment is often disrupted, and that has been true here, too. Over the last hundred years or so, human behavioral relationships with these environs have changed dramatically, resulting in cataclysmic changes. One of the most profound has been the drastic change in fire.

Fires here were once frequent – and they were not all wildfires. Prescribed burns were part of this landscape centuries before modern news reports made phrases like “massive fuel load” part of our summer vocabulary. Fires had purpose and method borne from long experience, encoded in ritual.

But for many years, fires dwindled in size and number, until massive fuel loading triggered catastrophic wildfires that altered entire landscapes. What burned might be completely destroyed; what did not burn became choked and was also destroyed.

In 1995, after a small gathering of the resources there, an Elder mentioned how sad it was to not see birds or other animals in the wetland, and how the areas where the plants could be collected had shrunk so much. That’s when I began to really pay attention. How had it gotten to this state? And what could we do about it?

In the early half of the 1900s, a road had been built around the wetland’s perimeter to allow better access to a campground. Drainage pipes, rediscovered when a large pine toppled in the winter of 2002 and revealed roots and broken pipe, had been installed to increase the drainage from the area.

Each year, as the ground continued to dry out, the blackberry vines thrived and expanded, and the native species dwindled. Without proper care, litter (both “natural” and manmade) accumulated. Pine trees began to grow in the middle of the wetland, a place where they shouldn’t have been able to even take root. Light and space decreased as the invasive species grew; more and more native plants were strangled. Fire hadn’t been part of this wetland for over fifty years, and its absence was part of the problem, too.

I was raised in a traditional household, where the use of fire as a management tool was well-known. That background and training set me to asking some questions. When was the last time the area had been burned in the proper time? When could the pipes be removed to help restore some of the water retention capability of the area and allow the levels to begin returning to normal? And what about that road? Nobody was using it any more, could it be removed? And could we burn the area, the sooner the better?

These questions might seem obvious to those of you who work in interpretation or environmental sciences. The answers might seem pretty straightforward, too. But of course, like the environment itself, nothing is ever quite that simple. Oftentimes, our questions either led to deadends or to more questions which led to deadends. Many of the Elder tribal members couldn’t remember the last time the area had been burned. Some said that it had been at least fifty years, and that they’d never seen it look so bad before. They shook their heads in sorrow and disbelief, convinced there was nothing anyone could or would do about it.

Talks with people outside the tribal community weren’t any better. Attempts in the mid- to late-1990s to have the wetland included in the prescribed fire management plans went nowhere. Conversations with the heads of resource management, FMOs, Park biotechs, Forestry heads, and division chiefs were frustrating at best. No one ever said so directly, but it sure felt like we were getting the brush-off, and that these experts and officials believed they were talking to uneducated Indians who didn’t have any “real” training in any of the proper hard sciences, so they could ignore us. And everybody knew that burning “at that time of year” didn’t make sense and couldn’t possibly work.

All was not dark rejection, however. Occasionally, a Park directive would come our way that showed brief interest in traditional gathering techniques or plant and environmental management. These directives would allow us, as traditional practitioners, to provide input at a few meetings, and there was always talk of more involvement along the way. But the meetings never continued, promised calls didn’t come, projects stayed at a standstill – except for the Himalayan blackberries and pine trees, which continued their progress in overtaking the wetland, and the water itself, which continued to drain away.

Fortunately, we didn’t give up, and Fate herself finally seemed ready to intervene on our behalf. There were several changes in personnel and at last, the opening we had hoped for was there: a chance to share the importance and contextual value of this very special place to the new division chiefs. This time, they saw, felt, and understood some of the concerns. There was consensus that the area was in seriously bad condition, and that the blackberries and pines had to be removed. Maybe there needed to be a prescribed burn, too.

That’s where it ended for the moment, because the chiefs didn’t have quite enough confidence in traditional methods and not everyone was willing to embrace all of the issues involved. But still, it looked like we were finally on track to at least begin weeding out the invasive blackberries and pines.

You knew it couldn’t be that easy, though, didn’t you? Just when everyone thought we could actually begin making progress, bureaucracy raised its head. No funding, and Resource Division professionals must monitor things, came down the order. That plus a lively debate about the best method to deal with the blackberries slowed things down to a crawl. By 2003, less than 30% of the area was accessible and less than that was healthy. Three feet of dead debris was layered on wetland plants that were struggling

for sun and survival. Volunteers from Yosemite Institute and other, mostly educational, groups began to help with hand removal of the blackberries on the western end of the wetland. With the extra help, we finally saw some improvement. The Resource Division submitted grant proposals to fund project monitoring, and we continued removing the blackberries by hand into 2004.

We did have some support for a burn. From the Protection Division, support came from the Division Chief, the Fire Management Officer (FMO) and others. Yet burn plans and consensus on when and how the area was to be burned remained undecided. Discussions and tentative timeframes were suggested as early as 2003, again in 2004, but nothing panned out. The wetland continued to strangle and shrink literally as we watched.

By 2004, tribal support was at a peak. Two of the local tribes and many essential people of tribal descent brought forth information and technical support. The FMO asked if a “ceremonial” ignition would be of interest to the tribes affiliated with the site, and they embraced the suggestion immediately. Research into traditions for such an ignition began along with continued consultation with the two local tribal groups and local traditional practitioners. After some discussion, the groups decided that the event should be documented by creating a short video. Every Division that participated – Protection, Resource Management, Interpretation, and the Indian Cultural Program – all expressed a desire and willingness to contribute.

Finally, in 2005, the Parks Fire Archaeologist began to write the Burn Plan. Complying with various legal restrictions was tough to overcome, but by early summer, 2005 it looked like the burn might actually take place.

The time needed to complete the season’s traditional gathering in the area as well as the need to control the heat level were taken into consideration for the timing of the burn. That meant scheduling the burn for late October – a time when many nontribal people thought would not work. Already, there had been a couple of wet spells, and another one was in the forecast.

A closed, clandestine meeting took place with a few individuals, including some hand-picked tribal members, resulting in a changed burn date. Most tribal members weren’t notified and concern for tribal participation was brought forward again. Another meeting was held to announce the burn date to one of the local groups, and a small delegation from each tribal group was able to participate.

Finally! On the morning of October 28, 2005, all parties came together for the pre-burn briefing. For the benefit of the fire crews, resource management teams, and other nontribal participants, the Fire Archaeologist explained the process for this unique burn. Tribal members and traditional practitioners were introduced and their roles in the “ceremonial” ignition process were described. After the briefing and a short question-and-answer session, everyone proceeded to the ignition site.

Prayers and offerings were given, followed by songs to encourage a successful burn and restoration. Two young men, one from each of two of the affiliated tribal groups, knelt and began to spin the fire hand-drill into the cedar fire hearth to summon an ember. The tinder below the hearth had been carefully gathered to nurture the flame.

While the two men spun the drills into the hearth, one woman sang a fire song and I fanned the ember with a traditionally woven basket. The flame was coaxed to life, and small bits of wood from the immediate area were added. Once the wood caught sufficiently, an Elder directed that the pieces be brought into the center of the wetland.

The sedges and tule began to whistle and sing with the flame: “About time!” they sang to the fire crews and others assembled nearby. The fire crew members stepped forward and took burning pieces out into the burn area. The flames grew and the breeze moved gently as needed to promote the fire. The conditions were perfect for a “cool burn” to take place.

The blackberries and pines mostly succumbed to the burn, which was hot enough to destroy some and deter the growth for a time of those remaining. The strangling debris and other natural litter burned quietly and thoroughly, as if it were melting snow. The smoke that filled the air seemed to disappear a short ways away. Everywhere, surprised voices commented on how well the area was burning. Everywhere, I heard amazement followed by stunned respect for the traditional ignition and its success. My heart filled with hope and thankfulness for the opportunity that this very special place would return to a healthy thriving environment once again. I was glad for the smoke that stung my eyes, for it released glad tears of promise and hope.

The following Sunday, in the company of a respected ethnobotanist and my family, we inspected the area. It was still smoldering in places. We crouched down and checked the conditions of native water plants. Had they survived? We found them, many just under the soil, still alive and already beginning to grow and heal. Water had come in light sprinkles of rain to nurture them. My youngest children grinned and touched the plants, saying, ‘Look, Mommy – they are here and they are all right! They are going to come back!’”

It has been ten years since I stood next to that wetland, paying attention and wondering what to do. I am standing there again, amazed and honored. For the first time, the National Park Service, volunteers, educational groups, Yosemite Institute, Yosemite Fund, Traditional practitioners, and Tribal members were able to come together for the sole purpose of bringing fire back to tend and heal a cultural gathering site. Ten years of persistence, ten years of challenges, ten years of hard work among diverse peoples.

Spring will come again, and soon. The wetland is here again, and will continue to heal. There is hope that the animals and birds will return here soon, too.

As I stand here watching, I can almost hear the wetland speak: Thank you fire, for coming back. Thank you humans, for tending us again. The tule seem to sing in thankfulness, too, for the decade that brought hope.

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