Communicating About Fire With Tribal Organizations

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A significant portion of forest land in the United States—particularly in the arid and fire-prone West—lies within or adjacent to Indian reservations. Even more lies within native aboriginal territories considered by tribes to be areas of special concern. With increased size, intensity, and complexity, fires are more likely to burn in areas important to tribes. In addition, many tribes have fire crews who work on large wildfires. Therefore, it is crucial that Federal and State agencies develop good working relationships with tribes to manage wildfires more effectively, efficiently, and most importantly, appropriately.

Everything that occurs within fire management, and especially during an incident, involves communication, the act of sharing information. Many tribes maintain well-trained, capable fire management organizations, with years of experience and vast knowledge of conditions on the ground. Each tribe can be a valuable source of information and a natural ally for communicating wildland fire messages. Good communication and good working relationships go hand–in–hand to promote successful fire management.

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The key to working effectively with tribes is the ability to build trust and to respect differences. Unfortunately, all too often, fire managers make critical mistakes when dealing with tribal governments, tribal people, and tribal fire teams. It is easy to assume that the same ways of seeing things and communicating—the same cultural norms of interaction—exist among Indians and non-Indians. Tribal views about fire, for example, can be quite different from modern western views. For the Salish and Pend d'Oreille Tribes of western Montana, fire is a gift from the Creator brought to the people by animals. Fire is a blessing that is the heart of spiritual practice and at the very center of traditional ways of life. When used respectfully in a manner consistent with traditional knowledge, fire enriches the world of these tribes, which have a long tradition of spring and fall burning and adapting to, rather than fighting, lightning-caused fires.

It's easy to assume that all tribes are the same; however, an approach that is effective for working with one tribe will not necessarily work with another. In addition, fire managers sometimes become so attentive to cultural differences that they forget they are also dealing with individuals, each of whom is unique, and each of whom is, after all, another human being. All of these assumptions can lead to major blunders.

Fortunately, by following some basic approaches to cross-cultural communication, you can reduce the chance of unintentional offense and increase the chance of creating a mutually respectful, productive, and rewarding relationship.

The Gift of Fire

According to the traditional beliefs of the Salish, the Creator put animal beings on the Earth before humans. But the world was cold and dark because there was no fire on Earth. The animal beings knew that, one day, human beings would arrive. The animals wanted to make the world a better place for the humans. So the animals set off on a great quest to steal fire from the sky world and bring it to the Earth. This story reminds us that while fire can be a destructive force, it is also a gift from the Creator brought to us by the animals.

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A public information officer explains the evacuation plan. Attendance at the nightly meetings during the Jocko Lakes Incident ranged from 250 to 650 people, depending on fire activity that day. Seeley Lake, MT. Photo: Angie Kimmel, Wild Blue Yonder Photography. 2007.

A homeowner in Alaska was disrupting a public meeting during the Boundary Fire in 2004 until the PIO stood by to let the person unload. The woman complained about everything and everybody, then stopped suddenly, looked at the PIO and said, "I just needed someone to hear me out. Thanks for listening."

While it is easy to be defensive during those circumstances, it is usually best just to listen. People want to be heard. When we listen, they know someone actually cares. Take time to listen to people, hear what they say, and provide the information they need. Information without empathy can seem callous and commonly is ignored.

Buist stressed the importance of two-way communication. "As a lead PIO, I don't care if I have a type 1 or a type 3 trainee PIO, but I do want someone who can communicate well with the citizens," he said.

Thank-you sign near Harpers Lake Base Camp, Jocko Lakes Incident, Flathead Agency, Seeley Lake, MT. Photo: Angie Kimmel, Wild Blue Yonder Photography. 2007.

Final Thoughts

In an age where Internet and the media dominate, it is easy to overlook the importance of face-to-face communication. While PIOs should use all of the tools available, they need to put themselves in the victims' shoes long enough to determine the best means for effective communication. Don't assume everybody is getting *accurate* information *when* it's needed. Ask for feedback frequently and adjust tactics to provide information and meet human needs.

People who were most affected by an incident won't necessarily remember what the media said, but how they were treated by an IMT. They will remember whether the team met their community's needs in a timely, accurate manner. ■

- Be aware of the potential challenges of cross-cultural communication. Make a conscious effort to address these issues.
- Accept that you might make mistakes or be unsuccessful in certain efforts. Try to figure out what went wrong, why your effort didn't succeed, and adjust your approach or behavior accordingly.
- Be aware that the issue of language is complicated. Many native homes use English as their primary language. Others primarily use their native language. Some use a mix. Some Indian people may appear to be less conversant in English than they actually are; others may appear more conversant than they are, or may use English in ways unique to their culture or community. That is to say, their frame of reference is based on a common cultural understanding that may not be apparent to outsiders. A translator or tribal member liaison who is familiar with both cultures can be helpful. They can translate both the substance and the manner of what is said, even if the dialogue is conducted entirely in English.
- Listen. Listening well is crucial to effectively communicating with tribal organizations. Communications are often based on relationships and respect, rather than positions or authority. One technique is respectful listening, in which you repeat your understanding of what you have been told to make sure the speaker is satisfied he or she has been heard accurately. Keep in mind, however, that if words are used differently between languages or cultural groups, even respectful listening can sometimes fail to reveal subtle misunderstandings. This point is especially important when meeting with tribal leaders, elders, and cultural advisors.

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- Learn what you can about the history and culture of the particular tribe with which you are working. Knowledge of other cultures is often better acquired by direct experience rather than by study, so attend any cultural education activities that the tribe might offer to visitors. Take time to visit with tribal political and cultural leaders, historians, elders, and educators. Learn from books, tapes, and videos, particularly from those produced or recommended by tribal institutions. No single, all-inclusive reference book likely exists.
- Understand that each tribal governing system is unique, and working with tribes is not always as simple as it may appear. Besides differences in governance structures between different tribes, there are sometimes differences between the administrative and cultural leadership within the tribal governance structure. Recognize the legitimacy of both groups when working with tribal governments. Therefore, fire managers may need to confer with two or more councils or groups when working with a single tribe. Communities often contain a number of distinct cultural groups, which may be changeable. On some reservations, a single tribe and a single native language may exist with a number of distinct bands or clans. Some reservations in the Northwest are home to confederations of tribes speaking distinct and unrelated languages.
- Consider the wide variation among tribes in governmental authority, capability, and sovereignty. Likewise, the formality of the business organizations within tribes varies widely. Some tribes resemble large corporations, while others may more closely resemble family-owned businesses. The fire manager must know that just because a tribal organization is "different" from the nontribal society does not mean it is any less sophisticated. Fire managers should seek expert advice from each individual tribe.
- Understand the value at risk. For many tribal cultures, the lands that firefighters defend are sacred landscapes that have been tribal homelands for millennia. The profound age of tribal habitation on the landscape is understood through oral tradition that is passed from generation to generation, sometimes for tens of thousands of years. Homeland protection may have a very different meaning for tribes.
- Be prepared to accept and attempt to understand that tribes may have valid alternate

The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes created an interactive educational Web site *Fire on the Land: Native Peoples and Fire in the Northern Rockies* as part of their Fire History Project. The site contains information about fire ecology, the traditional use of fire by the tribes, today's efforts to restore landscapes by reintroducing fire, and other compelling topics and useful resources. Visit <http://www.cskt.org/fire_history.swf>.

viewpoints on fire issues. What seems logical and important in one culture may seem irrational and unimportant in another. Being aware of this can help avoid unintentional ethnocentrism.

- Show respect for tribal elders. Elders commonly carry significant but informal authority within the tribe, and their approval can make or break the success of a project. In many communities, elders are a special group of people to be identified and communicated with early in the process. That engagement should be maintained throughout the project.
- Dress appropriately for the occasion and organization. Being a little overdressed can be perceived as a sign of respect while being dressed too casually (for example, wearing ball caps) can be seen as a lack of respect.

Finally, fire managers should embrace the opportunity to work with tribes as an opportunity for personal, as well as professional, growth. Understanding and respecting cultural differences in communications is essential to forging long-term effective working relationships. Achieving these cross-cultural communications goes well beyond short-term practical gains while managing an incident on tribal lands. The process of developing these cross-cultural understandings can leave the fire manager with a more complete appreciation for the role of fire, the impact of human connections to the landscape, and the knowledge gained about the use of fire by native cultures over thousands of years. ■

Selected Fire Communication Research

Matters of Trust and Trust Matters
The key to successful partnerships is trust. Josh McDaniel has written several articles on the importance of communication, education, and public involvement in promoting acceptance of fire management. To read more, visit <http://wildfiremag.com/mag/matters_trust/>.

Communicating About Fire With Wildland-Urban Interface Communities
Wildfire communication needs of people in wildland-urban interface communities and explored agency response to those needs were examined in this study. The study assessed communications before, during, and after fires in the San Bernardino Mountains. Rapid response research methods included informal discussions and focus groups, content analysis, and participant observation. For more information, visit <http://www.fs.fed.us/psw/topics/recreation/studies/fire_rapid_respose.shtml>.

Fire Meanings and Messages
Internalizing the wildfire threat is an important first step for homeowners who increase Firewise behaviors. This study evaluated how people receive, interpret, and reconstruct wildfire messages, especially with respect to educational programs such as Firewise or Smokey Bear. For more information, visit <http://www.fs.fed.us/psw/topics/recreation/studies/fire_fire_meanings.shtml>.

Homeowner Attitudes About Fire
Those who live within or nearby national forests in three States were surveyed to understand public attitudes about fire. Survey participants included year-round and seasonal homeowners and special use permittees with cabins on Forest Service land. For more information, visit <http://www.fs.fed.us/psw/topics/recreation/studies/fire_baer_reports.shtml>.

Communicating With Homeowners about Fuels Management
This report focuses on how managers can effectively communicate with the public about fuels management efforts. It summarizes persuasive communication programs and identifies characteristics of effective programs. For more information, visit <http://nrs.fs.fed.us/pubs/gtr/gtr_nc267.pdf>.

Human Dimensions of Wildfire
A collection of papers highlights research findings from studies supported by the National Fire Plan. These studies focus on the human dimensions of wildfire and examine perceptions and actions of individuals, homeowners, and communities as they try to make sense of, live with, and be proactive about wildfire management. For more information, visit <http://www.ncrs.fs.fed.us/pubs/gtr/gtr_nc231.pdf>.