



SHACKAN INDIAN BAND AND XWISTEN FIRST NATION

Reinstating cultural burning practices

By Esther Lambert

Source: First Nations' Emergency Services Society of BC – FNESS

THE SCIENCE

For thousands of years, First Nations communities across Canada practiced cultural burning as an effective forest management approach to care for the land and sustain their cultural practices. This practice was passed down for generations. Beginning in the 1860s, there was an interruption in the inter-generational transfer of knowledge and way of life, due to disease among indigenous peoples and loss of traditional customs during the Indian Reserve and Residential School era. Furthermore, from the early 1900s, the cultural burning practice was made illegal, leading to the thickening of forest layers that left coniferous stands prone to destructive wildfires and infestation.

Historically, there were at least 70 different uses of fire by First Nations. Cultural burns were done at various intensities, at different times of the year and in specific locations based on fire keepers' knowledge. The type, intensity and location promoted the growth of certain types of culturally significant plants such as food, medicine, grasses for wildlife and woody shrubs for baskets. Revitalizing cultural burning can result in the reduction of risk to wildfires, as it reduces fuel loading, while releasing nutrients; thereby, enabling effective land restoration. Engaging in a knowledge gathering exercise helps the forest management teams understand this historic practice, with its objectives and values, so that local and indigenous knowledge may be incorporated into community-based burn management plans.

THE TRIGGER

A great majority of First Nations communities in Canada, including the Shackan Indian Band, the Xwisten First Nation and the Yunesit'in First Nation, are located within wildlands where they intersect with urban development. Indigenous burning was widely practiced within these communities, resulting in fire-inclusive forests. This practice ended partly due to restrictive forest management legislation. In the absence of these checks on fuel stands, forests near these communities became more susceptible to wildfires. The First Nations' Emergency Services Society's (FNESS) Forest Fuel Management Department has been trying to re-engage with the communities and the province to reinstate some of those practices and to harmonize indigenous and non-indigenous forest management approaches. The Society collaborated with the Shackan Indian Band, Xwisten First Nation, Yunesit'in National Government and the B.C. Wildfire Service, to support an agreement to investigate indigenous burning practices to be incorporated into provincial and federal programs. With the guidance and expertise of independent and government researchers, the FNESS Forest Fuel Management Department prepared a funding proposal and submitted it to the First Nations ADAPT program, funded by Indigenous Services Canada. The Canadian Council of Forest Ministers provided more funding to carry out the burns.

THE APPROACH

An Indigenous-informed qualitative data gathering approach was used to collect information about the value system underpinning traditional burns and information about where, how, when and why traditional burns were conducted in these



Figure 12: The Shackan Indian Band and Xwisten First Nation, B.C. Wildfire Service and the First Nations' Emergency Services Society of BC worked together to inform, design and execute the burn plan. (Source: First Nations' Emergency Services Society of BC – FNESS)

communities. The goal was to understand Indigenous cultural burning practices that can assist in reducing the risk of loss due to wildfires. Elders and knowledge keepers participated in interviews conducted by some of the FNESS staff and researchers from Merritt, B.C. The interviews were then transcribed, digitized and summarized. This data was used to develop a community-based burn management plan. The plan considers climate change risks in wildfire mitigation. The Shackan Indian Band and Xwisten First Nation in relationship with FNESS and the B.C. Wildfire Service worked together to inform, design and execute the burn plan. Two traditional burns under a prescribed burn plan were completed in 2019. From the indigenous perspective, the goal was to revive cultural burns, in order to reduce the hazard but to also heal the land so that it will produce plants that are culturally significant to the respective communities, whether that be food, medicine, or wildlife.

THE OUTCOME

The research allowed for a re-instatement of the legitimacy of indigenous cultural practices and approaches and effective utilization of this knowledge. First Nations objectives were incorporated into the plan and these communities participated in subsequent prescribed burns. Two burns were implemented, which rekindled past practices, and increased awareness and acceptance of the elders and fire keepers'

knowledge; thereby, recognizing other valuable aspects of the land besides being a source of timber and enabling agriculture. According to members from the Xwisten Fire Crew, communities are now more aware of the cultural burns, why they are important and how to apply them effectively. The B.C. Wildfire crew also benefited from this knowledge transfer, which helps in transitioning the burning culture from one of avoiding fires to one of applying fire to accomplish ecosystem restoration. Another important outcome was the building of capacity within communities.

A WORD FROM SHACKAN INDIAN BAND AND XWISTEN FIRST NATION

Lennard Joe, professional Forester and Fire Chief from the Shackan Indian Band focused on the importance of communicating Indigenous values and ways of knowing to Western planners, especially in recent times when more Indigenous land is being encroached upon and climate change poses an increased threat: "Today we're really more emersed with the Western society than we have ever been. With the relationship that we have now with Western society, it is our responsibility to push forward on our knowledge of the land. It is our time to push forward to merge and blend our cultural values and put them into a measurable way that Western world can understand and buy into."

In terms of logistical considerations when preparing for a prescribed burn, the Acting Executive Director of FNESS, Jeff Eustache stressed the importance of early planning, which entails effective, frequent communication and coordination, so that all project partners have a clear understanding of what has to be done within a specific timeline. "I think our pilot burn operations worked well, considering the short one-week timeline that we had, trying to tie in the availability of the B.C. Wildfire Service crew for late March before they go back to their regular jobs, but at the same time trying to bring the videographer in. But you can't plan on a week. You're probably looking at two to four weeks so somebody could monitor the site conditions daily."