For the Klamath Tribes, the damage wrought by the Bootleg Fire is deeply personal

By Lucy Sheriff August 16, 2021
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The phone belonging to Don Gentry, chairman of the Klamath Tribes, rang around lunchtime on July 6, while he was at work at the Klamath Tribes' headquarters in **Chiloquin, north of Klamath Falls**. It was a childhood friend and fellow tribal member.

"He told me there was smoke coming from east of Chiloquin. I stepped out the front door and got straight into my car and drove east, toward the fire." The blaze was small at the time, but it worried him enough to contact the Chiloquin district ranger and the U.S. Forest Service. "I knew we were in the middle of peak fire conditions: drought, low humidity, high winds. I was extremely concerned." The fire spread and now has burned more than 413,000 acres, the largest fire in the West so far this year. It was 98% contained as of Aug. 13.

The fire is destroying the sacred ancestral homeland of the **Klamath Tribes, which constitutes the Klamath, Modoc and Yahooskin people**. Tribal members say they are heartbroken as they watch their land burn.

"I grew up in that area. I have memories of hunting with friends, spending time there with my dad and my brother — who have both now passed," Gentry said. "I'm grieving."

The Bootleg Fire, which started as two separate blazes on July 6 and then merged, has rapidly spread across the Fremont-Winema National Forest, the land of the Klamath Tribes. "Our people still use these areas to hunt, gather and pray with each other," Gentry said. "How will the trees, animals, water tributaries and ecosystem fully recover?"

There have been no lives lost from the fire, and tribal buildings have escaped unscathed, but numerous tribal members were evacuated from their homes.

The impact of this fire on the Tribes, however, cannot be measured by counting the number of buildings lost; members are also mourning the ecological and cultural damage. The environmental impact will not be fully apparent until surveyors can access the land, but the fire has burned elk wintering ranges, the headwaters of tributaries that ultimately flow into Klamath Lake, waters where the tribes have fishing rights guaranteed by a treaty with the U.S. government.

Fish and game are important nutritional and cultural staples. They are considered First Foods, food groups that form the backbone of tribal culture, part of what the Creator left to take care of the Klamath People, according to the Tribes' beliefs and traditions.
Salmon and lamprey, as well as elk and deer, were historically relied upon to provide subsistence for the Tribes, and many individuals still depend on these foods today.
The Tribes are concerned about potential erosion into rivers and nutrients washing into the lake, home to endangered suckerfish populations, another staple for the Klamath.

Archeological records show that the Klamath Tribes have been on this land for at least 14,000 years. According to the Klamaths' own oral history, the Tribes have been in the region "since the beginning of time," Gentry said. "We're really concerned about protecting those sites."
The burned forest contains vestiges of the Tribes' deep connection to this now-charred landscape: historic sites, relics such as artifacts made from obsidian — a sharp, black stone used to make jewelry, hunting weapons and ceremony regalia — old village sites, and prayer markers all denote where the Tribes' ancestors would nap, pray, fast and make bowls, arrowheads and knives.

"We've had all these years of being on the landscape, and so many places had evidence of our spiritual religious practices, and they've just burned," he said. He also pointed out the need to secure the area to protect from disturbance, both from looters looking to collect ancient artifacts and from accidental disruption caused by recovery and restoration activities that will likely follow after the ashes cool.

"Things like salvage logging and tree planting, there's a risk of disturbing these sites, and so we **need to bring in trained cultural resource technicians to conduct surveys and determine mitigation on how we protect these sites**," Gentry said.

In what is a first for the Nation, **the Klamath Tribes have had a seat at the table with the U.S. Forest Service** and other agencies during fire meetings.

Zak Jackson, the emergency manager for the Klamath Tribes, said **tribal representation** allows everyone to be "aware of the areas of significance to the tribes. This coordination helps identify areas that the Tribes can assist with and provides the situational awareness when dealing with areas of great significance to the Tribes," Jackson said.
It's crucial for the Tribes to be involved in fire management, he said, to help with potential evacuation efforts and because of the sensitivity and importance of multiple areas that fire officials may not be aware of. "Providing some local knowledge of the community and areas to the agencies and the teams responding to the fire that may not be local helps with their response efforts and (to) identify areas for evacuees," Jackson said.
Gentry is also adamant that the Tribes are resilient and will persevere through this challenge as they have in the past.

"We'll survive this. But a big part of who we are, since we're so connected to the land, has been lost," he said.