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Living Heritage

by Kathy Bowman, R6

November is a month set aside to honor American Indian heritage in the United States.

There's a tendency to think of "heritage" as a dead thing. But heritage is a living thing. Let us show you just one of many examples of how that's so, and how that's so in the Forest Service.



For ten years, in a project to restore camas meadows, the Willamette National Forest has been collaborating with the Siletz Indian Nation and the Grande Ronde Indian Nation (descendents of the Kalapuya and Mollala tribes that once inhabited this part of the Willamette Valley and Cascade foothills, respectively.)

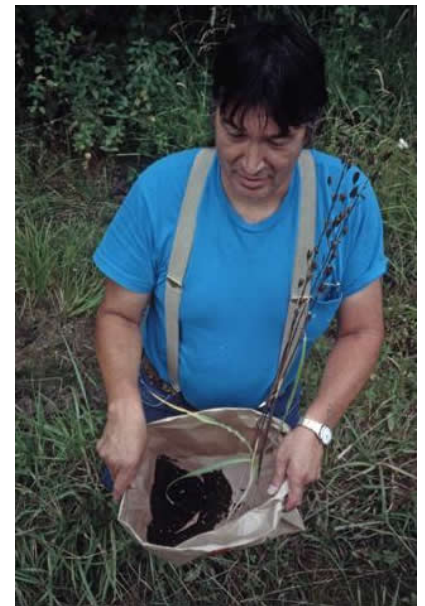
The Camas Prairie Restoration Project was initiated in 1996 as an interagency and intergovernmental project to promote camas (*Camassia quamash*) production through restoration of a degraded prairie wetland. It's a collaborative effort on the part of the two Nations, the Bureau of Land Management, private nursery contractors, Oregon State University, Lane Community College, and the Sweet Home Ranger District, according to botanist Alice Smith.

The efforts at Camas Prairie, in the foothills of the Cascade Range, and at nearby culturally important locations, are intended to contribute to the restoration of the indigenous cultural landscape, providing substantial camas to facilitate reinitiating tribal ceremonial use after a 150-year hiatus on the site.

To begin the project, the Forest Service did careful archaeological testing, vegetation surveys, camas seed collection and propagation, removal of Oregon ash trees and non-native blackberries, prescribed burning, recreation site management, and planting camas seed and bulbs. In addition, over 300 camas bulbs were grown from the seed at a private nursery and, after the first burn, planted by all of the cooperators in the project.

To continue the work, camas seed is collected every summer and scattered after the site is burned - approximately every other fall. This September, for the fifth time in 10 years, firefighters from throughout the Santiam watershed used fire to restore the Camas Prairie wetland to conditions similar to those found in the early 1800s. The amount of camas in the prairie has more than doubled since the burning regime began.

Burning reduces competition to the plant from woody trees and shrubs. It also helps control non-native vegetation both by physical removal of competing plants and reduction in seed



output, while at the same time creating sites to establish camas seedlings. Burning also reduces competition to camas from other vegetation and enhances the winter range forage quality for elk.

It also reintroduces use of fire to the area.



The original inhabitants of the area set fires regularly throughout the Willamette Valley, presumably to discourage the growth of shrubs and trees, thereby enhancing hunting and seed gathering, and also to reduce competition to bulb producing plants.

However, following removal of the Tribes to reservations in the late 1850s, the Camas Prairie site was converted to a pasture or hayfield that was eventually abandoned in the 1980s. At that time drier portions of it were quickly invaded by woody vegetation.

This project is just one example of how the Forest Service can and does partner with American Indian people to preserve heritage resources through restoration.

Sidebar: Camas is a member of the lily family. It is a starchy bulb that thrives in wet meadows, and which was once a primary food source. Traditionally, camas bulbs were harvested in great quantity in late spring and baked in underground ovens that were composed of rocks and layers of vegetation. Fires were built above the ovens and tended for two to three days. Properly cooked camas has a sweet flavor, tasting like a mix of licorice and molasses. The cooked bulbs were eaten singly or mixed them into cakes that were dried and stored for winter use.



Thanks to Alice Smith, botanist and Judith McHugh, public affairs officers, both of the Willamette National Forest, and many others for highlighting other projects large and small around the country restoring traditional botanical, fish, and wildlife resources in concert with American Indian people.

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