

THE KARUK TRIBE
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Tribal Communities, have more often than not, been taken for granted and even ignored by the world. These communities that cling on to their customs and traditions that are sacred and unique to them have been left back, while the rest of the world gallops ahead. There is one such community that has faced more hardships over the last few centuries, but has still managed to come out strong and sustain itself the best it could.

The Karuk tribe is a federally recognised American Indian tribe. This second largest Native American tribe considers itself the major stakeholder of mother earth. Their activities have for long revolved around hunting, gathering, fishing and basket making. This fishing tribe has always been dependant on mainly the Klamath River for its main staple food - The Salmon. Over the years, they have survived using their various kinds of ceremony and harvesting.

The Karuk fishing culture is based on the Ishi Pishi falls where the Klamath River narrows for the quarter of a mile, and this then creates a natural barrier for the fish. The Karuk fishermen use traditional dinettes to fish migrating salmon, while standing on rocks. What they refer to as a “non lethal” practice makes sure that there is never a case of overharvesting. They couple their fishing with a lot of traditionally private prayers, spiritual and physical preparation, one of which also includes sprinkling herbs on the fishing water before doing so.

Enforcement and Regulation

The Karuk tribe promotes resource management and preservation in times of scarcity such as ours. They encourage tribal laws on apt resource usage within all aboriginal tribes. Tribal self governance, self dependence and self reliance have always been their priority

Fire and fuel management

The Karuk tribe practices controlled burning as a means to avoid uncharacteristic forest fires that usually end up destroying their resources and native lands. Controlled burning, they say, achieves multiple resource objectives, like allowing them to promote biodiversity and improve ecosystem functions.

The Karuk tribe works with agencies and tribal staff to implement cultural burning projects based on Karuk environmental management practices. In order to build capacity and infrastructure, the tribe works and coordinates with the Karuk Community Development Corporation

Fisheries

All of the Karuk tribe’s fishing practices have always kept in mind the need to preserve the same. From allowing the first of the lot to always pass by or to carefully avoid overfishing salmon. The tribe always encourages understanding the ecological process that will later amount in an abundance of salmon, and consequently allow it to form a part of their subsistent diet. They work on improving the quantity, quality and availability of correlating microhabitats on which the fishery resources depend.

The Karuk have issued tribal ordinances relating to traditional harvesting methods, time and area closures. They teach the same to interested youth and public. They work with organisations to develop projects relating to fish passage, habitat improvement and population augmentation and monitoring.

Lately, the Karuk tribe has been working with colleges like the University of California and University of Berkeley to come up with cost effective land management practices. These have been proven to be more cost effective than the ones which are currently being used by public agencies.

With the white settlers' entry to the area, commercial fishery developed. And hardly did anyone know then, the extent to which commercialisation will expand its hands across the natural bounties of the earth. Things thereafter changed so much so that, the Spring Chinook, once the largest run of salmon, is now on the brink of extinction. And many factors contribute to this decline but none was greater than the dams which stand between the salmon and their home spawning ground as a symbol of ownership that the non-tribal humans tend to claim over the natural resources.

A tribe that consumed salmon several times a day, now have to make do with less than 100 per year, says a 2005 report. This dramatic diet shift which leaves an average tribesman to consume less than 5 pounds of fish a year has been blamed for the recent high rates of diabetes, heart disease and decrease in life expectancy.

Environmental degradation has therefore left the Karuk's with a lack of healthy food. Not only the companies, but even the neighbouring farmers have been accused of using so much water for their irrigational purposes, that it leaves the rivers to run extremely dry and scanty, come summer.

Also, the ownership of land and location around the Klamath and Salmon rivers have been threatened due to the increased incidence of wildfires, which are caused through natural but more prominently human ignitions. The fire affects the plants, the water and the fish, the territorial plants and animals on which rely the Karuk for their cultural perpetuity.

The degradation caused to the environment has to be the outcome whenever many individuals use the scarce resources in common. Tribes like the Karuk are the hardest hit as they experience dramatic environmental shifts in their forest lands and fisheries despite their own low carbon lifestyle. Other damaging human influences to the Karuk include logging activities that have depleted the old growth forests and the fire suppression policies created by the U.S. Forest service that have limited the cultural burning practices. Forceful modification of the traditional practices to fit in the contemporary political context has made the situation worse for the indigenous people.

The department of natural resources of the Karuk tribe envisions for an "Eco Cultural Resource Management Plan" (ECRMP) to serve as the long term adaptive management strategy for the protection, enhancement and utilisation of natural and cultural resources. The plan tends to outline the cultural and environmental management practices through the use of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and correlating western science. The plan provides over twenty such practices based on TEK and the "world renewal" philosophy, which highlights the interconnectedness of humans and the environment.

The plan aims to re-establish the traditional burning practices, decrease fuel loads and the risk of wildfires. It is meant to establish a framework considering the wide range of human and environmental stressors to the Karuk tribe. The principal goal of the ECRMP is restoring the landscape resilience through the TEK, thereby enabling a balance between ecological processes and human resource needs. The department of natural resources develops and implements strategies identified in the plan, works with the federal and state

agencies and the NGOs and collectively they take into account the traditional values and co-ordinate them with tribal programmatic activities in the current and future management strategies.

One of the main features of the plan is re-establishing the traditional burning practices in order to decrease the fuel loads and the risk for more severe wildfires. The traditional burning practices enabled the Karuk people to burn off specific type of vegetation and ensure continued diversity in the landscape.

Another crucial aspect of the plan is the life cycle of fish, most importantly the salmon that are central to the Karuk ecosystem and food traditions. Traditionally, the Karuk regulated fishing schedules allowing the first salmon to pass ensuring that those most likely to survive made it to the prime spawning grounds.

Now, the important point of concern is that if these indigenous people are taking the onus on their shoulders to protect their natural habitat and save the environment, everyone should undergo a renaissance too. There's a need to scale up the Eco Cultural Resource Management Plan on a much broader level, thereby helping the Karuks be a witness to their dreams and ensuring a better environment for each one of us as well.

In partnership with the TEK and Western Science, we can utilise cumulative information to make informed assessment that will enable us to better understand the loop holes and help in better implementation. There is a need to formulate strategic mitigations at the landscape level which can cooperatively be implemented based on established priorities. Also, answering the unanswered questions and monitoring real time results shall allow the plan to grab a stronger hold at the national level.