

# Aah takuníktaamhinaatih: Karuk Fire Training Ignites Hope

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## ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

Led by Karuk women and cultural practitioners, KWTREX+ is an annual live-fire, intensive training about prescribed burns, cultural fire, and continued response to fire suppression. While they offer practical lessons like using common fire gear, hand tools, and drip torches, what makes them unique is they root all of the training in their cultural values, resources, and histories. All of KWTREX+ s intentions generated an orchestra of sounds rarely heard at any fire training: cackles by crass aunties serving jokes; Karuk language being spoken at the fireline and on the radios; howls of joy on top of burning, crackling hillsides; boiling water bubbling throughout the day for herbal teas; Native seeds shaking in giant bags, collected before the burn to replant afterward; hair tightening into braids while eating lunch; beads and shells clanking into jewelry by the roaring river after a long day; chatter about cultural fire perspectives and resistance to assimilation. Before and even in my day job-1 work for the Department of Natural Resources for the Karuk Tribe and we do a lot of larger land management projects-people make decisions about places they ve never been to...We were feeling that with cultural burning, your education specific to that place via you living there, gathering there, being there is really part of your knowledge base for how we burn that place...Not every place is the same.

## FULL TEXT

NEC Staff

Five Indigenous women, majority Karuk, hold a fir stick in their hands. As the skies clear and the wind finally calms, they encircle a small fire. Altogether, they light each of their sticks and move toward the designated burning site. One yells in Karuk, Chimi nu'ahíshrih [Let's put fire down - now]! The others repeat her words while setting dry grass ablaze. Aah takuníktaamhinaatih [They are packing fire]"

Little by little, the meadow fills with flames at the center of Tishániik, one of the Karuk Peoples world renewal sites. We all watch behind the firelighters, standing ready to support the cultural burn. Spiritual energies saturate the air. Collectively, we hone in on our intentions to renew, protect, and preserve the ceremonial landscape filled with generational life and medicines. Hours pass. Midnight approaches. We finally finish with twenty acres burned. This cultural burn at Tishániik was made possible because of the Karuk Indigenous Women's+ Prescribed Fire Training Exchange (KWTREX+). Led by Karuk women and cultural practitioners, KWTREX+ is an annual live-fire, intensive training about prescribed burns, cultural fire, and continued response to fire suppression. This year s KWTREX+ happened during the week of June 23, 2024, with over 50 participants. I was accepted into this training and after having such inspiring experiences, I wanted to highlight this invaluable offering by the Karuk community; how invaluable it is that they welcome others to their home to teach about Karuk fire relations and ways of caretaking their part of the earth.

KWTREX+ provides a training opportunity unlike any other in the world. While they offer practical lessons like using common fire gear, hand tools, and drip torches, what makes them unique is they root all of the training in their cultural values, resources, and histories. Throughout the week, they invite Karuk community members to speak about fire in relation to basket weaving, foods, medicines, ceremonies, land stewardship, and more. Cultural objectives are woven into fire plans, such as ensuring Native trees are protected and willows are burned extra hot. In selecting trainees, the organizers prioritize Indigenous women, trans, and nonbinary applicants. At this year s

training, the participants were predominantly Indigenous women, many of whom have been around fire as an integral part of their culture. The participants encompassed varying levels of experience, ranging from being first time fire practitioners, like myself, to working years in fire suppression.

All of KW TREX+ s intentions generated an orchestra of sounds rarely heard at any fire training: cackles by crass aunties serving jokes; Karuk language being spoken at the fireline and on the radios; howls of joy on top of burning, crackling hillsides; boiling water bubbling throughout the day for herbal teas; Native seeds shaking in giant bags, collected before the burn to replant afterward; hair tightening into braids while eating lunch; beads and shells clanking into jewelry by the roaring river after a long day; chatter about cultural fire perspectives and resistance to assimilation.

People cried recollecting about their territories being destroyed by the hands of the state and settlers. Returning to gathering sites that had been clear-cut without notice by federal agencies, killing not only trees but all the tiny and big relatives across the forest floor. Feeling rage from fire suppression and logging tactics that reject trees as breathing beings connected to all species (including humans) around them. Being unable to weave baskets as a central cultural resource because the plant materials were too infested without burns to protect them.

Despite the grief, most people spoke of hope and resiliency in their respective communities. Reclaiming cultural practices and ceremonies by relearning how to put fire back on the ground. Seeing nonhuman kin re-emerge, after years of absence, because of burns. Experiencing the ripples of re-normalizing fire as a tool, medicine, and relative. Watching homelands slowly begin to recover, resuscitate, and breathe again. As one participant reflected, Fire is needed as much as rain."

On the last day of the training, I sat down to talk with Vikki, one of the KW TREX+core organizers and a general badass and beloved community member:

My name is Vikki Preston, she/her. My mom is Karuk and Yurok, so I grew up here in Orleans. Our villages are around here. My dad was from Susanville. Hes Paiute, Pit River, and Modoc. Very spread out lineage through Northern California.

[KW TREX+] came about from a general group of us locally in Karuk Country being of the same mindset: that we would like to see more diversity and different types of burning groups and events happening. A lot of us participated in the prescribed burning events. Personally, I liked and didn t like some parts of the events or working in wildfire. There's a way that a lot of the fire world is; it's very cis-hetero-male-white. As someone who is not a lot of those things, feeling comfortable in those spaces was not really a luxury that I had. It was a lot of years being really insecure, and I would see other folks in those spaces also feel that insecurity of it. Feeling like it's not for them. I would often talk to people about it, talk about lar their own individual experiences of wanting a more inclusive burning space or a general safer place to burn... Women who would want to get involved in [burning] events would be like Oh, I cant burn because my abuser [is there]."

Traditional burning here in Karuk Country is often really connected to the whole community. It's not just a men s thing Often it was really treated that way in contemporary times...I was always taught through basket weavers that fire is important. A lot of my context came from even here locally, was not including weavers, other women, or other people in the community.

Place-based burning is part of the intention and part of our practice of [Karuk] cultural fire here... Before and even in my day job-1 work for the Department of Natural Resources for the Karuk Tribe and we do a lot of larger land management projects-people make decisions about places they ve never been to...We were feeling that with cultural burning, your education specific to that place vía you living there, gathering there, being there is really part of your knowledge base for how we burn that place...Not every place is the same. That was really part of something we wanted to build in and not take lightly: that people and their placed-based knowledge is super important. I feel like we accomplished this part really well.

The participants were really uplifting the program as we went. We were kind of just giving them the tools to do that. In some cases, they brought their own tools and were like, We want to also teach you how to make this better There were different tensions and dynamics. Great dynamics and a lot of energy into the relationships... That has always

been hard to manage. You can't really manage it. As an organizer, you can't help but think What should I do? It's always a really powerful group, especially when you get Indigenous People together. Let alone Indigenous women and other expansive communities and intergenerational stuff-you just have such a powerful group. People telling you how it is, which I appreciate a lot and also want to accredit it to a testament of how open people feel.

Different parts of the training that I would've liked to have included were conversations where we are drawing in more context to things going on in the world. I really wanted to make more connection and have more of an effort to fundraise for Palestine...I also wanted to, and this was still a critique from the last [KWTREX+], address non-binary people-because even saying Womens TREX, there's a binary there. I've heard mixed thoughts, like you can't just add on to women and everyone else too Which we kind of did...It's on my mind to at least do better, to at least talk about it, to be transparent because we definitely have had a lot of conversations about gender and sexuality within fire.

In my perspective, because a lot of tribes describe it differently and it's not the same for every tribe, locally here I see cultural burning as an Indigenous person, community, or family being able to burn in the way they want to burn, where they want to burn, when they want to burn. And not have to be beholden to Western restrictions. Permits, burn bans, you're going to be put into jail or busted-like those are still very real... think different methods, whether it's with pitch sticks or propane or drip torches, those things are where things get fuzzy for group consensus. I generally feel like if it's how people want to do it, it's how they want to do it.

I grew up with my family burning the field to keep the blackberries out. We weren't holding ceremony before we burn. We were really just maintaining and doing our due diligence. It's not always a huge thing. You're doing it with yourself or your family. You're still intentional. That's hard as we reintroduce our communities to [People] are like This is really special It IS special. This is very special. I don't want people to underestimate it. I do feel like, though, sometimes we are just doing our regular practice. There's really special burns and some regular due diligence. We definitely have levels [of cultural burning] here in Karuk Country... there's a lot of nuance. To learn more about and follow KWTREX+, visit Instagram @kwtrex and Facebook at Karuk Women's TREX.

#### THOUGHTS

of my favorite moments [of KWTREX+] included taking Mel [a participant from Bolivia] to the ocean and redwoods for her first time, having my kids come and spend time with me during the in-between, making new friends, feeling like the majority in a group setting, and acceptance, inclusion, and learning from our knowledge bearers. Everyone has a gift to share. Such a blessing to receive them. The [greatest] lesson during this KW TREX + for me was to tap into the collective community knowledge. For example, I was feeling like I was not capable of leading in such complexity (firing patterns, slopes, equipment failures, wind shifts, etc.). Yet once I got out of my own head, I felt the vision of the KWTREX+ flow. Their vision came to fruition. It takes a minute for your mind to relinquish control and stop reaching for previous trainings. In this instance, for this type of burn, I have to have trust in others and trust in myself to contribute to their goal -Chanel Keller (Esselen and Chalon) The

#### Sidebar

##### FROM PARTICIPANTS IN THIS YEAR'S KWTREX TRAINING "I

was honored to be chosen to participate in the Karuk Women's TREX this year. [I am a Karuk woman who had no official experience with fire. I learned so much, not only about prescribed burning with cultural objectives, but about myself and the friendships and community I want to be surrounded in. The first night of fire, I got a chance to light the black line as the sun was setting. I heard three women's voices singing behind me as I dotted the ground with fire from my pitch stick. I later realized the voices were not from the women, in human form, working beside me. The warmth coming from the ground matched the warmth from my heart. It was an unforgettable experience -Elaina O'Rourke (Karuk) "Some

core value of KW TREX+ for me was building relationships with the community and the land. The people and their passion for community building is what makes this opportunity so special. We were given the space, time, and teachings, to connect with the land and plant relatives that we were tending to, throughout the entire process. To go onto sacred ground, harvest native seeds, rejuvenate the earth with fire, and then remove non-native species was a special kind of complete care and connection -Terra Burke (Lumbee) (Lumbee)

# DETAILS

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