

Native American Use of Fire

Correlation to Learning Standards

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts: Writing Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects 6-12: Grades 6-8, Range of Writing 10

Illinois Social Science Standards: SS.G.2.4, SS.G.2.6-8.LC.

Fire as a Tool: Native Americans use of Fire

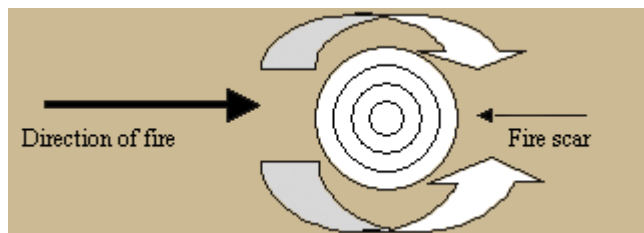
Fire was an important tool widely used by Native Americans. It was part of their everyday life. Fire had many uses: reducing the undergrowth thereby opening up the area for more food plants such as berries; clearing the land for crops; and hunting-driving game in an open woods was quieter and easier to move through when hunting. For a long time it was believed that the Native Americans had little impact on the land they inhabited, taking only what was needed and moving on. However this version of history is not true. Native Americans and in fact all people have changed the landscape they live on to meet their needs for survival and growth. Fires were purposely set by Native Americans for many reasons all critical for their survival: providing food, places to live, safety, and in warfare.

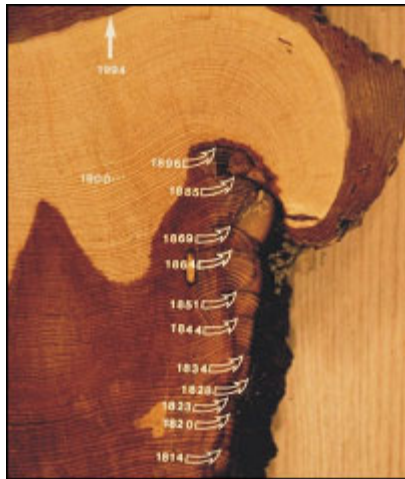
Of course naturally caused fires such as those started by lightening or volcanoes did happen but the fires set by Native Americans were different in three ways:

1. Time of the year. Native Americans set their fires at certain times of the year depending on what the purpose of that fire was. For example fires set to clear land for growing crops and stimulating berry growth were set in the early spring in the northern part of North America just as the new growth was starting.
2. Timing. Fires were set at regular intervals, often as frequently as every 5 years. This was more often than naturally occurring fires.
3. Intensity. Because fires were set more frequently than normal there was less time for larger plants such as shrubs and trees to grow back. This meant there was less fuel to feed a fire, the fires were less intense, and more likely to burn along the surface (ground fire.) A fire that has more fuel will be larger, often getting into the tops of trees and spreading from tree to tree (crown fire.)

Evidence

What kind of evidence is there to support these claims? Most of the evidence is indirect such as written accounts by early settlers, explorers, trappers, and missionaries that saw fires or evidence of fires on the landscape. The landscape itself leaves clues by what is growing there and by looking at tree rings. Trees often have fire scars that give clues as to how often fires started, how severe they were, and what direction the fire came from. A fire scar will form on the area of the tree opposite from the direction the fire came from.





Sugar pine with fire scars labeled.
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We also know fire was an important part of Native American culture because it is part of their mythology. The following story describes how fire came to native peoples.

How the Coyote Stole Fire

Long ago, when man was newly come into the world, there were days when he was the happiest creature of all. Those were the days when spring brushed across the willow tails, or when his children ripened with the blueberries in the sun of summer, or when the goldenrod bloomed in the autumn haze.

But always the mists of autumn evenings grew colder, and the sun's strokes grew shorter. Then man saw winter moving near, and he became fearful and unhappy. He was afraid for his children, and for the grandfathers and grandmothers who carried in their heads the sacred tales of the tribe. Many of these, young and old, would die in the long, ice-bitter months of winter.

Coyote, like the rest of the People, had no need for fire. So he seldom concerned himself with it, until one spring day when he was passing a human village. There the women were singing a song of mourning for the babies and the old ones who had died in the winter. Their voices moaned like the west wind through a buffalo skull, prickling the hairs on Coyote's neck. "Feel how the sun is now warm on our backs," one of the women was saying. "Feel how it warms the earth and makes these stones hot to the touch. If only we could have had a small piece of the sun in our teepees during the winter."

Coyote, overhearing this, felt sorry for the men and women. He also felt that there was something he could do to help them. He knew of a faraway mountain-top where the three Fire Beings lived. These Beings kept fire to themselves, guarding it carefully for fear that man might somehow acquire it and become as strong as they. Coyote saw that he could do a good turn for man at the expense of these selfish Fire Beings.

So Coyote went to the mountain of the Fire Beings and crept to its top, to watch the way that the Beings guarded their fire. As he came near, the

Beings leaped to their feet and gazed searchingly round their camp. Their eyes glinted like bloodstones, and their hands were clawed like the talons of the great black vulture. "What's that? What's that I hear?" hissed one of the Beings. "A thief, skulking in the bushes!" screeched another. The third looked more closely, and saw Coyote. But he had gone to the mountain-top on all fours, so the Being thought she saw only an ordinary coyote slinking among the trees. "It is no one, it is nothing!" she cried, and the other two looked where she pointed and also saw only a grey coyote. They sat down again by their fire and paid Coyote no more attention.

So he watched all day and night as the Fire Beings guarded their fire. He saw how they fed it pine cones and dry branches from the sycamore trees. He saw how they stamped furiously on runaway rivulets of flame that sometimes nibbled outwards on edges of dry grass. He saw also how, at night, the Beings took turns to sit by the fire. Two would sleep while one was on guard; and at certain times the Being by the fire would get up and go into their teepee, and another would come out to sit by the fire.

Coyote saw that the Beings were always jealously watchful of their fire except during one part of the day. That was in the earliest morning, when the first winds of dawn arose on the mountains. Then the Being by the fire would hurry, shivering, into the teepee calling, "Sister, sister, go out and watch the fire." But the next Being would always be slow to go out for her turn, her head spinning with sleep and the thin dreams of dawn.

Coyote, seeing all this, went down the mountain and spoke to some of his friends among the People. He told them of hairless men, fearing the cold and death of winter. And he told them of the Fire Beings, and the warmth and brightness of the flame. They all agreed that man should have fire, and they all promised to help Coyote's undertaking.

Then Coyote sped again to the mountain-top. Again the Fire Beings leaped up when he came close, and one cried out, "What's that? A thief, a thief!" But again the others looked closely, and saw only a grey coyote hunting among the bushes. So they sat down again and paid him no more attention. Coyote waited through the day, and watched as night fell and two of the Beings went off to the teepee to sleep. He watched as they changed over at certain times all the night long, until at last the dawn winds rose. Then the Being on guard called, "Sister, sister, get up and watch the fire." And the Being whose turn it was climbed slow and sleepy from her bed, saying, "Yes, yes, I am coming. Do not shout so."

But before she could come out of the teepee, Coyote lunged from the bushes, snatched up a glowing portion of fire, and sprang away down the mountainside. Screaming, the Fire Beings flew after him. Swift as Coyote ran, they caught up with him, and one of them reached out a clutching hand. Her fingers touched only the tip of the tail, but the touch was enough to turn the hairs white, and coyote tail-tips are white still. Coyote shouted, and flung the fire away from him. But the others of the People had gathered at the mountain's foot, in case they were needed. Squirrel saw the fire falling, and caught it, putting it on her back and fleeing away through the tree-tops.

The fire scorched her back so painfully that her tail curled up and back, as squirrels' tails still do today. The Fire Beings then pursued Squirrel, who threw the fire to Chipmunk. Chattering with fear, Chipmunk stood still as if rooted until the Beings were almost upon her. Then, as she turned to run, one Being clawed at her, tearing down the length of her back and leaving three stripes that are to be seen on chipmunks' backs even today. Chipmunk threw the fire to Frog, and the Beings turned towards him. One of the Beings grasped his tail, but Frog gave a mighty leap and tore himself free, leaving his tail behind in the Being's hand---which is why frogs have had no tails ever since. As the Beings came after him again, Frog flung the fire on to Wood. And Wood swallowed it. The Fire Beings gathered round, but they did not know how to get the fire out of Wood. They promised it gifts, sang to it and shouted at it. They twisted it and struck it and tore it with their knives. But Wood did not give up the fire. In the end, defeated, the Beings went back to their mountain-top and left the People alone.

But Coyote knew how to get fire out of Wood. And he went to the village of men and showed them how. He showed them the trick of rubbing two dry sticks together, and the trick of spinning a sharpened stick in a hole made in another piece of wood. So man was from then on warm and safe through the killing cold of winter.

How did Native Americans use fire?

According to Williams (2000) Native Americans used fire for the following reasons:

1. **Hunting.** Fire was used to drive large game such as deer, elk, and bison into areas that made hunting easier. Sometimes animals were driven by fire over cliffs or into narrow canyons, rivers or lakes where they could be more easily killed. Torches were set to find deer and attract fish. Smoke was a useful tool in forcing raccoons and bears from their tree dens.
2. **Growing Food.** Fire was used to clear areas for growing food; prevent fields from growing back to shrubs and trees while they were fallow; increase the yield of berries such as strawberries, raspberries, huckleberries; and clear areas under oak trees to make the gathering of acorns easier.
3. **Insect Collection.** Fire was used to collect and roast crickets and grasshoppers. Smoke was used to drive bees from nests aiding in honey collection.
4. **Pest Management.** Fire helped to keep the population levels of pests such as rodents, poisonous snakes, flies, and mosquitoes down.
5. **Range Management.** Fire stimulated the growth of new grasses for grazing animals and kept the area from growing back to shrubs and trees.
6. **Fireproofing.** Native Americans knew how to fight fire with fire. Fires were deliberately set near settlements and other special areas. If a fire moved through the area it might go out when reaching the already burned area because there was no fuel.
7. **Warfare and Signaling.** Fires were purposely set in fighting enemies. A cleared area was hard to hide in. Fires were used to destroy enemy property. Fires were set during an escape to camouflage movement. Large fires were also set to notify others of enemy movements and gather forces for fighting.
8. **Economic Extortion.** Some tribes burned large areas to prevent settlers and traders from finding game. They would then trade with them for dried meats.
9. **Clearing Areas for Travel.** Keeping trails open and free from brush was important for travel, and safety.
10. **Tree Felling.** Trees were important for building structures and canoes. Before axes were available through trade, Native Americans used fire to kill trees. One method was to drill two intersecting holes in

a trunk, put charcoal in one hole and let the smoke escape in the other. The other method involved encircling a tree with fire at the base, "girdling" it, and eventually killing it.

11. **Clear Riparian Areas.** A riparian area is land near water. Clearing brush made hunting for beaver, muskrats, moose, and waterfowl easier.

Teaching Activity

Write a story. Imagine you are a young Native American boy or girl. It is a warm spring day with little breeze. A fire is being set today to clear an area for growing food. Here are some ideas you might want to build into your story:

- Time of the year-late spring
- Cool evenings, warm days
- Days are getting longer, more sunlight
- After less activity of winter, busy time of year
- Maple syruping
- Birds and animals moving about
- Not too windy day
- Fire is exciting, yes dangerous, fires set by adults
- Good-clear land for food to grow and berries
- Your job is to stand guard in case the wind shifts--use a buffalo hide to beat out any sparks or small fires that might get too close to the village.

References:

William, G.W. 2000. *Introduction to Aboriginal Fire Use in North America*. Fire Management Today. 60(3):8-12.

This publication is a product of the United State Forest Service and may be accessed online at http://www.na.fs.fed.us/fire_poster/nativeamer.htm.