


California Indian Basketweavers Association



Newsletter #1
June 1992

Basketweavers Association Forming at 1992 Basketweavers Gathering

The California Indian Basketweavers Association is expected to be formed at the 1992 California Indian Basketweavers Gathering at Ya-Ka-Ama in Forestville, June 26-28. Anyone who supports the stated purposes of the association will be eligible to join in one of two membership categories. If interested, please write for application to:

California Indian Basketweavers Project
16894 China Flats Road
Nevada City, CA 95959 or call (916) 292-0141

Purposes of California Indian Basketweavers Association

Subject to review & approval by basketweavers at the 1992 Gathering, the purposes of the Association are:

- To preserve, promote & perpetuate California Indian basketweaving traditions
- To raise awareness & provide education of Native Americans, the public, public agencies, arts, educational & environmental groups of the artistry, practices & concerns of Native American basketweavers
- To promote solidarity & communication between Native American basketweavers
- To promote & provide opportunities for Native American basketweavers to pursue the study of traditional basketry techniques & forms & to showcase their work
- To provide information & services to Native American basketweavers, including means of protecting their rights as artists & Native Americans
- To establish rapport & work with public agencies & other groups in order to provide a healthy physical, social, cultural, spiritual & economic environment for the practice of Native American basketry
- To increase Native American access to traditional cultural resources on public & tribal lands & traditional gathering sites, and to encourage the reintroduction of such resources & designation of gathering areas on such lands
- To broaden communications with other Native American traditional artists
- To do all of the above in a manner which respects our Elders & Mother Earth

WHAT SHALL WE CALL OUR NEWSLETTER?

Do you have an idea for a newsletter name?
If so, let us know.

LOGO CONTEST

We need a logo to be used on letterhead, cards, newsletters, etc. Please submit your ideas or artwork to the address listed above.

Protest of Herbicide Spraying

...Elders have noticed that the bees are disappearing—there are blossoms on the trees, but no fruit.

On March 30, 1992 about fifty people gathered at Simpson Timber Company to protest Simpson's plan to spray herbicides on more than 3,000 acres of timberland in Humboldt & Del Norte counties, including privately-owned land within the Yurok reservation.

Protestors included members of Californians for Alternatives to Toxics, the Green Party, the Northern California Basketweavers & Gatherers Association, concerned Native Americans from the area, and Humboldt State University anthropology students.

The protest over herbicide spraying was peaceful until a Simpson employee tried to drive through the crowd of demonstrators, striking Yurok basketweaver Susan Burdick. Protestors were angered by the incident and some entered a Simpson gate to complain to Sheriff's deputies & ask that more witnesses' reports be taken. Five people were arrested on charges of trespassing, including Yurok basketweavers Susan Burdick and Margo Robbins who were additionally charged with resisting arrest.

Herbicide use by Simpson and other private timber companies has raised health & safety concerns. Simpson applies Garlon 4 in the spring, by a combination of helicopter & manual spraying. It is used in areas of redwood & douglas fir to kill competing species such as tan oak. In pine-growing regions, Pronone pellets are used to kill vines, brush & small trees.

Garlon 4 is approved by the federal government, but questions & fears about the cumulative & combined effects of toxic substances over years of exposure remain. According to the California Environmental Protection Agency, 2-4-D is often applied in combination with Garlon 4. Diesel fuel is sometimes added as well. Some Yuroks suspect that spraying has caused a high rate of health problems on the reservation, including birth defects, miscarriages & colon cancer. Patty Clary of Californians for Alternatives to Toxics has said that chemicals in the same family as the active ingredient in Pronone pellets are known as "ready leachers", meaning that they travel readily through the soil into groundwater & streams.

Simpson had earlier removed two hundred acres from its herbicide spraying schedule in response to concerns expressed by people living on the Yurok reservation. The acreage consisted of a mile-wide strip on either side of the Klamath River. Nevertheless, fears of contaminated run-off from other sprayed lands which drain into water sources remain. The Yurok Interim Tribal Council formally delivered a letter to Simpson Timber Company asking them to stop all spraying on reservation lands. The council is concerned for the health of tribal members & the long-term impact on the land, water & fish in the area. Deformed fish are appearing in local fish hatcheries and Elders have noticed that the bees are disappearing—there are blossoms on the trees, but no fruit.

Many have suggested that timber companies discontinue spraying & hire people to physically remove unwanted plant species. According to Simpson resource operations forester, herbicide spraying costs about \$40-\$50 per acre while hand removal costs about \$200-\$400 per acre. The local economy would benefit from increased jobs and some have noted that spraying may be less expensive to timber companies but the cost to society is great.

Vera Ryerson Honored as Woman of the Year

Vera Ryerson (Yurok) was named "Woman of the Year" by the Humboldt County Commission on the Status of Women. She received the award in March at the Natural History Museum in Arcata. Vera is a well-known basketweaver who learned the traditional skills from her mother. She has been teaching basketry nationwide for twenty years and examples of her work are on display at the museum.

Our Stories, Prayers, and Poems:

California Indian Basketmakers and the Forest Service

BEV ORTIZ

After the first California Indian Basketweavers Gathering in June, 1991, many of the weavers felt a renewed commitment to solving the problems, such as access to gathering areas, that they share [see *News from Native California*, Winter 1991/92]. A Basketweavers Advisory Council was organized to evaluate the conference, help plan the next one, and explore the possibility of establishing a California Indian Basketweavers Association.

On February 24, 1992, the council attended another historic meeting. For the first time ever, U.S. Forest Service policy makers (the Pacific Southwest Regional Management Team) met with California Indian weavers interested in management of national forests. Hosted by the Forest Service at its Regional Office, the meeting had lasting and positive results.

As the meeting began, the room was quiet, and the discussion subdued. After a welcoming address by Deputy Regional Forester Beverly Holmes, members of the Forest Service Regional Office management team explained agency programs that might be relevant to the nine women of the Basketweavers Advisory Council. Sonia Tamez (Indian Program Manager), described the agency's eighteen national forests in California. Sonia stated that weavers know more about the proper care of basketry plants than anyone else, and asked weavers to help the Forest Service identify and manage gathering areas in national forests.

Sonia was followed by Judy Rose, Regional Historic Preservation Officer in charge of Cultural Resources Management. This year Judy is emphasizing interpretation of Native American cultural resources through the America's Great Outdoors Program. As part of the program, the Forest Service is coordinating with traditional leaders and tribes to reconstruct a Maidu roundhouse and a Tolowa village.

Linda Nunes (Civil Rights Director) expressed her commitment to bringing a multi-cultural focus to the Forest Service work force. She wants to see the Forest Service develop a closer partnership with

Native Americans.

Deputy Director of Timber Management Mike Srago, who oversees the use of herbicides, spoke next. He emphasized the need for weavers to make local forest staff aware of their gathering areas, so the weavers can be protected from exposure to chemicals. Then Charles Goudy (Watershed Manager) described his goal of ensuring that enough vegetative cover remains on watersheds to protect the water quality off site.

Following these presentations, weavers presented their concerns to the officials. Their emotions encompassed both laughter and tears as they sought ways to ensure the future of California Indian basketry.

The Basketweavers Advisory Council members enlivened the fifth floor conference room with their words, and with magnificent displays of cultural materials. The latter included a Dunlap Mono milkweed fiber belt made by Gladys McKinney and a Yurok maple bark skirt made by Susan Burdick. Lovely baskets, both large and small, sat on tables adorned with coils and bundles of basketry plants.

The conversation swiftly settled onto the contents of some of the bundles—bear grass. Bear grass provides the background overlay in Hupa, Karuk, Tolowa, Wiyot, and Yurok baskets. Dance regalia makers use its split and braided stems for decorative elements of women's skirts and hair ties.

Susan Burdick (Yurok) noted that this versatile material is so important to her people that they "pretty much packed our bags to send us here to talk about it. It's in every basket."

Josephine Lewis (Karuk) explained that, to produce soft and flexible weaving strands, bear grass must be burned every year in the fall, after a few good rains. The plants sprout the following summer.

Susan, Josie, and other northwest weavers negotiated with local Forest Service officials for a one-time controlled burn. Hailed as "experimental" by officials, the burn took place in late December and early January of this year. Forest Service crews

used torches to burn the tops of individual plants, leaving the bases untouched.

While such methods satisfy local Air Quality Board standards for cool, slow burns with little impact to on-the-ground vegetation, they leave the weavers without a reliable supply of high-quality materials. The resultant bear grass shoots are less pliable (more brittle) and, according to Susan, the weavers lose a whole season's growth.

Timing is but one concern. The best bear grass grows where the plants retain the most moisture—underneath trees, precisely the place where timber managers don't want to burn. Some Asian immigrants gather huge quantities of bear grass on national forest lands, and it is then shipped out of the country. Additionally, the Forest Service has historically been unwilling or unable to make the needs of weavers a priority; weavers' requests go unheeded because of changing staffs, budgetary constraints, inattention, and buck passing.

A member of the management team suggested the weavers contact local land management planners about their needs. As Susan Burdick related, this has already been done:

A lady [in our area] was given all of this information—what materials we use and need, and the time we need it burned. I called after the first big rain and asked them to burn. They take the request from us every year.

Acquisition of hazel shoots presents a lesser, but nonetheless important concern for northwest weavers. Like bear grass, hazel must be burned to yield usable shoots, but the burning takes place every two years rather than one. Small shoots are gathered the first year after the burn; large shoots the second. The shoots are used to weave coarse, functional baskets, such as work hats, baskets for gathering seaweed and tan oak, and baskets for cleaning huckleberries. Hazel shoots are also woven into baby baskets and cooking baskets.

According to Susan, small, accidental

fires have recently burned some hazel bushes. Also, many bushes grow on private land owned by weaving families, who are negotiating with other agencies for burn permits.

Presently, northwest weavers are forming a local association to boost their cause. In the meantime, access to materials remains a common stumbling block there and in all other areas of California. Denise Davis (Maidu) related the lengths to which she must go to obtain sedge.

There used to be sedge in Marysville and Yuba City. The rice farmers killed it. All the weavers in this area used sedge, yet there are no plans to grow or plant sedge in these areas. I have to go all the way to Santa Rosa for my sedge.

Kathleen Smith (Olemitcha Miwok/Mihilakawna Pomo) described a sedge transplanting project which could serve as a model for the Forest Service. In the 1970s, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers made plans to flood the Warm Springs Valley and with it, long-time Mihilakawna and Makahmo Pomo gathering areas. As part of the Warm springs Cultural Research Project, two acres of sedge were transplanted outside the area of inundation. As with bear grass, where one burned acre would provide ample materials for many weavers, the two acres of sedge have met the needs of Sonoma County weavers. "It doesn't take a lot of land," she encouraged the management team.

Some basketry materials are easier to obtain than others. Jennifer Bates (Northern Mewuk) described how gray and sandbar willow, which require winter pruning to grow long, straight flexible shoots for baskets, are inadvertently helped along by CalTrans: "They cut bushes on the side of the road. That's a plus for CalTrans!"

In the Stanislaus National Forest, Jennifer noted, weavers and Forest Service officials are planning a walk to identify gathering areas.

Florence Dick (Dunlap Mono) spoke of the support her people have received from Bruce Waldron, Sequoia National Forest Hume Lake District Ranger—not just in obtaining basketry plants, but also black oak acorns for food. Her sister, Gladys McKinney, mentioned the food, medicine, and basketry materials gathered in their area.

Gladys described the presence of several cultural resources on Forest Service land: soaproot for "utility brushes;" milkweed for fingerwoven cradleboard belts and burden basket straps; and redbud

shoots, bracken fern rhizomes, and deer grass stems for baskets.

Of all the basketry plants, deer grass is the most difficult material to obtain in her area. Forest Service lands also harbor materials for cultural materials of recent origin, such as pine needles for the modern pine needle baskets.

Like the other women on the Basketweaver Advisory Council, Linda Yamane (Rumsen Ohlone/Costanoan from the Carmel Valley) feels a special relationship with the plants.

I've pointed out plants to many people who have been surprised to learn they had any significance. For them, the plants were just "stuff," but for me seeing the plants is like seeing a friend, because I know the plant. And I think about the many generations of ancestors who knew the plants and used them. It makes me feel connected to the people I came from and to the place I came from.

Although there were no contemporary Ohlone/Costanoan weavers from whom Linda could learn basketry, she started making non-traditional styles of baskets years ago.

The [Spanish] missions changed our lives early on. People scattered and mixed with other groups. This caused cultural losses. A lot of traditions went underground. In those days if you wanted to survive it wasn't a good idea to advertise your Indianness...It was safer to identify with the Spanish, or something else. We were supposed to be extinct. In fact, a lot of people in this room today are supposed to be extinct. Now we're in a cultural revival.

When I was younger, I believed what I read—that all our baskets had perished. I was a basketmaker, but I couldn't use our basket tradition or materials because I didn't know what they were. Little by little the pieces have come together. It's been a lot of work, but now I know what our baskets look like and what they're made of...When I make my first basket from my cultural area, I want the materials to come from Carmel Valley or nearby. The plants and where they come from are part of the life and spirit of the basket—and me.

Historical and environmental disruptions have forced many contemporary weavers to gather materials outside the boundaries of their people's traditional homelands.

Susan Burdick discussed the close relationship that existed between homeland and baskets years ago.

In our area, where you lived determined which materials you would gather. It's natural you would gather from the place you lived...On the coast people gather more spruce than sugar pine. When I lived in Hoopa, I gathered more sugar pine.

Some basketry materials could be obtained in every area. In the old days, quills were easily obtained from the slow-moving porcupines by throwing a hide over them, causing them to release their quills. In more recent times, road kills provided most quills.

More than a decade ago, Susan noticed that her area's porcupine population was declining. The local Forest Service representative at that time greeted her concern with surprise. "We didn't think anyone would miss the porcupine," he said. Since porcupines eat young saplings, the timber-conscious Forest Service had been poisoning them. Sometimes new employees were being sent out to shoot the animals at night.

Susan sadly told the management team that although such policies have now been discontinued, the porcupine is no longer seen in her area today.

I'm not just thinking of myself and my people, but when you break that cycle, our cycle we live in, something else will go. You're not just hurting the porcupines. It angers me to know the cause is nothing but greed. Fifty years ago there wasn't clear-cutting. You wouldn't have to eliminate a little animal if there was better management.

Porcupine quills are dyed yellow in a pot of staghorn lichen soaked in water, or with scraped, pounded and soaked Oregon grape roots.

In addition to their use as a colorful overlay in northwest basketry, porcupine quills are woven to create a ceremonial band, which is worn around the head of a young girl during the Jump Dance. The Jump Dance is a "mending dance." Explains Susan:

It lasts for ten days. It's about fixing everything that needs to be fixed. It's not just for us. It's for you. It's for everything that walks, and every plant. We pray for clean water and air. A lot of different things. It's important to keep these things going.

Other than one band that Susan replicated based upon a broken example in the

Clarke Memorial Museum collections, the remaining bands are old. According to Josie Lewis, it is a great honor for a young girl to be chosen to wear the band during the dance. Without the porcupine, however, "it's likely we won't see this much longer." Florence Dick concurred, saying "They saved the condor. Why not save the porcupines before they're wiped out?"

Josie named elk as another animal of concern, since men in the northwest make spoons and purses from the horns they drop.

In addition to basketry plants, the weavers' council emphasized the need for food, medicine, and other useful plants. Jennifer Bates referred to two such plants:

Elderberry is used to make clap sticks for dances. Manzanita berries make a cider. There are many berries and bushes out there that were used and are still used today. Today they are used for special gatherings and big times. They're not used every day, but they are still used.

Susan Burdick listed others.

For foods we gather [tanoak] acorns, hazelnuts, chinquapin seeds, pine nuts, gooseberries, huckleberries, salmon, black cap mushrooms, elderberries, blackberries, strawberries, and blueberries. These grow everywhere. We gather wild onions, dandelions, wild grapes, mushrooms, mint, vine tea, high mountain tea, pennyroyal, wild rose, chicory (a substitute coffee), goldenrod, and angelica root for prayers. We gather a lot of other plants for medicinal reasons.

The stunning maple inner bark skirt that Susan brought to the meeting was based upon a similar one at the Clarke Memorial Museum. Susan has made three such skirts and knows of only one other maple bark skirt made by her people in this century. She learned when and how to gather maple bark from Maidu people, who use it to make a ceremonial flag. As Susan was quick to point out, judicious stripping of the bark doesn't damage the tree.

While the management team and advisory council discussed many substantive issues, there wasn't time to discuss others. For instance the council members are deeply concerned about herbicide spraying, and fear that spraying has resulted in weavers' cancer deaths, since basketry plants are generally split with the mouth.

Some basketmakers have worked at great personal risk to stop herbicide spraying on both Forest Service and private timber company land.

Nonetheless, the meeting was suffused with a sense that not only more meetings, but real change would result. The weavers closed with passionate appeals for understanding and enduring expressions of hopefulness for the future.

Kathy Wallace (Yurok/Karuk, Hoopa):

Basketmaking is more to us than a craft. It's a tie to our ancestors and to the earth and the future. We want to be able to pass it down in our circle. We have a lot of responsibility to pass it on. As weavers, we gather and take care of the plants.

Now a lot of the responsibility has been turned over to the Forest Service. You're a part of our circle, because we cannot [legally] do the burning. You are a part of our continuing our culture. We're expecting you to be a part of taking responsibility. We would take it back, but we haven't been given that option...

Basketry is an important thing. It's not something everyone can do. It's a gift. It starts when you're born. It continues until the day you die and after you die.

Denise Davis:

You don't just do basketry. You live it. Not many are that dedicated. Baskets are our stories, prayers, and poems. They're not a craft to put on the shelf. They're real... These ladies are special, and so are you. We are all reaching out, and it feels good.

The knowledge, experiences, and deep emotions shared by council members brought a sense of healing, renewed commitment, and enduring memories. As Forest Service Deputy Director Beverly Holmes, herself Cherokee, told the women, "As a little girl, I was taught that the white man understands with his mind and speaks with his mouth. An Indian feels from the heart and speaks through the heart, not the mouth... You've taught us a lot today."

Bev Ortiz is a park naturalist, freelance writer, and ethnographic consultant living in the East Bay.

A Forest Service Perspective

SONIA TAMEZ

We had a very productive exchange regarding how the Forest Service and Indian basketweavers could work together to foster the gathering of basketry materials such as sedge, deer grass, and bear grass. We discussed the need for seasonal burning, restoration of riparian areas with native plants, and the decline of animals such as porcupine. Bev's article goes into the specifics of the meeting; I just want to add another perspective and describe how we are following up.

The Forest Service representatives were impressed by the craftsmanship and beauty of the baskets the weavers brought. All were moved by the weavers' accounts of their experiences as they struggled to maintain their traditions in the face of many difficulties. Months after we met, weavers and Forest Service employees are still talking about what they saw and heard, and asking what they can do to help.

We have begun to work on the issues the weavers brought to us. We are examining how we can facilitate basketry material gathering on Forest Service lands. We are clarifying our policy and emphasizing the need for cooperative efforts to manage traditional gathering areas. Local Forest Service people are meeting with weavers in order to see how specific gathering areas can be protected. Since February, there have been a dozen meetings that I know of and more are being discussed. There is still a lot to do and differences to work out, but I'm encouraged by the willingness to work together.

[Note: Sonia Tamez, U.S. Forest Service Indian Program Manager, can be reached at (415) 705-2558.]

