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Culture and natural resources unite on Umatilla Reservation

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PENDLETON, Ore. – Resource management on the lands of the [Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation](#) took a unique turn a couple years ago when the board of trustees approved a plan built around consideration for their first foods. The concept was introduced by Eric Quaempts, director of the [Department of Natural Resources](#). Quaempts is an enrolled Yakama member but was raised and resides on the Umatilla Reservation.

He explains the serving order of wild foods that goes back for centuries, “The first thing served is water and next is salmon and other fish. Next are deer and other big game, followed by roots and then berries like huckleberry and choke cherry. That serving order comes from a creation belief that those were the order in which the foods promised themselves to take care of Indian people. The serving order is a reminder of that promise and a reminder that we need to reciprocate and take care of the foods. The community has been observing and practicing this system for thousands of years.

“That serving order does four very important things; it has the tribe’s creation belief; it speaks to cultural continuity; all the foods are protected under the Treaty of 1855; and, it incorporates ecology. Those are very powerful and elegant groupings of related species. What it’s saying is this is your relationship to the landscape and these foods, and you have to take care of them for them to be sustainable.”

That was the background around which the DNR would frame its goals and organize its work. Using first foods to call attention to species and ecological processes might also bring recognition of their importance to people outside the reservation. The DNR employs about 135 people and with 50 – 60 percent being non-Indian it helps everyone understand tribal culture and how their work relates to culture and community.

A number of successes are already visible. Initially there was concern over how information about women’s food would be shared – women’s foods being roots and berries. There was fear that over-exploitation might occur for commercial purposes. Such problems already exist for huckleberries in portions of the Cascade Mountains over competition with commercial operation.

“The U.S. Forest Service and BLM have now funded assessments of women’s foods on the Umatilla National Forest and the Baker District of the BLM,” Quaempts said. “We developed agreements on how the information is described and used so it doesn’t tie foods precisely,

but rather areas of cultural concern. We're being protective about the information."

In discussing huckleberries, he said, "We want to promote as much as possible natural processes like fire to provide first foods. Natural processes take less effort and funding. There is also an opportunity to do tree stand management with tree harvest to sustain and protect huckleberry production which is reduced when the forest canopy closes."

Another successful activity involved working with a developer who was placing huge numbers of large windmills for power production and each had a road to it. "They needed a wetland fill permit and that created federal involvement with us," Quaempts said. "We developed mitigation agreements with this company and got them to site towers somewhat differently to keep them out of more productive areas with lots of roots. There had also been a 40-acre parcel of landlocked BLM land and they secured an easement through that parcel, so now tribal members can use that to dig where before they couldn't get to it. They also established a first food mitigation fund we can use to purchase habitat for restoring first foods or activities for cultural perpetuation."

Collaboration is now taking place with [Oregon State University](#) and [Oregon Fish and Wildlife](#) to study rates of cougar predation on big game. It's not anti-predator, but rather to ensure that game species are not being overly affected, in which case other management plans could be enacted.

Wild horses also present a management concern. These tribes have long been a horse culture and tribal members have a strong interest in horses. The combination of horses, domestic cattle grazing leases in some areas, and big game animals can have a negative impact on the native bunch grass communities, so the challenge is to keep them all in balance, plus the desire to have edible roots in sustainable production.

The benefits of managing for first foods have other far-reaching implications as well. "We're using this to develop curriculum for the tribe's community school and also using it as a framework for developing a diabetes prevention program for the tribe's clinic," Quaempts said. "The first foods themselves are healthy. The act of going out and acquiring them is healthy. Most of the risk factors regarding diabetes have been identified as correctable with diet and exercise. I've worked on a diabetes prevention proposal for my brother who is a physician at the clinic on the Yakama Reservation. Those are two applications we hope to see expanding in the future."

The first foods management program has had really positive response. Quaempts has made numerous presentations at colleges and universities and spoke at a sustainability conference in Chile last August to representatives from half a dozen countries and several universities. "It was very well-received because it helps people understand that culture and natural resources really aren't divisible when you can see the links."