



Western Edition Episode 4
"The West on Fire: Good Fire"
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(MUSIC – STEALING)

BILL DEVERELL (HOST): Hi, I'm Bill Deverell, and this is *Western Edition*, season one: "The West on Fire." The gospel of fire safety in the Western U.S. has long been one of suppression: fires are bad, and they should be avoided at all costs, and put out when they arise. But the Indigenous communities of the American West saw, and see, things differently.

THERESA GREGOR: Traditional Ecological Knowledge teaches us that we need to do prescribed burns or cultural burns, right? To maintain the health of the land, to eliminate debris buildup, to create pathways for animals, you know, for humans.

DEVERELL: In this episode, we talk to three Indigenous Tribal leaders who engage in controlled and cultural burns. These include prescribed burns – intentionally setting and carefully controlling fires as a way of managing ecosystems. By burning the undergrowth and the dead trees, it robs wildfires of the fuel load that makes them spread out of control. This has become part of a sensitive debate, in which fire management officials have often gone up against Indigenous practice.

GREGOR: We are trying to like correct the mistakes from the past. So how do we use Traditional Ecological Knowledge to not only just like revitalize culture, right?, but to maintain our lands and restore our habitats, and to make our homeland safer?

DEVERELL: Theresa Gregor is an assistant professor in American Indian studies at California State Long Beach, and a member of our workshop team exploring the West on fire.

GREGOR: Haawka memeyuuy temewaa, maat siny k'iipaay Elch Kwaan. (Hello everyone, I am a woman-person, from "Caterpillar's House" also known as "The Knolls".) I am Dr. Theresa Gregor. I am lipay and Yoéme, from the lipay Nation of Santa Ysabel in northern San Diego County. I also have been involved as either Director or Liaison/Consultant with the Inter Tribal Long Term Recovery Foundation, which is a Tribal nonprofit committed to disaster preparedness and resilience.

DEVERELL: Theresa, can you tell us a little bit about your own history of fire on Tribal landscapes that you are so familiar with and grew up on?

GREGOR: So the reservation that I'm from and where I grew up is really mountainous. It's about 60 miles inland from downtown San Diego. And so we're located between Palomar and Laguna Mountains is the Vulcan Mountain range. And Vulcan Mountain is our primary geographical location. You know, I grew up at about 4,300 feet. And so we had all four seasons: snow, you know, rain. And when I grew up in the 80s, everybody used to use fire to burn their paper goods outside. People will do their own burn piles. We never had to have burn permits. My dad always practiced defensible space, even though we never called it that. He always dug around our yard and the fields around our barn and our house, cause we lived on the foothills of Vulcan Mountain. But even with that, my brother was eight or nine and he was playing with matches and he started a fire in our yard that burned up the mountain side. And that was one of the biggest fires - it's still one of the biggest fires in our Tribal history on our reservation. We've been very fortunate to not have experienced the level of fires like the La Jolla Tribe and San Pasqual and Barona Tribes experienced. People would regularly light or dump on fire. I don't necessarily know why, I guess they wanted a big bonfire. So we always had those kinds of fires. But, like, to have a fire in your yard or to have a bonfire, it was not a big deal. Like people had fires cause they would sing songs and play peon at their house. And peon is our traditional gambling game. They would have, you know, a party or something and they would, they would want to play peon. We use fire for mourning. We often burn our deceased family members or, you know, deceased members' articles. So we'd dig big pits and we burned their personal belongings and it has a deep spiritual connotation that those personal effects and items are going with them into the star world on their next journey. And that way they don't have to linger and look for things here on earth. The other, I guess, wildfire that I recall seeing was in the mid-80s when Palomar Mountain burned and from my parents' home, we had a direct vantage point to the fire. And I want to say that was around 1980. It might've been 1983. It felt like that fire burned in my little kid memory for like 10 days. But I think it was out within, you

know, four or five days and it looked like a volcano erupted. And I remember thinking that the Palomar Observatory was going to burn and I was really scared cause, you know, I thought it was such a neat place to go to visit. But, no one evacuated. There wasn't the sense of like imminent dread and threat. It was kind of like: This is a dangerous situation, but they're putting it out. It's going to be controlled. And I didn't have in my memory or in my memories, I don't have the association of the fear and the anxiety and the dread and a lot of the trauma that I think comes out of what we see today. And that could be because Mt. Palomar was less populated than it is today. It was largely a forest, uninhabited land. But I think today the narrative is so much more fearful of fire that we're afraid of that fire. We don't know how to live with fire. And I think that's the bottom-line lesson that Traditional Ecological Knowledge and really understanding fire as a tool can start to change and shift if we have these kinds of dialogues with Indigenous peoples and you know, non-Native people that are living in high fire risk zones. We are trying to like correct the mistakes from the past. So how do we use Traditional Ecological Knowledge to not only just like revitalize culture, right? But to, to maintain our lands and restore habitats, and to make our homeland safer. And that's the conversation that I've been having with members of our constituency and other community organizations and community groups.

(MUSIC – KEEP IT IN A BOTTLE)

DEVERELL: That's also a conversation Dirk Charley has been having for decades. He's a Tribal member and a Tribal Liaison with the Dunlap Band of Mono Indians. And he's a retired U.S. Forest Service employee. Dirk is also a member of our workshop exploring, investigating, and analyzing the West on fire. He remembers fire being a central part of his childhood.

DIRK CHARLEY: I was born in Fresno and I lived in Costa Mesa when I was a kid. My dad was in the Marine Corps and he moved us up to the Dunlap area, which is 40 miles due east of Fresno in the Sierra Nevada. And that's why, as a kid growing up in that area, I learned a lot from my grandparents, my uncles, my other Tribal members, Elders that were up there. And I, that's how I learned a lot about fishing and hunting and cultural burning ways. A lot of our parents worked for the Forest Service, Parks Service, or loggers, or woodcutters. For me to graduate in high school was a very significant event. My mom and dad were very, very, very proud of me. And when I got out of high school in '74, my first job was as a temporary firefighter with the California Department of Forestry, now called Cal Fire. While I was working in that state job, my father was the founder of the Horseshoe Meadow Hotshot Crew, all-Indian crew, Hotshot crew for the Sequoia National Forest. So it was interesting to see Dad on fires with his crew. He was working for the feds and I worked for the state, so already it got a little competition there. You know, Pop was my hero. I joined the Navy in April of '75 and I was a Fleet Sailor. I was a

Machinist's Mate and I was stationed overseas for two years in Italy. That's where I met my future wife. And, after I got out of the Navy in '79, I worked for the U.S. Forest Service in the Angeles National Forest right there out of Glendora, up in Tanbark Flats. And I was a helishot, Helitack crew member - night flying air attack, the Bell 212 helicopter. We were commandos and I remember fighting fire all over the United States because that helicopter was on contract and never a dull moment, made a lot of money. I don't know...I like that type of work. My dad told me that Indian people, we're cut out for that type of work because we can use chainsaws, we know how to do hand crews. We don't mind working, you know, all day, all night, and we just keep on going. And I got a job career promotion on the Sierra Hot Shots. Got to go to some famous fires, like Yellowstone; my dad and I were on the Great Yellowstone Fire in 1988. We were there for 38 days.

DEVERELL: Wow.

CHARLEY: My father on his crew, me on my crew. And, you know, I got to travel to the Everglades and Minnesota, Virginia, Idaho. It was awesome...Then I got my Hotshot Foreman job on Horseshoe Meadow Hotshots after my dad retired, then that was my dream job to be a Horseshoe Meadow Hotshot and I was the Foreman there for three years. And what I do now is a Tribal Liaison, Bill. But when I got out of the service and I got involved with the helishots, helicopter world, seeing fire and seeing the land from above, then I understood the lay of the land, the ridge tops, exposure, you know, where the meadows, the streams, because we're always looking for safety zones, escape routes, for landing areas for helicopters. And, and when you land in the land of the Morongo Indian people, then you kind of look around and figure out like, well, who lived here, any areas that we need to avoid or you know, has somebody made contact with the Tribes? And so I learned a lot. My helishot foreman was Lewis Yazze, a Navajo, a gunnery sergeant in the Marine Corps, but he was my helishot foreman. He taught me a lot about 'when you work in fire, Dirk, you know, we always try to figure out whose land is this because we're landing on traditional, somebody's traditional homeland.' So, and then we learned a lot about the areas in federal land, the culture of the people. And that was something my dad taught me also in my firefighting experience was that, 'Dirk, try to find out who the Tribes are because usually they ignore the Tribes and they don't include them in the planning.' Well, my dad would ask, 'well, who are they? We need to speak with them because this is a special area for all we're looking at.' There used to be a lot of Indians in my dad's crew. And my dad's like, 'you know what? This is sacred area. We're already seeing cultural resources are archeological. You know, petroglyphs, you know, we should stop and modify our tactics.'

(MUSIC – BARB WIRE)

DEVERELL: Michael Connolly also grew up with fire. He's a member of the Campo Kumeyaay Nation in eastern San Diego County, and a recognized authority on cultural burn practices of Indigenous Californians.

MICHAEL CONNOLLY: I live in an area that is fire prone and it's just something that you have to constantly be aware of. Periodically, fires go through. I'm surrounded by chaparral; chamise is the dominant species of plant and some people call it greasewood. It burns very fast. We have sumac and scrub oaks and manzanita; those are the predominant plants in the area. And from the time I was young and I lived in the city, but I'd come out to the reservation and, you know, you always had to be fire conscious. It was something that could just get out of hand. And, and it was something that just was incorporated into the lifestyle and to be very fire aware. And when I moved onto the reservation, fire protection was one of our big concerns. And, and in fact, reservations, we have a long history of working with the firefighters. One of the main sources of income for the reservation for many years was working with the hotshot crews and the over the summers. Most of the able-bodied people on the reservation would go, would volunteer to go work on those crews. And so, we were incorporated into the, kind of the Western system of just suppressing fires wherever they come up. And as I got more involved in the environmental program on the reservation and started doing a lot of research and going back and looking at the records, I, I saw how really non-Traditional they're practices were, how different it was that, the Traditional way of managing the environment and how it changed the carrying capacity of the land. And so I started looking at burned areas and there's always burned areas out in our region because we get fires almost every year, there's at least a small fire somewhere. And I started really looking at those burned areas and watching them as they go through their succession and grow back. And I started developing more of a respect for the Traditional practices and how that really changed the whole dynamic of the ecosystem by having these areas that were burned out and then going through the transition back into the succession, to the climax vegetation. So with that, I started doing even more research going back even to the time of the Spanish and just to see what was happening, not only within the chaparral vegetation but also along the coastal plain and even out into the desert area and seeing how that relationship had developed with fire. And as people began to get more respect for Traditional land management and I, when I talked to Tribes, to people from other Tribes who were trying to reintroduce fire, especially up in Northern California, but, and in the Sierra as then, I saw a lot of what they were doing as things, things that we could also, to maybe a more limited extent, bring to our region.

(MUSIC – PILE)

DEVERELL: Michael is describing his role as a researcher, educator, and communicator across regions, in an effort to share Traditional land management practices. As wildfire seasons get longer and more extreme, there's a growing desire to re-engage those Traditional practices. And that's where people like Theresa Gregor come in.

GREGOR: California Department of Forestry, U.S. Department of Forestry, they had a fire suppression policy for years and years, and Traditional Ecological Knowledge teaches us that we need to do prescribed burns or cultural burns, right?, to maintain the health of the land, to eliminate debris buildup, to create pathways for animals, you know, for humans. And so I think for some, it's sort of making a really big paradigm shift. And I think for some, it's a paradigm shift that they think might be too simplistic, and maybe they might even think it's a step backwards; I'm not sure. But for the most part agency partners try to understand what the Tribal needs are - this is what I've seen in the last two or three years - and then look at within their own agency structure, how best they can work to adapt and implement some of those practices. That's what I've seen. But, of course, you know, state and local federal agencies have much more, you know, restrictions placed upon them not only because of funding, but largely in part because of liability. Right? So I think that's also a big component of this.

DEVERELL: Have you seen this landscape change just in the last couple of years, in other words, this optimism about collaboration and let's say outside respect for Indigenous knowledge?

GREGOR: Yeah, definitely. And I think there's a shift too, with even Tribal partners of feeling reactionary or defensive against sort of like state agencies or federal agencies. That instead of feeling like threatened or that they're going to be patronized and perhaps dismissed by those entities, there's more of a willingness to have dialogue and conversation and try to share their perspective and point of view in order to, to create some sort of change. Right? And change the relationship.

DEVERELL: Why do you think that's happened that there's more openness, let's say on both sides of this question?

GREGOR: I think there's a lot of factors. I mean, I think number one for California in particular, and I don't know if this is the case across the country, but, you know, gaming is a big industry here and I think some of our Tribes have utilized their economic development in a way to make political change. Right? And so to have a voice and have platforms for advocacy. And so I think some of it has come from that mobilization where they can show up to more meetings, be representative, hire staff in these particular fields to voice what those needs are. I think the second is also what I hope is going to be a continued cultural shift in the way people think

about American Indian communities today, that, you know, those old stereotypes that like, you know, all the real Natives are gone, right? That you know, they lived in teepees and now they're not present - that we do have this contemporary visibility as just, you know, neighbors, right?, as you traverse through Indian country wherever you go in the United States and people are understanding that the cultural differences and respecting more of them. I think to me, I see some of that shift. Of course, you know, there's always the examples where we're sort of set back by ignorance and I think racism still too exists. But for the most part, in this line of work, I see more open-mindedness and a willingness to understand Tribal history and in particular, to understand Tribal sovereignty and that includes that cultural sovereignty.

DEVERELL: Yeah. I'm encouraged by your optimism. And I, I think I share it. Can you also reflect on, with these state and local and regional agencies, the employment of Indigenous employees? I mean, certainly that's got to be part of this too, isn't it?

GREGOR: Sure. That's a huge part of it. I mean, we're seeing people venture into those fields and carry their cultural and Tribal knowledge with them. And I think that's a huge benefit, not only to like the federal government or the state governments, but just for our people to see that we can have individuals in those places and still be allies and still be collaborators and, and still make a difference.

(MUSIC - KNOW JUST WHAT TO DO)

DEVERELL: Dirk Charley, with the Dunlap Band of Mono Indians, says that when he worked for the Forest Service, fire became an invitation to learn more about the land and the generations – both past and present – that inhabit it.

CHARLEY: We once went into a rock shelter and this was in Arizona. And myself and my squad, we were putting out the lightning strikes in a yucca tree. But, after we put it out, we were so hot. So we were looking for any kind of shade. And the Arizona desert, the Tonto National Forest, is like 118°. We found a rock shelter. And when we went into it and we explored it a little bit more, you know, with our headlamps on, we'd seen the ancient pictographs and we realized that this is a holy area. This is something that, as firefighters, we're like, well, should we tell the archeologists about this? Or, should we just leave it alone? Ain't nobody ever gonna come up here? We all decided, let's not tell anybody, let's leave it alone. And that was my decision at that time as the foreman of that unit, but I felt like that's all right, you know. They don't need to know that; let that one just remain.

DEVERELL: Yeah. Amazing.

CHARLEY: We knew what to look for too...

DEVERELL: You know, we have on one side of the ledger, some real anxieties about fire with climate change and drought and fuel loads. Do you think there's another side of the ledger that we are creating new bridges to Indigenous people, culture, institution, histories, stories, fire management, land management practices, because of fire?

CHARLEY: Yeah, Bill. I have a lot of hope. I think there's more thought and consideration given to Native American perspectives and Traditional Ecological Knowledge. In 1992, I left firefighting to go into administration as an equal employment manager. And one of my jobs was as a Tribal relations program manager, and by working closely with local Native American leaders on Tribal or U.S. Forest Service lands, it gave me great pleasure to lend my, not only my intellectual, technical skills and resources - communications wise, but also on the physical part of it. We've been wanting to burn some of that area that's burning right now for a long time, but we have been restricted. But now we have opportunity, you know, but still let's, let's take the danger out of it. But after it's all said and done, we're going to have to come back and talk about this. When it comes to the concept of good fire, you've gotta go look at the lay of the land. It's a tool to help clean up, a tool to help bring back. It's a tool to help good growth and proliferation. But it involves teamwork. You gotta scout it out. You gotta set up, you gotta prep, you gotta execute. And then you gotta, don't ever forget the most important thing, you gotta monitor it.

(MUSIC – HOW YOU GONNA KNOW)

DEVERELL: Michael Connolly with the Campo Kumeyaay Nation says that while it's heartening to see fire officials implementing prescribed burns, he'd like to see them take a more holistic approach to land management, one that considers climate, vegetation, animal and human life, and many other factors.

CONNOLLY: So everything was so interwoven with each other as a single practice maybe, but everything is tied together in the harvest, in the songs and the stories and astronomy and the climate. We didn't have a consistent climate and still don't. And, so we go through these very long, wet years and we go through very long, dry years. There could be times when there was really maybe less burning that was occurring because vegetation was growing much slower and there might've been a shift to other types of food sources. So that was part of the knowledge base, was knowing what this frequency should be. How high do you want the chaparral vegetation to be before you burn in an area? And there's probably areas where they would

allow them to go into a much higher level of climax vegetation. Some they probably never burned.

DEVERELL: And do you think the, the loss of what you call the interconnectedness with the knowledge of the interconnectedness and you mentioned culture, astronomy, botany, wildlife, precipitation, climate...do you think that fact that those interlocking things and ideas and beliefs have been pulled apart as discrete actors? That's part of the chief problem where we've lost touch with Indigenous land management?

CONNOLLY: That's really hard to say. I suppose if you analyze it enough and in enough different scenarios, you could probably come up with an algorithm that would tell you that now's the time to burn this, or now's the time to burn that. But if it's defined as another approach to your relationship to the earth and to nature, then you have to go beyond that and you have to rediscover these relationships and you have to see people as part of the ecosystem. And people have to know themselves what they can do in a positive effect on the environment, not just with the fire, but in what you do as the fire is going through a succession. How do you do harvest through that area? How do you deal with the increase in prey animals that are occurring? Are you going to hunt more? But if you really want to have that kind of relationship it's something that has to be rediscovered on, on many different levels from the water in the ground – and, and how you view the water not just as a resource to drink and to water your fields, but also is something that waters, the trees and the, and the plants, and that comes to the surface to create, you know, pools of water and for habitat for different plants and animals. And then that relationship that you have with water is something that also goes hand-in-hand with that relationship that you have with fire and the relationship with the plants and animals around you.

DEVERELL: Yeah, it sounds as though, Mike, you're expressing some concern that I – not knowing as much as you do, but I share – is that perhaps our awareness of the power of prescribed burns to mitigate against catastrophic wildfire is going to be adopted or used more but perhaps crudely as a tool without all the other knowledge that can come with a different view of fire on the landscape. Is that what you're saying?

CONNOLLY: Yeah. Well, what I'm saying is for us, it wasn't just the tool itself. It was how that tool was used in conjunction with everything else that was part of the culture.

DEVERELL: And then, how do we ensure that the increase of prescribed burning is fully aware of the cultural power and cultural knowledge of land management? How do we ensure that that comes hand-in-hand with a rising adaptation of prescribed burning?

CONNOLLY: Well, part of it is, is what we do within the Tribal communities. And there's a lot of Tribal communities that are, that are re-introducing burning. And in the process of doing that, they're also revitalizing other aspects of their culture and bringing that forward. So in many ways, we're rediscovering knowledge that that has been dormant in our communities and trying to incorporate that and, and blend it into a modern lifestyle that in some ways, there's no way that we can go to any certain period in the past and say, okay, that's how we're going to live from now on. We've always been adaptive and, especially here in Southern California, we've adapted to changing conditions and altered our lifestyle to meet the needs. But also in many ways we're creating something new because we can't, we can't do the same things that we did in the past because of things like liability and land use planning and, you know, other things that have put us in a situation where it's almost impossible sometimes.

(MUSIC)

DEVERELL: Thanks to Michael Connolly, Theresa Gregor, and Dirk Charley for sharing their views and expertise on cultural and prescribed burns. I'm Bill Deverell. Next time on *Western Edition*, we discuss the impacts of wildfire smoke across the West:

PROMO CLIP FROM THE NEXT EPISODE (VOICEOVER BY MIKE MENDEZ): Latino and Indigenous undocumented immigrants have been living in these communities for decades, if not a hundred years. And they're invisible because they're rendered invisible by public policy, systemic racism, and cultural norms of who's considered a worthy disaster victim.

DEVERELL: *Western Edition* is produced by Avishay Artsy, Katie Dunham, Elizabeth Logan, and Jessica Kim. Our music was written and recorded by I See Hawks in L.A. *Western Edition* is a production of the Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West. Please rate, review, and subscribe to the show, and share it with a friend. Thank you and talk to you next time.