

## **Episode 1 - Good Fire Script**

### **Richard**

*Welcome to episode one of Changing the Climate, This episode is all about Good Fire. Thank you for joining me, your host, Richard Bednarski.*

*In this episode, I speak with Craig Tucker, a natural resources consultant for the Karuk tribe in Northern California. He has worked alongside them for over 20 years, mostly focusing on restoring the health of the Klamath River and its watershed.*

*However, as the fire crisis has become more severe across the west, the Karuk asked him to switch gears and help with the policy around fire. After over a century of banned cultural practices, including controlled burning, the Karuk of northern California are seeking to bring good fire back to the landscape.*

*To begin, let's hear from Craig Tucker about how fire is bringing people together, across lifestyles and the political aisle through what he termed the [Good Fire Report](#), which highlights the dire necessity of more prescribed fires.*

### **Craig Tucker**

It really explains the barriers that fire practitioners face when trying to fire back on the landscape. The lead author's are an attorney and a professor at CSU Chico. But it's informed by tribal fire practitioners, folks who work for the northern California prescribed burn association. It kind of led us to a place this past year where we're collaborating with the Cattlemen's Association.

Whereas a lot of environmental issues are kind of divisive in rural areas, this one is not. It turns out it doesn't matter if you are a democrat or a republican, your house will burn down. What we found was that farmers, ranchers, tribes, environmental groups all face the same obstacles in defending their homes and communities from wildfire.

I think climate change underscores the importance of traditional landscape management through the use of prescribed fire. So if we were managing the forests

properly, it's not that we would have zero calamities due to climate change, but we would have a lot fewer wildfire related calamities because of climate change if we were properly managing our forests. And it's just that state and federal agencies don't let us do it.

We're calling on the agencies to have these plans that require decision makers to consult the weather forecasts. Why would we throw a bunch of suppression action at a start if we know if there is going to be a wet weather pattern coming in in four days?

Conditions are freaking perfect, perfect to put fire on the ground, and we have this national blanket ban on fire.

### **Richard**

*Wildfire management has improved over the years with better weather forecasting and fire fighting tactics . However, overarching policies have not adapted to the warming climate at the same pace.*

*The national fire ban was placed on all forests earlier this year due to elevated fire danger. It has since been lifted, and cultural burning has happened in many areas, but roadblocks still remain in place preventing local agencies from utilizing good fire.*

*One of the struggles in returning good fire to the land is timing. Fall often is the best time to put fire on the ground, usually ahead of early winter storms. However, hotter average temperatures and ongoing drought have extended the fire season well into the fall. In turn, this has led to tough management decisions that could prevent getting good fire back on the ground.*

*Moving forward, Tucker explains the importance of traditional Indigenous knowledge and the necessity of coexisting alongside fire.*

### **Craig Tucker**

And then the Yurok, Karuk, Hoopa, Tolawa, all of these tribes up here in northern California, and tribes all over the West. And I think it's probably true on the east coast as well. In the west we have these fire adapted ecosystems and so people lived here and

they had to deal with the fact that fires came. Fires come just like earthquakes, hurricanes and tornadoes. You can't beat back fire no more than you can beat back hurricanes. You have to prepare for it and learn how to deal with it.

And so here it meant using fire to protect your homes. And so the traditional methodology was typically, you would burn very often, annually, immediately around your villages. And then, think about it as a series of concentric circles, like a bullseye radiating out. The closer you are to the center the more often you burn and the further away from the center, the less often you burn.

And that sort of added to what we call landscape mosaics. You had different burn patterns across the landscape. This gave rise to different sorts of forest and ecosystems, which made the place more ecologically diverse for all the plants and animals. And so you see this popping up now, I would say, as the scientific literature becomes increasingly decolonized. We're realizing that, one there are a lot more native people here than we thought. Two they had a much heavier impact on managing the landscape than anyone thought. And we know that places where we've seen the most ecological diversity are places where there was active indigenous management.

I mean California is in such a desperate situation, that they are now going back to actually listening to the tribes. They literally passed laws criminalizing burning. My Karuk pals are like 'yeah that made it illegal to be an Indian.' They made it illegal to be Karuk because those cultural practices are intertwined with the cultural identity of these guys. And so when they denied the right to practice the ceremonies and they denied the to use those land management techniques is really when we set ourselves up for these moments today when our forests were transformed from diverse, really dominated by hardwood acorn bearing oak trees that help feed people to really farmed stands of Doug(las) fir. And those things are even age stands of Doug fir. Some of these places have had fire excluded for over a century. And when fire hits those stands of trees it goes up like an inferno.

So some of the things that hold people back or he might not think of it, so this is one. So in California, the standard for. The liability standard is if you're a burn boss so when you want to do prescribed fire burn, you hire a person and they call him the burn boss who's in charge, and if burn, the buck stops with the burn.

So in California if you're a burn boss, you do prescribed fire and in the unlikely scenario that your fire gets away from you results and property damage, the standard of negligence people see is simple negligence, which is kind of like 'hey did you burn down the house but I guess it's your fault in you're liable.

In other states, states like Florida and South Carolina and Mississippi where there's a lot more it's much easier to get prescribed fire on the ground, there was a gross negligence standard would, meaning that if there was a property damage that you followed all the terms of your permits and you did everything that would be reasonably expected. There's some protection there from the liability and what the difference makes it so that a burn boss can get insurance.

So if you can't get insurance and every time you do your job there's this small risk that you may be sued for everything you own. Well there's a big you know if medical doctors had to face that we would have no medical doctors so that's why there's a shortage of burn bosses in California and other states like Florida and South Carolina put more fire on the ground, so we set out to try to reform that and we got halfway there.

### **Richie**

*Recently, California's Governor Gavin Newsom signed senate Bill 332 into law. This bill changes the language around negligence and allows burn bosses, those who manage controlled burns, to operate a burn with a reduced risk of litigation, should the fire get out of control, which is extremely rare for controlled burns.*

*Simply put, Senate Bill 332 will protect burn bosses against the cost of recovery if the fire gets out of hand, which is extremely rare for controlled burns, unless the practitioner acts in a grossly negligent manner. That is to say reckless behavior beyond the realm of a reasonable person.*

*This immunity will remove a significant hindrance to prescribed fires - thereby increasing the potential for getting good fire back on the ground. However, Tucker said there is still more work to be done.*

*I asked Tucker what were some of the biggest obstacles currently in the way of getting good fire back on the landscape. His response was not surprising.*

### **Craig Tucker**

Well, the first one is going to be money. We have an infinite amount of money to fight fire. We have a pretty limited amount of money to do, prevention. Taking a little bit of the money that we use for suppression and instead using it to prescribe fire, forest thinning, noxious weed removal, these types of things.

Liability issues are a big part of it, and then we have to know California has well intended laws that get away so the Clean Air act, for example, the California. Air quality control boards in a you know, a reasonable good faith effort protect air quality. That gets in the way of prescribed fire often so you know if you want to do a pre prescribed burn, you have to wait for the weather's just right humidity just right, the winds just right. And if the Air Quality Control Board decides in this giant swath of California that you know air quality doesn't permit burning, even if you're a corner of that swath is in perfect conditions you're precluded from burning.

Really the fire from these cultural burns should not be considered anthropogenic air pollution, it's really a natural background condition for air quality.

### **Richard**

Wildfires this year have continued to burn through towns. Often not mentioned in the media is that these fires are burning through lower-income communities. Tucker, having worked with Indigeous for a long time, pointed out that many of the victims affected by wildfire are also often communities of color.

### **Craig Tucker**

I mean I think there's a social justice piece to all this too. You know the people whose houses are burned down are usually poorer people. That's starting to change, I mean half a Santa Rosa burn down, big chunks of Redding's burn down. So that's that's changing which is one reason why all of a sudden, policy makers are doing stuff. But for a long time this was a problem that was really visited upon communities of color and communities of low income. The other piece it's a social justice piece, it is a part of people's culture. Fire was used to protect people's homes but fire is a sacrament for

Karuk and other tribes all over the west. And by denying tribes the right to burn that they have for thousands of years, you're really taking away a part of their culture, part of their spirituality and religion.

### **Richard**

Now that wildfires are becoming larger, more severe and more frequent and news coverage has focused on the destructive aspect of these fires, how has the public's perception changed towards fire? Tucker has found a positive shift in his area towards fire and this is one of crucial steps in bringing fire back to the landscape, he believes.

### **Craig Tucker**

Yeah particularly locally so and communities up here are, our local fire safe Councils and watershed Councils, like the Mid-Klamath Watershed Council and the Karuk tribe. They have done such a great job all on community education and outreach, that up here when it's time to burn that people take the day off people show up. It's a big enormous Community event. People see it as part of their Community responsibility to be involved in these prescribed burns.

So people really do get it, but as you get into more urban areas I think people are more scared of fire they're more bought into it kind of Smokey the Bear mentality they've been trained to be afraid of fire and people are inconvenienced by smoke, and you just have to like, look a little smoke now or a lot of smoke later, you get to choose, people are still bought into we can just put all the fires out. Which, I think we are proving isn't true. But it's slowly changing, it's slowly changing and I think people, like people in New York were affected by wildfires in California this summer and so I think we have to use that to drive the national politics around this issue.

### **Richard**

*Nearly a century of fire suppression has led to drastic increases in fuel loads, things such as fallen trees, under growing trees, shrubs, stuff that burns really easily and is low on the ground. When coupled with logging that favors even-aged stands of trees, which coincidentally are highly fire-prone, humans have primed the forests for megafires. Tucker has begun working with a group of experts to help nudge the ecosystem back to where it was before fire suppression began over a hundred years ago. Tucker talks about how regional organizations around northern California are working together.*

**Craig Tucker**

We have learned to appreciate the power of coalition building, so the Western Klamath restoration partners (WKRPA) and you can look that up online too. It's Karuk, it's the forest service, its local watershed Councils, the nature conservancy, fire learning network, Cultural burn association; a whole host of organizations have come together to put to to develop a management plan for the 1 million acres of Karuk aboriginal territory in the middle Klamath. Right now, most of our burns are pretty small scale, but I would describe all that as pilot programs that we're ramping up, demonstrating competency, demonstrating benefits and ramping up. So what we see is the work we're doing in the best case scenario. These pilot programs impress everybody. Everybody starts to get it, and the politicians learn that the wiser investment with the taxpayer money is the prescribed burn and not just stockpiles of cash for fire suppression. The economics are on the side of prescribed burners.

We've let the timber industry off the hook, a little bit. Clear cutting our forest, managing for even aged stands have Douglas (larch) and other pines have dramatically contributed to this problem. And then the timber company often their solution is more clear cuts. I'll admit that if you cut down every tree and pave over the forest there's probably going to be less fires, but I don't think anybody really sees that as a practical solution to this problem. So it's really about coming to appreciate that the best way to manage fires is to have a healthy ecologically functioning watershed.

**Richard Bednarski**

*In the end, Tucker feels we all need to work together to solve the fire crisis. As someone who has focused the bulk of his career on healthy waterways, he believes this is best done by cultivating a healthy watershed through the incorporation of good fire.*

**END**