

# **What Does Philosophy Have to do with the Northwest Forest Plan?: Traditional Ecological Knowledge, Indigenous Knowledges, and Ecocultural Restoration: An Issue of Environmental Justice**

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## **Background: The Northwest Forest Plan**

The Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP) was originally adopted by the Clinton Administration in 1994 after much controversy and activism, both legal and direct, regarding the management of old growth forests in the Pacific Northwest. This “compromise plan” from the “library group” came out of the timber wars of the 1980s and 90s<sup>1</sup> in which late successional forests—trees that in some cases had been standing for thousands of years—were being rampantly cut in a largely unregulated manner by the timber industry, threatening endangered species such as the Western Spotted Owl, various salmon populations, and degrading the ecosystem in ecologically and economically unsustainable ways.

Much has been written and otherwise produced on the original 1994 NWFP, the science underlying it, and the ecosocial events that lead up to it, some of which are cited below.<sup>2</sup> Something significant is happening right now, in 2025, however. The

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<sup>1</sup> For one excellent and very readable first-hand account of these direct actions and events, especially during “Redwood Summer” of 1990, which included acts of civil disobedience and galvanized a generation of environmental activists, and introduced a feminist perspective into environmental activism, see Judi Bari, *Timber Wars* (Monroe: ME Common Courage Press 1994)

<sup>2</sup>● See, for example, these internet-available sources:

- <https://www.andykerr.net/kerr-public-lands-blog/2023/11/5/the-unmaking-of-the-northwest-forest-plan-part-1-out-with-enforceable-substance-and-in-with-performative-process>
- *The Making of the Northwest Forest Plan* book release lecture, Oregon State University, featuring book authors K. Norman Johnson, Jerry F. Franklin and Gordon H. Reeves
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XFcvdV9QFuE>

Northwest Forest Plan is being revised for the first time in 30 years. And this time there is a strong clamor and cry for the inclusion of indigenous and Tribal voices the particular kinds of understandings of forest ecosystems that have emerged over centuries of pre-colonial and post-colonial inhabitation by indigenous peoples and Tribes in these bioregions.<sup>3</sup>

### **Interlocking Systems of Oppression, the NWFP, and Traditional Ecological Knowledge**

In my professional life as an interdisciplinarily-trained environmental philosopher,<sup>4</sup> I have taught, researched, and written on issues relating to the intersections of environmental theory and activism. In 2006 I published an academic article entitled “Ecofeminism and Forest Defense in Cascadia: Gender, Theory, and Radical Activism.”<sup>5</sup> This article and others I have authored<sup>6</sup> focus on the core ecofeminist and environmental justice holdings that social issues, particularly issues pertaining to oppressions and exclusions of marginalized human groups are directly intertwined with issues relating to the destruction of natural environments and the beings and entities therein. I see that lens as applying to issues relating to the NWFP in this blog because it illustrates that connections between social justice and environmental health have long been drawn by advocates of reducing logging and other forms of forest ecosystem destruction in the Pacific Northwest (PNW). This blog will briefly examine what TEK is and how it applies to the proposed changes to the NWFP. This blog asserts that tribal voices must be included in this next

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[https://www.hcn.org/articles/will-the-northwest-forest-plan-finally-respect-tribal-rights/?utm\\_source=wcnl&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=2024-07-19-Newsletter](https://www.hcn.org/articles/will-the-northwest-forest-plan-finally-respect-tribal-rights/?utm_source=wcnl&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=2024-07-19-Newsletter)

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e2c7d5a807d5d13389c0db6/t/67db0390f43844138ab0dbdd/1742406544734/FUSEE+NWFP+DEIS+comment+letter+3-17-25.pdf>

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<sup>5</sup> Mallory, Chaone. “Ecofeminism and Forest Defense in Cascadia: Gender, Theory, and Radical Activism” (*Capitalism, Nature, Socialism: A Journal of Socialist Ecology* Vol. 17, no. 1, (March 2006).)

<sup>6</sup> See also: Mallory, Chaone “The Spiritual is Political: Gender, Spirituality, and Essentialism in Radical Forest Defense” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*. 4.1 (2010) 48-71 (Spring 2010); “Ecofeminism and a Politics of Performative Affinity: Direct Action, Subaltern Voices, and the Green Public Sphere” *Ecopolitics Online Journal* Vol. 1 No. 2. 2-13, (October 2008)

draft of the NWFP, and that environmental philosophical categories such as TEK are a needed contribution to these discussions and policy-making procedures.

### **Background and Current Actions**

Environmental issues and issues of social justice are inextricably intertwined and the NWFP provides significant examples of this connection. I had an opportunity to hear these connections drawn directly at symposium held at the University of Oregon on January 22, 2025 called **Northwest Forest Just Futures**.<sup>7</sup> The presenters made this connection clear as they described the new proposed mandate for the NWFP to include Tribal voices, indigenous knowledges, and the call to respect tribal sovereignty and co-management of the forests of the PNW. These are voices that appallingly were excluded in the original drafting and promulgation of the administrative rules of the NWFP in 1994. The inclusion of indigenous voices demanded by Tribes and other members of the environmental community in the re-drafting of the NWFP and particularly the environmental philosophical notion of **Traditional Ecological Knowledge**<sup>8</sup> is germane to understanding why, on an ecosystemic and cultural level, the development and evolution in environmental policy and law of the recognition that marginalized, excluded, colonized, and otherwise oppressed groups are a needed and necessary component of any efficacious and just forest management scheme, particularly as expressed and acknowledged in the recent proposed revisions to the NWFP.

### **What is TEK, What is Happening, and Who is Involved**

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[https://www.kezi.com/news/local/inclusion-of-indigenous-voices-in-revised-north-west-forest-plan-focus-of-symposium/article\\_7a134350-d91e-11ef-a447-577d240b2c09.html](https://www.kezi.com/news/local/inclusion-of-indigenous-voices-in-revised-north-west-forest-plan-focus-of-symposium/article_7a134350-d91e-11ef-a447-577d240b2c09.html)

<sup>8</sup> One key academic figure in this area is indigenous Professor Kyle Powys Whyte, Professor of Philosophy, University of Michigan. See this paper and/or this talk: [https://kylewhyte.marcom.cal.msu.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2018/07/Justice\\_Foward\\_Tribes\\_Climate\\_Adaptatio.pdf](https://kylewhyte.marcom.cal.msu.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2018/07/Justice_Foward_Tribes_Climate_Adaptatio.pdf)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6aSHB6oGcWI>

See also: Kimmerer, Robin Wall *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* Minneapolis, Minnesota : Milkweed, 2013

The Eugene, OR based non-profit organization **FUSEE—Firefighters United for Ecology and Ethics**--- has submitted a policy advocacy letter and comments to the US Forest Service (USFS) on the NWFP, which includes, in part, this statement:

**“NEED TO COLLABORATE WITH TRIBES IN PROACTIVE FIRE MANAGEMENT PLANNING** The agency should prioritize collaborating with Tribes in fire management planning to identify values or places of Tribal importance that would be damaged or degraded by wildfire suppression actions, especially in areas containing Tribal cultural resources or heritage sites. The FEIS needs to disclose the impacts of conventional fire suppression actions on Indigenous cultural resources and heritage sites (for example, retardant slurry drops on harvest sites of traditional edible or medicinal plants, bulldozers running over vision quest prayer seats or other sacred sites, high-intensity backburns in heritage old-growth oak groves, etc.). This collaborative fire planning work should be conducted prior to wildfire incidents and be integrated in fire management plans and all incident action plans in case of wildfires. In closing, FUSEE is fully supportive of the Potential Management Approach of using a full spectrum of fire management activities including prescribed fire, wildfire, and Indigenous cultural burning on all lands, including wilderness, to restore fire resilience and sustain ecological, economic, and social values including public safety. In our view, Tribal inclusion needs fire inclusion, and these represent the two most critically needed changes in the NWFP amendment. All other proposed changes to the NWFP should be analyzed in terms of their impacts on these two essential goals.”<sup>9</sup>

But how are these normative and material goals to be achieved? The concept of **environmental justice** (EJ) also plays an important role in the updating of the NWFP. One of the fundamental principles of environmental justice is that groups that have been historically excluded from participation in ecological management and regulatory schemes should 1) be included and listened to; and 2) that these particular knowledges, the knowledges of these groups (Tribes of the PNW in this instance) that have extruded through centuries of understanding specific, changing landscapes constitute an important part of restoring and promoting forest ecosystem health in an era of rapid ecological change, particularly from the effects of climate change. This particular concept is called **Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK)** and this is where the study of Environmental Philosophy can be especially useful.

A primary concept of philosophy is *epistemology*. Epistemology is the study of knowing, or ways of knowing. This is relevant to how TEK relates to forest management and the proposed revisions to the NWFP because it highlights how

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<sup>9</sup><https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e2c7d5a807d5d13389c0db6/t/67db0390f43844138ab0dbdd/1742406544734/FUSEE+NWFP+DEIS+comment+letter+3-17-25.pdf>

different ways of knowing—knowings and knowledges from non-dominant groups such as indigenous and Tribal persons, whose cultures and thus cultural knowledges are historically embedded in specific ecosystems, can help to protect and make the forest resilient. Western scientific knowledge practices produce particular kinds of understandings of ecosystems, usually in a reductionist way.<sup>10</sup> The dominant Western scientific paradigm by itself is inadequate to understand how to best protect and preserve places such as old growth forests, especially while now confronted with increases in wildfire in these sensitive-but-resilient non-human and human communities that are resulting from climate change.

One of the primary concepts in TEK relates to how it is that ecosystems are embedded in historical human interactions with such. One of the ideas highlighted by the several indigenous speakers at the Forest Futures Symposium referenced above is that, as already stated, TEK (sometimes also known as IEK—Indigenous Ecological Knowledge) as applied to forest management is crucial for the **ecocultural restoration** of old growth PNW ecosystems and the human communities and cultures woven into the multi-species forest tapestry.

As stated by the indigenous environmental philosopher Kyle Powys Whyte:

4.4 Integrating tribal and non-tribal sciences: Many policy documents in the U.S. call for the integration of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) with science in climate change or other environmental or natural resources research. It is sometimes assumed that TEK is only instrumentally valuable to climate science because it is observational knowledge collected over generations. However, TEK best refers to a persisting system of responsibilities. McGregor, for example, defines TEK as the relations among “knowledge, people, and all Creation (the ‘natural’ world as well as the spiritual) ... [it is the] process of participating (a verb) fully and responsibly in such relationships, rather than specifically as the knowledge gained from such experiences. For Aboriginal people, TEK is not just about understanding relationships, it is the relationship with Creation. TEK is something one does” (McGregor 2008, 145). TEK actually refers to entire systems of responsibilities that are intrinsically valuable insofar as the systems are at the very heart of communities’ worldviews and lifeways. The inclusion of TEK in adaptation, management and stewardship strategies is actually about respecting systems of responsibilities. It means creating inclusive research practices that are not only about sharing stores of

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<sup>10</sup> Scientific reductionism is the notion that all physical systems can be reduced to their individual, discrete, and separate parts and their interactions understood as a function of the rules of mechanical physics. This idea stems from the Cartesian worldview that nature and the rest of the universe is essentially an elaborate “clock” or mechanism that can be taken apart, studied, and understood, and put back together in such a way that benefits the (human) examiner of the “clock.” See Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1980, Harper Collins)

knowledge, but about sharing understanding of a host of responsibilities that should play integral roles in adaptation, management and stewardship strategies. Institutions that govern or fund research can shelter TEK systems of responsibilities by doing what it takes to ensure their robust participation well beyond the provision of accumulated observations of some landscape. More importantly, TEK concerns tribal strategies for adaptation that are based on tribal systems of responsibilities and the worldviews/cosmologies such systems flow from. Collaboration across science and TEK systems must involve conversations about how different groups of people understand the nature of reality and responsibility.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, human communities and good human/non-human interactions are essential to the restoration and protection of forest ecosystems. The “eco” and the “cultural” cannot be separated. And it’s not just Western scientists and policy-makers who have epistemological superiority over forest science. Indigenous and Tribal perspectives are crucial to maintaining forest health.

## **Conclusion**

I will conclude this blog with the following statement from a researcher with FUSEE:

“The NWFP presents a remarkable opportunity to integrate Indigenous Knowledge with western fire ecology science and blaze a new path towards ecological fire management. The DEIS should include at least one, preferably several, alternatives that propose an expanded regimen of prescribed fire, cultural burning, and ecological fire use during wildfires. Fire management touches upon all the other main issues of climate, old-growth, and of course, Tribal inclusion. The agency must not miss this opportunity in the NWFP Amendment process to shift its obsolete, unsustainable, and unjust fire management paradigm.”<sup>12</sup>

My view: by inserting the philosophical concept of TEK into the revisions of the NWFP, environmental justice will be promoted, indigenous and tribal understandings of forest ecosystems will be availed of (for the benefit of all), and the precious, unique, ecosystem of the PNW will be further protected, legally, and bring us closer to restoring the ecocultural ties that braid.

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[https://kylewhyte.marcom.cal.msu.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2018/07/Justice\\_Foward\\_Tribes\\_Climate\\_Adaptatio.pdf](https://kylewhyte.marcom.cal.msu.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2018/07/Justice_Foward_Tribes_Climate_Adaptatio.pdf) p. 11

<sup>12</sup>

<https://fusee.org/fusee/fly-on-the-wall-the-northwest-forest-plan-federal-advisory-committee-meeting-in-eugene-part-1>