

A Dropped Thread

MacDonald's basketry workshop was part of the Ethnobotany Resource Area Project (ERAP), a project at the West Eugene Wetlands that allowed fragile relationships to form between members of local tribes and the organizations that manage and restore the Wetlands. Since the project ended, tribal members have been absent from substantive involvement at the Wetlands.

The ERAP project lasted for five years, from 2004-2009. But managers and ecologists who took part in the project say that it ended too soon as the result of fumbles by BLM senior management uncomfortable with increasing tribal involvement at the Wetlands. In particular, BLM reassigned Pat Johnston, its award-winning project manager at the Wetlands, at a pivotal point in the project. Johnston had raised more than \$1 million in funding for restoration at the Wetlands, had done much to develop collaborative relationships between all of the Wetlands partners and had performed extensive tribal outreach over a number of years.

The West Eugene Wetlands is owned and managed by a number of governmental and non-profit groups, including the BLM, the City of Eugene, the Army Corps of Engineers, the Willamette Resources and Education Network (WREN) and the Nature Conservancy. The ERAP project was a joint project of WREN, BLM and the Institute for Culture and Ecology (IFCAE).

The ambitious ERAP project aimed to help nurture intercultural relationships and to encourage the practice and sharing of traditional Native American ecological knowledge. Its ultimate goal was to create an ethnobotany site at the Wetlands where local tribes could manage and restore culturally important plants — such as hazel, willow and juncus for basketry, and camas for food — using traditional methods such as controlled burns and intensive tilling and pruning.

The project also hoped to help educate land managers and scientists at the Wetlands about the importance of the relationship between the area's ecology and historical Native American use of the land. Because the ecosystems of the Willamette Valley evolved alongside intensive use by Native Americans over thousands of years, some ecologists believe that restoring certain indigenous practices will also help restore the land and its ecosystems.

"The Grand Ronde tribe had been involved at the Wetlands (during the ERAP project). I think the question is, why isn't the tribe involved in a substantive way now?" says Bob Zybach, historical ecologist and former consultant for the ERAP project. "BLM is legally obligated to involve the tribe at a substantive level because it's ceded land. They were in a position to continue that process and they aborted it."

Severing the Tie that Binds

Johnston, who declined to be interviewed for this story, had been deeply involved at the Wetlands and instrumental in reaching out to tribal members even before the ERAP project began. She helped found WREN, the environmental education arm of the Wetlands, and initiated a project at the Wetlands in which Kalapuya elder Esther Stutzman renamed certain sites with Kalapuyan words.

Johnston has received a number of awards over the years from the BLM and the Department of the Interior (DOI). Just a few months before she was reassigned, she traveled to Washington D.C. to accept several awards for her work at the West Eugene Wetlands, including the Partnership in Conservation Work from the DOI and the BLM National Volunteer Award. Both awards were granted jointly to Johnston and WREN. In 2003, Johnston received BLM's Star Award for capturing more than \$1 million in funding for restoration work at the West Eugene Wetlands.

David Lewis, cultural resources director for the Grand Ronde tribe, speaks highly of Johnston. "One of the

BLM) hasn't called me at all," he says.

Eric Jones, former ERAP project director, agrees that Johnston was an effective leader for the socially and ecologically complex project. "Pat was this amazing forward-thinking BLM manager in charge of the Wetlands, but was undermined by her superiors. Pat was trying to send the tribes consistent messages and build trust. But how do you have a positive, collaborative, multi-stakeholder network when someone with authority is acting in ways that undermine the project? The project was just maturing, just starting to gain traction, and then the message to the tribes was, be careful what kind of time you invest in this because you might not get a good shake."

A Fragile Link to the Past

The West Eugene Wetlands can be easy to miss if you're zipping down busy West 11th, Eugene's most commercial and industrial strip. Out your car window, you might see an occasional flash of scrubby or sodden field between the long row of big box stores, billboards, square industrial

'When you restore a landscape, that would include cultural use. There's an assumption that plants, animals and humans are separate, but in ecology we know that they're interrelated. People were involved in it; therefore, you want people to come back in.'

**— David Lewis, cultural resources director,
Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde**

activating forces there was this really positive relationship that all the partners had with BLM (while Johnston was there)," says Lewis. "When she was reassigned somewhere else, they lost that connection somewhat. She was a very positive force out there. She really cared about the land and the maintenance of it, and what we could do with it for the community. She really cared about the project and wanted to help everybody out. But I don't think the BLM was completely appreciative of her efforts," he says.

Lewis adds that BLM hasn't invited the Grand Ronde tribe to participate in any projects at the Wetlands since Johnston left. "We cover an area that's too vast to be asking for more projects, but if there's something going on at the West Eugene Wetlands, we can be involved in that and would be involved in that because it's important. We are here and we're available to help. But I haven't received any offers to do anything out there in probably two years. (The

warehouses and bland housing developments. But these unassuming fields carry a unique legacy.

This 3,000-acre patchwork quilt of rare and protected wetlands habitat offers a link to the Willamette Valley's ecological and cultural past. It's a fragile remnant of the wetlands and oak savannah landscape that dominated the valley before settlers arrived, a landscape that has been rapidly replaced by agriculture and development over the years and is still shrinking. In fact, less than 1 percent of the Willamette Valley's original wetlands habitat still exists.

The West Eugene Wetlands is not a single park, but a disparate collection of fields fragmented by busy arterials, business parks, commercial strips and factories. These fields are in various stages of health: Some are relatively intact, but others are badly degraded — overgrown with invasive blackberry and ivy, compacted at one time by herds of cattle, or poisoned by industrial pollutants.

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