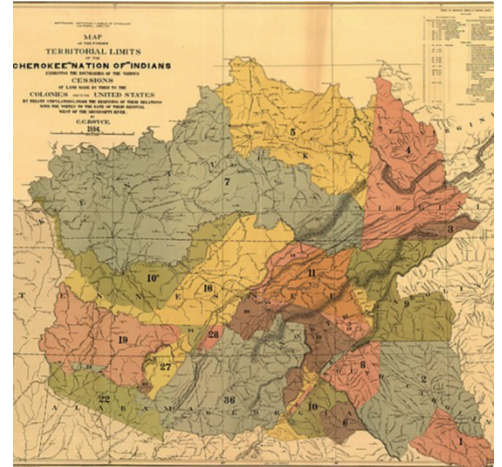


After the Fire: Potential Impacts of Fire Exclusion Policies on Historical Cherokee Culture in the Southern Appalachian Mountains, USA

Contemporary foresters agree that anthropogenic fire is a key factor in developing the southern Appalachian landscape, but most research focuses on the initiatives of white settlers and government institutions, with little attention to Cherokee cultural burning practices. However, prescribed fire held significant cultural importance to the Cherokee people; as a result, twentieth century fire exclusion campaigns were severely detrimental to their lifestyle by interfering with daily practices and causing large-scale changes to the Appalachian landscape. The following study was conducted by Carson Colenbaugh and Donald Hagan. The authors examined Cherokee traditions involving fire and how these cultural activities, as well as their tribal sovereignty and ancestral Appalachian lands, were affected by fire exclusion era policies. This article was published in the *Human Ecology* journal.



Key Findings:

- The Cherokee likely had 1-2 large fires each year alongside more frequent smaller fires to reduce fuel buildup, improve hunting/foraging grounds, clear land, and revive culturally significant plants.
- At the material level, Cherokee burnings helped cultivate plant and animal species vital for daily life and cultural traditions, including deer, fire dependent trees, huckleberry, rivercane, etc.
- On a symbolic level, fire was considered a conscious, transformative medium that represented purification, fertilization, and power; fire was common element of Cherokee storytelling and played a role in many sacred ceremonies.
- Banning landscape-level fire introduced new shade-tolerant species to the landscape, reducing the availability of historical Cherokee plants and animals.
- As resources grew scarcer, the Cherokee were forced to lose parts of their cultural identity and rely more on the lifestyles of the settlers, creating cultural oppression like the language and religious bans of the time.

Take Home Points:

- Both Cherokee burning traditions and U.S. fire exclusion policies carried a cultural impact beyond agricultural/ecological utility.
- Human cultures should not continue to be excluded from the landscapes they helped to shape. Land management agencies should collaborate more with Indigenous tribes to share resources and knowledge while creating similar ecological, cultural, and social goals.
- Historically, the Cherokee helped develop the woodland conditions desired by contemporary foresters, non-Indigenous land managers should work to include Indigenous managers at all levels of decision-making.

Links to paper:

Colenbaugh, C., Hagan, D.L. After the Fire: Potential Impacts of Fire Exclusion Policies on Historical Cherokee Culture in the Southern Appalachian Mountains, USA. *Hum Ecol* **51**, 291–301 (2023): <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10745-023-00395-z>
https://www.appalachianfire.org/files/ugd/696505_721b44f5d22146108402be7e561cc47d.pdf

Related research:

<https://www.appalachianfire.org/firehistory>



Picture: Carson Colenbaugh