[MUSIC PLAYING]

BONNIE WILLISON: From Wisconsin Sea Grant, I'm Bonnie, and this is *The Water We Swim In,* stories about the Great Lakes and the people working towards equity. Wisconsin Sea Grant is based at UW-Madison, which occupies the traditional land of the Ho-Chunk people. The stories on this podcast span the area we now know as Wisconsin, where the lands and waters are cared for by the 12 native nations that call Wisconsin home. Today, we're talking about red pine forests, blueberries, treaty rights, and how they all converge around fire on a tiny spit of land jutting out into Lake Superior.

EVAN LARSON: I'm going to interrupt you briefly for just a moment. I saw somebody check a watch. And there was like this little dip in the conversation, and I could tell it's like, all right, why are we here other than to eat food? And before--

BONNIE WILLISON: I'm in a conference room with about 40 other people eating lunch. The room looks out onto Lake Superior. Evan Larson has just gotten up to address the group.

EVAN LARSON: Some of the most important teachers in my life, among the many elders that I've connected with, are trees and tree rings. The stories that are recorded in the rings of trees help understand the history of the land.

BONNIE WILLISON: Evan raises his hand up high, holding a flat cross section of a log.

EVAN LARSON: And so this is a fire-scarred piece of red pine that was collected on Minnesota Point. And so, within the rings of this tree, the innermost ring is 1781. The outermost ring is 1931. And it recorded fires 1788, 1804, 1826, 1829, and 1842. And so this is an absolute record of when fires are burning across Minnesota Points.

BONNIE WILLISON: The group of us were in Superior Wisconsin that day to attend the opening ceremony of a Wisconsin Sea Grant-funded project called Nimaawanji'idimin Giiwitaashkodeng. This translates to "We all gather around the fire."

MELONEE MONTANO: I feel rude standing up here because I like to be down, but I don't want to have my back to people, too, while I speak just a little bit.

BONNIE WILLISON: That was Melonee Montano, who stood up to join Evan Larson.

MELONEE MONTANO: So we're trying from all sorts of directions to try to bring back the voice of fire, just talking about the importance of cultural fire and what that is for the Anishinaabe people and bringing it back. So the land, since it hasn't seen fire, it's literally been waiting. And so here we are again, but we knew that we had to start it off in a good way with ceremony before we can start doing all these other things because if we didn't, then we wouldn't be doing things in the right way from the Anishinaabe way of life because we need to be able to let the land and the spirits all out there know what we're doing, also ask for permission, and explain our good intentions. So again, now that we did that--

BONNIE WILLISON: Right before this lunch, our group had gathered in a pine forest on Wisconsin Point, a very long sandy secluded strip of land with water on both sides. At our gathering, we had native and nonnative people, professional firefighters and researchers, and others who are lending their knowledge and expertise to this project in some way. I was invited as a communicator for Wisconsin Sea Grant. Out under the pines, Evan and a firefighter built a small fire, and a group of 40 or 50 of us stood in a circle. The ceremony started. The ceremony included prayer, songs, and stories, most of which was in the Anishinaabe language.

EVAN LARSON: The translation of the project name Nimaawanji'idimin Giiwitaashkodeng, what that translates in English, is "We are all gathering around the fire." I think the beauty of that title is that, yeah, it's because we have all these great collaborators, and we're gathering around ishkode-- fire. And we have all of these beings, all of these different plants and animals, and they are also gathered around the fire, very much so in the way that they live and how they've evolved to be. It is ishkode, fire, at that center that is enabling all of these things to happen.

MELONEE MONTANO: I'm super, super grateful that I'm able to be a part of it because it's a long time coming since fire has been suppressed for our people. And we've been put in jail because of it. But it's up to us to carry on this responsibility. And I don't know if we have to chain ourselves to railroad tracks or what, but whatever it's going to take to give fire a voice and respect again, we're basically here for that.

BONNIE WILLISON: Melonee, Evan, and a host of others will be working on this project for the next few years ahead. This opening ceremony marked the first step in the project.

EVAN LARSON: There is really only one good way forward, and that is to collaboratively restore cultural fire to these places.

[APPLAUSE]

Also, thank you--

MELONEE MONTANO: [SPEAKING ANISHINAABEMOWIN]

Melonee Montano. I'm a member of the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Ojibwe and the eagle clan. When I was growing up, I used to spend a lot of time with elders. And I can speak to Red Cliff mostly because that's where I spent a lot of time with elders, where they would talk about the use of fire in our area to burn for blueberries.

When our community out here in Red Cliff would use fire, they would go to places like Stockton Island or the Moquah Barrens or Raspberry Campgrounds in Red Cliff, and they would go in little neighborhoods. And so, sometimes, that would be like 8 to 10 different families, and each family had a lot of kids. And they would all go out and set up camp to be able to burn and, at another time of the year, be able to pick blueberries and things. When they would go out and pick those berries, they were spending extensive amounts of time together. And they were doing ceremonies. They were feasting together.

We had stories where elders talked about he wanted to play so bad, but he couldn't until he was able to pick so many blueberries. He remembered sitting on the ground and looking across the blueberry plants, and they were so thick that all he could see was blue. And he became really overwhelmed about all those blueberries to pick.

Blueberries are one of our first foods. When I say one of the first foods, you think about things like deer and rabbit and strawberries and blueberries, all those ones that are native to our region that we heavily relied on as part of our diet. And we often have them as part of our feast and our dishes at different ceremonies and things like that.

And not only that, but when we do our traditional services for people when they pass away, we talk about how, once they pass, their spirits actually travel for four days and four nights. And each night, they stop and make a fire for themselves. And each day, they pick a different type of fruit, and they eat that. In one of those days, one of those fruits that they actually pick and eat is blueberries.

And then, in addition to that, the social component and, of course, the cultural component, they were doing it to be able to make money because they were selling a lot of blueberries to businesses in our local area here in Bayfield. And they actually would be loaded onto a train known as the Blueberry Line.

[TRAIN WHISTLING]

And so I think about how many blueberries that we must have had in our area to have an entire train line that was dedicated to just carrying blueberries back down to Chicago. And so I think that in order to have such an extensive amount of blueberries, you obviously had to have fire.

One thing that our people talk about is that everything out there has a spirit. Fire has a spirit, and there's actually a different name for the spirit of fire. In Ojibwe, just "fire," in general, we use "ishkode." It's one of the gifts that have been given to people and the animals and plants and trees and all of that. And we, throughout time, had been using fire as a management tool, obviously to be able to clear land and have the foods that we needed.

And all those things, unfortunately, shifted throughout time as a result of government policy. A lot of our people that were out there picking those blueberries were basically brought under the logging industry then, and so that was an extreme shift from going to picking blueberries in a pine forest or at barrens and different places like that to all of a sudden being in the woods, cutting trees and peeling pulp. Fire suppression policies came along.

We had stories where elders talked about memories of their parents and grandparents who were actually put in jail if they were caught using fire. It was automatic 30 days in jail. A lot of our families were big then. And if the man of the household was out using fire to be able to make sure that we had enough blueberries for the families, and then all of a sudden, he's arrested and put in jail for 30 days, then his family really goes hungry. But they also had to do what they had to do in order to survive and continue feeding their families.

That was just another layer of things that were contributing to the historical trauma that we still carry today. Our generation, of course, carries a lot of fear about that fire. It, I guess, created its own trauma within me as well. For a while, for a time period, I actually had, I wouldn't say, a hatred, but I guess, a hard time in thinking about fire. Basically, my children's dad, Damon Panek, had been doing wildland fire for many years. I would worry about him if he wasn't coming back safely and what that would mean. And our kids were young at the time, too, and just how devastating it would be to realize that I had lost him to a fire.

Hopefully, our young ones will actually start building their relationships with fire in a positive light. And that's something, with my own children, we've been real grateful that they've been able to be a part of burning the backyard and things when Damon would be doing things like that. Their fear has even been lessened as a result of just being around and exposed to it and realizing that it actually can be a beautiful thing and watching all the new girls that comes up afterwards and being able to gather those berries and things, too.

DAMON PANEK: [SPEAKING ANISHINAABEMOWIN]

Gezhiibideg is my known name, and Damon Panek is what they call me. [CHUCKLES] As the Wildland Fire Program manager for the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Ojibwe, I definitely fear fire, big time. I don't have this imbalanced fear of fire. I have a pretty balanced fear of fire right now. But this imbalanced fear of fire, that perception has been influenced by, ultimately, capitalism, really. The propaganda of the early 1900s with the Forest Service is all about saving timber for harvests, like Smokey, the bear, right?

SMOKEY BEAR: Fire! Fire! Run for your lives!

DAMON PANEK: Have you seen some of the old-school posters? But they're pretty solid about, like, fire is a bad thing, and you're going to kill all the baby bears. You think of Bambi running through the woods.

SMOKEY BEAR: Please be careful. Only you can prevent forest fires.

DAMON PANEK: Fires that happened in the early 1900s were devastating, for sure. But the reason why they were so intense is because most of that was logging slash. You suppress fire for so long. It builds up fuels. You cut that down. You leave it on the ground. It dries out. And 10 years later, you get the perfect alignment of wind and heat and relative humidity, and you get a spark from a train. It's going to take off. We've just become so disconnected from it that we've forgotten how to have a relationship with fire.

I think everyone can connect to fire. We all have a relationship with fire. Our genetic transformation into the beings that we are today is a direct result of fire. That common thread that we all have, where we can sit in front of a campfire and just sit there and just stare at it and watch it, I think that genetic memory is there for all of us.

MELONEE MONTANO: When I started really reconnecting with fire and doing some of the work and helping Evan and the others, I couldn't help thinking about how, by bringing back fire, we might actually be able to start helping to heal from that intergenerational and historical trauma. And in turn, I realized that I myself am receiving my own healing through it as well.

The connections with all of us working on fire in this region have come together in so many different ways. It feels like we were all sort of in different places a few years back doing our own thing, and something brought us all together. And that's what helped us to realize that the time is now to actually be doing this work focused on fire.

BONNIE WILLISON: One of those people that Melonee met was Evan Larson.

EVAN LARSON: Hi, my name is Evan Larson. I'm a professor of Environmental Sciences and Society at the University of Wisconsin in Platteville. I went to college with all the intentions in the world of becoming a third-grade teacher. And in between my junior and senior years, I came into an undergraduate research experience. And that was my introduction to the field of dendrochronology, so the science of using tree rings to reconstruct environmental history.

My parents had a woodshop, and so I spent a lot of my early childhood with tools and smelling sawdust and using a chainsaw. And so this work brought together this background that I'd grown up in with what I've always had is a really deep interest and passion for the world that we live in.

My graduate degrees are in geography. Ended up at the University of Minnesota for my PhD. I was doing research. And so my PhD advisor, Kurt Kipfmueller, and I and others in the lab started taking these trips to the Boundary Waters every spring as a way to decompress. I grew up in Minnesota, went to the Boundary Waters my whole life. I always thought of it as a really beautiful and special place.

So we went up, and we started doing some research, collecting tree-ring samples, looking at old trees, starting to think about long-term records of climate that can be reconstructed from tree rings. And I remember this very distinctly when all of a sudden, it really sunk in that the work that we were doing, it was not just an academic question of what is wilderness, but it's this like-- it is much bigger than that.

This first scouting trip, I remember that this big loop among all these islands, and we were looking for fire scars at Stockton Islands. And there were probably 29 trees, I think, that had these very atypical scars on their trunks. It's kind of oblong-shaped peel scars, where the bark was removed by people, and that leaves that mark in the rings. And I had always just assumed it was modern campers that were hacking on trees with axes and things like that.

And so we took a section of this scar on this trunk, and we just did a rough count of the rings on the outside of that scar, telling us how long ago that scar had been formed. And there were like 200 rings on the outside. And so all of a sudden, we're like, oh, this was not Boy Scouts. This scar is really telling a lot longer story.

Lee Johnson is the director of the Cultural Heritage Program in Superior National Forest. He said, I'm pretty sure this is a place where there's really good evidence of an Anishinaabe family who was living on this island and making canoes during the first raid. And those kind of connections just happened over and over and over and over.

Over the course of a number of years, as we're getting to spend more and more time in that landscape, we are starting to build the relationships that take time to build with folks at Fond du Lac, [INAUDIBLE], Grand Portage, Lac La Croix. We connect with managers from the Quetico Provincial Park. That Western notion of that division between people and the land that has forever been a false concept with some really severe implications, by moving past that, we can actually work toward this really beautiful and rich and diverse future that is sustainable.

Melonee and I met when we were getting ready to go up to Lac La Croix First Nation reserve.

MELONEE MONTANO: I was invited to travel along with them, partially because I had ties to the community but also just have been taking more of an interest in that work. And it was actually the first time I had really hung out with Evan.

EVAN LARSON: It was one of these working relationships where it immediately felt like we'd probably been working together forever.

MELONEE MONTANO: While up there, we talked about future work that we might want to do as well. And there's been several people throughout time that have been interested in doing the same kind of approach with Wisconsin and Minnesota Point. Minnesota Point, for example, is heavily populated. It feels like the history that was there that holds how are people, meaning the Ojibwe, have been there and been using that area and things is almost erased from the high development.

And then, when it comes to Wisconsin Point, it's a lot more quiet. It feels more natural, but at the same time, it is a lot more intense as well. Not only have our people been there, but they're also buried there. And their bones are still there. The presence of those graves there puts a whole other feel into it-- just more about the trauma that had happened and the removal of our people from those lands.

We reached out to all the different organizations in the area. We ended up being extremely surprised that everybody was really on board and really excited about it. And it's work that they definitely want to see through.

EVAN LARSON: So we had been talking about this project for a couple of years. I don't even remember why I went to the website. But I landed at the Wisconsin Sea Grant, and it was a couple of weeks after the call had been posted and the top priority-- justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. Seeing the call come out from Sea Grant, it just crystallized. And then to share it out with Melonee and Robin and others, everybody would be like, yeah, this is it, let's go.

I saw the title of the email in my inbox and that it was from Sea Grant, and it said Decision. I was sitting about 10 feet from where I am right now. And I got up, and I just walked away. I had a cup of coffee, talked to my wife for a little bit. And then I went back, and I opened it up and was like, yup, responded, woo! [CHUCKLES] It was thrilling. It feels so right in so many ways, and it's just so exciting to see this project happen.

BONNIE WILLISON: After the break--

EVAN LARSON: We had literally been walking through the woods, kicking stones.

BONNIE WILLISON: --we walk through the woods and kick some stumps.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

EVAN LARSON: Oh gosh, that's a big question.

BONNIE WILLISON: I had just asked Evan Larson how he describes the We All Gather Around the Fire project.

EVAN LARSON: If I had to bring it down into a succinct statement, I might open the conversation since it has to be short, as I'll say, let's go back to the last glacial maximum. [LAUGHS]

BONNIE WILLISON: For someone who studies changes to the landscape over time, I guess the last glacial maximum might seem like a good place to start for an abbreviated story of Wisconsin's forests. Evan says that at the last glacial maximum, which is roughly 20,000 years ago--

EVAN LARSON: If you're standing in Northern Wisconsin, you would have been under a mile of ice. The plants and animals that you'd see around you are nothing that you would recognize today. As that ice receded, you had all of these just massive migrations of plants and animals. Like, oh, the oak trees were down in Florida, and they started going up this way, and the spruce trees started following the Appalachians. And the hemlock and the beech, they did their own different thing, but now they're hanging out together.

What that means is that when we're standing right now on this landscape, and we look around, and we see the assemblage that we think of as a northern forest, we're actually standing in the only time that that specific assemblage has ever existed. And what that means is that that forest has literally never existed without people because people have been following that ice, too.

Literally, in this landscape that we're in, people have always been a part of it. When we talk about forests, trees can live hundreds of years old. So since the arrival of Europeans to places like Zhaagawaamikong-neyaashi-- Minnesota Point, Wisconsin Point-- literally, we're talking a few generations of trees, and that's it.

BONNIE WILLISON: Zhaagawaamikong-neyaashi, that's the name for the places we now call Minnesota and Wisconsin Points. "Zhaagawaamikong" roughly translates to "sandbar place," and "neyaashi" means "point."

EVAN LARSON: If you look at the scale of Lake Superior, Zhaagawaamikong-neyaashi, this tiny landform. But in that tiny place, it is somewhere that so many people are connected to, so many people love. It's got such an important place among Anishinaabe and many people before them. It is familiar and close enough where if we can come together and do this work there, that is where the message can really start to ripple out. So my part, coming at this from the perspective of a dendrochronologist, is to help develop the tree-ring story of Zhaagawaamikong-neyaashi.

So right now, I'm working with four students from Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College.

STUDENT: [INAUDIBLE], the poison ivy.

EVAN LARSON: And so, yes, we have literally been walking through the woods, kicking stones.

All right, so this one was not on our list, but yet I'm really--

BONNIE WILLISON: Hey, Marie.

MARIE ZHUIKOV: Hi. Glad to be here.

BONNIE WILLISON: I jumped on the phone with Marie Zhuikov, Senior Science Communicator for Wisconsin Sea Grant, because last fall, Marie joined Evan and his students on a sampling trip.

MARIE ZHUIKOV: I was excited to be able to make this even though it was a weekend. So I met Evan at the Lake Superior Estuarium. That's kind of their home base. It's an interpretive center for the estuary run by the Lake Superior National Estuarine Research Reserve. Then the students arrived. There was Mocha, Valerie, Emily, and Ashla. And then we drove out to the very end of Wisconsin Point.

It was in the fall, just the overcast, muted fall day. We stopped at the very ends where the lighthouse is, and we got out at the parking lot and just walked into the woods. There's no trail.

EVAN LARSON: I already got turned down a little bit.

MARIE ZHUIKOV: They had some trees in mind that they hadn't had a chance to sample yet.

EVAN LARSON: This wasn't an easy stroll out along a path just to get where we've been. But it's super overgrown, and you can't really see the forest floor. You can still see the legacy of fire, like blueberries, red pine. And there's just a whole host of plants and medicines here that are associated with a place that has burned. But if you look at the lower layer, no red pine.

All of these red pine will cast seeds for the rest of their lives, but they will very likely never actually result in a baby pine tree because fire opens the forest floor of that mineral soil, and white pine seeds can get through a little bit of duff. Red pine seeds, when they fall on this, they just land on the needles and litter there, and they cannot get to the mineral soil and germinate.

STUDENT: Till there's a fire.

EVAN LARSON: Until there's a fire.

STUDENT: Until we come through and burn it.

EVAN LARSON: Darn, right.

STUDENT: [GIGGLES]

EVAN LARSON: Yup. All right, so now I'll hit off-trail. I will go find a tree, a dead tree. So normally, what we do is kind of spread out, and it's the group of us just doing these wavy walking lines through the forest. So a lot of times, the stumps, it'll be five, 10 feet away from you before you, all of a sudden, realize like, oh, that's a stump. And for all of the samples that we've taken, I'm sure that we've walked by. Probably many of that could be sampleable, but we either didn't see them or something like that.

STUDENT: Oh! A hole. [LAUGHS]

EVAN LARSON: I wasn't as far as I was expecting to go.

MARIE ZHUIKOV: One of the first ones we looked at was a downed tree that was just covered with moss.

EVAN LARSON: [KICKING THE TREE] Yeah, it's totally solid. It's totally covered in moss and lycopodium. Looks like a good one.

MARIE ZHUIKOV: In my past, I was a wildland firefighter and just picked up what burn scars look like by osmosis. Usually, fire scars are a blackened area at the base of a tree. A lot of times, they're triangular-shaped. There can be a foot high up to 3 feet high or higher. There's no bark on the burned area.

EVAN LARSON: All right, who wants to take Marie through the process?

Well, we do a kick test. We go around, kick, make sure that the stump is solid because if it's solid, that indicates that there's been scarring and that the tree has produced resin to heal.

STUDENT: [KICKING]

EVAN LARSON: What's your assessment?

STUDENT: Pretty solid.

EVAN LARSON: Pretty solid 'cause of that resin the red pine are so abundant with. They're going to open it up to make sure that our interpretation so far is accurate. Appropriate safety gear is required.

[SAW SCRAPING]

These stumps have been there from trees that have been dead for 100 years or more, in some cases. And on that first draw of the saw, and the woodchips fire, and all of a sudden, you just like [INHALES DEEPLY], you could just smell the resin.

[SAW SCRAPING]

[BIRD CHIRPING]

Are you picking up on it?

MARIE ZHUIKOV: There was a bald eagle circling overhead and calling out. So we just stopped, and we listened to the eagle for a while.

[BIRD CHIRPING]

[SAW SCRAPING]

STUDENT: There.

EVAN LARSON: Anybody want to interpret?

STUDENT: Peel scar right there.

EVAN LARSON: So that question is, how do you know? How do you know that, because of the way it is? [LAUGHING]

MOCHA: You can see where people have peeled the bark away, and the tree healed around then. And you can also see there have been a couple of fires that have touched this tree, and it's like-- and we feel like there's a pretty good chance that those are prescribed burns, those that were Anishinaabe.

EVAN LARSON: There's a lot of reasons that you might peel the bark off of a tree. In some parts of the world, the inner bark was a common food source during starvation periods because the starch in that might be incorporated into medicines for a variety of different reasons. And one of the very utilitarian purposes is that you can gather that resin, and then that is one of the ingredients that goes into the gum that you would use to build and repair birchbark canoes.

These trees have been living on this land, carrying this story and these relationships and their rings for all this time. But trees die, too. And so these trees are now old. That story is long enough ago where these are the last vestiges of that really that tangible legacy.

MOCHA: Is there a way that we could approximate the amount of fires that have happened using what we're able to gather from these tree stumps?

EVAN LARSON: So yeah. There's a lot of statistics that you can use on fire history research. You can call the mean fire return interval, like how many years between fires. You can call a fire rotation, how long does it take to burn an area the equivalent of our study area, things like that. I used to really care about the numbers. And it's been interesting because over this project, I've realized that the numbers are less and less important. But more important is the presence of those scars in that place and that sometimes statistics kind of mask what the really important story is. So all right, a couple more cuts.

STUDENT: OK.

EVAN LARSON: Do we have a backpack?

STUDENT: No.

EVAN LARSON: We'll take-- I think we'll take two.

STUDENT: Those are gorgeous samples.

MARIE ZHUIKOV: I had to head back home, so I left. But the students stayed out there for longer and collected more samples and brought them back to the estuarium.

EVAN LARSON: We've done a pretty well-- a systematic coverage of both points, and we've sampled pretty much every stump or log that had a fire scar. We brought them back to the Superior Estuarium to get them to dry out totally, and we glued them all down to plywood. We're going to be working with the Duluth MakerSpace and sand them and sand them and sand them and sand them. And this is-- I love this part of the process because you start with these rough cuts.

And you're using belt sanders or orbitals, start at 40 grit and then 80 grit, 120, and 180, 220, 320, 400. And a lot of these will take up to 600 grit, which is an incredibly fine polish. And you get to this moment where all of a sudden, what looked like a rough cut, the rings just start to pop out. And it smells good because you're heating up the resin, and then you start to see the shapes of the growth rings and these fire scars that have been laid down year after year after year.

Once we get them polished to a high shine to the point where if we look at them under a microscope, you can see the individual wood cells, then we'll take them to the laboratory. And under microscopes, we'll first count the rings in each of the samples and mark the features like fire scars and peel scars. And then we go through a process called cross dating. Cross dating is looking at the width and the character of individual growth trends and finding these patterns that emerge over time. The width of that growth ring reflects rain and sun and temperature and storms and things like that. And if you look at enough, you can start to identify these consistent patterns that occur over, say, a broad region.

Now, we're comparing patterns and characteristics in the tree ring record from those to the living trees where we know the rings-- we know how they're anchored in time. And when you find a match, it's a really fun process because you're like, I don't know, I don't know, I don't know, and all of a sudden, it's just, like, slick. And it is just like a fingerprint. And in that way, we can start to look at when these fires burned on the points down to the year and, a lot of times, even down to the season. This was a fall burn. This was a spring burn based off of where that fire scar falls within individual growth rings.

And we've gotten some hints from preliminary work that the patterns on the points are going to be exactly the same that we would expect-- that there would be frequent fires occurring every 10 years or so throughout much of the record. And then, with a shift of land use associated with the establishment of reservations, 1854 treaties, with Allotment, with the Nelson Act in Minnesota that was intended to remove all off reservation Ojibwe to the White Earth Reservation in the western part of the state, kind of this whole series of events, everywhere we've worked, we see, at that moment, the decline in fire activity.

MELONEE MONTANO: My role in the project is basically to help bring together a holistic picture along with the work that Evan and our students in the field are doing. My approach is mostly with gathering the Indigenous knowledge, mostly working with Fond du Lac tribal members and community members and then others in the region that specifically have knowledge in regards to fire. That's basically looking at who fire is as a being rather than what fire is. Who fire is will be told to us through all of the stories that we gather.

I get really excited that I'm able to go out there and spend time with elders and knowledge holders, to be able to hear their stories. That's something that I've always been excited about since I was young. I can't say enough about how good that feels to be able to sit with them and just be able to be gifted with hearing what they want to share at that time. And all of them have so, so much to share, and it's all so important.

When we're approaching people to ask for knowledge, one of the biggest things we need to make sure is that we pass asema or kinnikinnick, which is basically a tobacco. But for myself, personally, I try to carry my own mixture, which is often made of blueberry leaves and bearberry and strawberry. And a majority of those plants, especially bearberry and blueberry, we wouldn't have those plants to be able to put in our kinnikinnick if it wasn't for fire. And so fire is one of them that is able to help us carry on one of our main cultural practices, which is the passing of tobacco.

In some ways, it's talked about as a form of a spiritual contract because you're requesting information or knowledge from that person. You're asking them to share something that they carry that they consider sacred or important to them. But we also believe that a lot of times, the spirits are working through those people. So in a sense, you're asking for that help from that individual, but you're also asking for the spirits that help them share what needs to be shared. And in turn, by accepting that asema, they agree to provide what they can and what they're willing to uncomfortable with.

And so far, we've had agreements to do some interviews, which are going to be starting next week, in those individuals. They've been extremely happy, realizing that they can help bring a positive light to fire again. And we'll be able to bring that together with the scientific knowledge that's gathered to really get a good understanding of what the fire history is on both Wisconsin and Minnesota Point with the end goal basically being to return fire to those landscapes.

BONNIE WILLISON: After the break, I talked to the person who will likely be leading the team responsible for starting that first fire on Wisconsin and Minnesota Points.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

DAMON PANEK: I think, a lot of people that are in fire, it's kind of like a ancestral pull in a way where you feel really connected when you're doing it. So when I first got into fire, it felt so familiar. Like, the smells and the sounds and everything about it was just like, man, I've been here before. I've seen this before. I've felt this before.

BONNIE WILLISON: That's Damon Panek, longtime wildland firefighter who's currently the Wildland Fire Program manager at the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa. I wanted to talk to Damon because he already knows the feeling of returning fire to his ancestral lands, and he would likely be the person to oversee that first fire on Wisconsin or Minnesota Point.

DAMON PANEK: Definitely, the excitement of doing fire, that was my initial draw, probably. I seek out those kind of chaotic moments, and fire provides a lot of that because you're kind of always having to stay on your toes with your surroundings and things like that. Over time, my relationship with fire evolved. We started asking questions with our elders and asking about fire and seeing photos from a long time ago. And you can see trees with fire scars in them. That's when my whole world opened up with fire, and I realized more of how it was related to our identity and our culture and our way of life.

For us, in the Great Lakes region, fire on the landscape is normal for us. These past couple of 100 years of suppression of fire and suppression of Ignitions of fire is abnormal for this environment. One of the other big moments in my life was recognizing that in the Apostle Islands, we were surrounded by evidence of fire all the time.

I started working with the National Park Service at Apostle Islands in spring of 2000. And I had been out to this island, Stockton Island, every summer for 15 years since I started doing Island School out there, where we bring a bunch of kids out there and do natural and cultural programming.

We had Kurt Kipfmueller out on the island to do some fire history. It started coming back that there was way more fire on this landscape than lightning could explain. And it's just mind-blowing hearing from elders say that they went out there and picked berries, and then they would set it on fire, and then now we've got the research that can literally show the fires that these elders are talking about. For all those years, I would literally walk past these stumps and red pines and not really know much about how fire played a huge role in that landscape.

BONNIE WILLISON: Returning fire to Stockton Island was a collaboration between the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, other bands that are part of the Great Lakes Indian Fish & Wildlife Commission, and the National Park Service. And Damon was there every step of the way.

DAMON PANEK: In the lead up to burning on Stockton Island with the National Park Service, there was a lot of work to get people to understand that we can do this effectively, we can do it safely, we can do it efficiently. A lot of people think that we're just a bunch of knuckle-dragging firefighters, but we actually have a lot of very complex equations that we run to predict fire behavior and what it's going to do in a certain fuel type. And so we do as much as we can to be as controlled about it as possible.

So in 2017, we reintroduced fire to the landscape on Stockton Island. The traditional cultural fire frequency is about every for to six years if you're burning for blueberries. We basically missed 80 years of fire on that landscape, about 20 rotations of fire, so a lot of work went into prep. We had to go in and use chainsaws and grass saws and a whole bunch of other tools to create a control line. And then getting all the equipment out there, we basically had to haul it out in a boat.

The burn day was a really good day. The wind was perfect. The temperature was perfect. We picked a really nice warm summer day with a little bit of a breeze. That's the perfect day to burn. So if the wind is coming from the north, you start on the south end, and you start burning there. We just marched along with the fire. You can imagine a line of fire just marching slowly across the landscape.

The fire dictated the pace. We would help it out a little bit every once in a while. You have people on the flanks bringing fire along the edge so that you can build depth on the edge. But essentially, the fire basically finished the whole thing for us and stayed within the lines. And yeah, it went very well. One of the best burns ever-- [CHUCKLES] that I've been a part of, anyway.

What the Park Service decided to do was to take the traditional cultural practice of fire on the landscape and use that as a guide for how to manage that landscape. It recognizes that ancestral knowledge, the history of the human relationship to that space. We don't need them to do that. We don't need them to recognize our ancestral traditional relationship with these landscapes because it's so powerful that we have it without question.

When the Ojibwe, the Chippewa of Lake Superior, and the Mississippi bands sold the northern third of Wisconsin to the federal government, we made sure that we could still live here. So in 1842, when the chief signed that treaty, article 2 of that treaty states that we have the right to hunt and then also other privileges of usual occupancy. So it's implied in other privileges of usual occupancy not only the ability to extract resources but also to manage for those resources so that we can extract them. So embedded in that is the right to burn as it is the right to hunt as it is the right to fish, to gather, to go out there and watch the sunset, to go out there and pick berries, to go out there and pick medicines.

We don't need them to recognize our ancestral traditional relationship with these landscapes. But because of the way things are right now, having them as an ally to meet mutual goals of land management in our ceded territory, in our ancestral homeland, that's a plus for them. [CHUCKLES] It's like a good thing for them because they're finally waking up to integrating traditional knowledge and traditional cultural practices back into the landscapes that defined them.

The beautiful conditions that exist out there are the conditions that were managed by indigenous people with fire. Taking indigenous people off that landscape is just kind of backwards because you're taking away the reason why that place is beautiful. [CHUCKLES] So I think that's the biggest part with Minnesota Point and Wisconsin Point is making sure that the greater communities who share this space with us now recognize that these landscapes were maintained by tribal people with fire for as long as those landscapes have been there and what they love about that space, with just how beautiful it is, is a direct result of fire on the landscape.

So we do have the authority to burn, but we also want to be good neighbors, too. So what we're saying is that we're going to learn about this space together. We're going to come up with some plans for it. Fire could be one of those ways that we could get back to management there, and there could be other things, too. But we already know that fire needs to be on that landscape because fire is what has contributed to it being the way it is.

We all are imagining one day, everybody on the hillside of Duluth is going to be able to look out their window, and they'll see a plume of smoke coming up from Minnesota Point, and that plume of smoke is going to go up into the air, and it's going to bend over the lake, and they're going to look down there and say, oh yeah, the tribe is just down there burning for blueberries, and they're going to be comfortable with that because we've informed them enough to say we can do this, we can do it safely, we can do it effectively, and we can make this space beautiful for all of us again.

I imagine families going out there and grandmas and grandpas bringing their grandkids out there and picking berries and those grandparents remembering stories from when they were kids and telling those stories and singing songs or using the language. We're creating the perfect park again for our people to go and just be present in the moment and just to be Anishinaabe.

MELONEE MONTANO: I can't wait for the day when we're actually returning fire to these areas and how intense that's going to be and how meaningful it's going to be in closing this gap that's been broken, that's been forced to be broken by government policies and assimilation and things like that, and just how healing that's going to feel for so many. Yeah, I can't wait for that day. And I think it's going to be an amazing time.

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[MUSIC PLAYING]