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# Cherokee relationships to land: Reflections on a historic plant gathering agreement between Buffalo National River and the Cherokee Nation

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## Abstract

This piece reflects on my involvement in a historic agreement between Buffalo National River and the Cherokee Nation regarding the implementation of the “Gathering of Certain Plants or Plant Parts by Federally Recognized Indian Tribes for Traditional Purposes” rule, 36 CFR Part 2 (Code of Federal Regulations, title 32, sec. 2.6., 2016). This rule allows federally recognized tribes to gather plants within national parks with which they are traditionally associated. Representatives from the Cherokee Nation’s formally constituted body of elder knowledge keepers—the Cherokee Medicine Keepers—lent their expertise on land-based knowledge and stewardship practices that provided the basis for such a landmark agreement. Plant gathering within Buffalo National River offers Cherokee people a way to continue traditional cultural practices that are impacted by climate change in eastern Oklahoma. In many cases, plants are more plentiful and healthier within the park boundaries than on our limited tribal trust lands that are threatened by climate change and contemporary agricultural and development practices. The agreement also acknowledges our ancestral and political relationships to the lands within the park and allows Cherokee people to reestablish our connection to the park lands as a collective source of traditional sustenance, cultural knowledge, and health. In this piece, I offer some context for the project, specifically in terms of Cherokee relationships to land, given my previous scholarship and my longtime work with the Medicine Keepers.

Our elders tell us, *nigada gusdi didadadvhni*—“we are all related.” This phrase expresses a relatedness between *all* beings (not just humans), and teaches us to acknowledge the interdependence and sacredness of life in all its forms. With this in mind, our elders say, *nigada dedadanilvgi*—“respect all things.”<sup>1</sup> In this spirit of respect for, and relationship to, the land, we carried out the following project to establish an agreement between the Cherokee Nation and Buffalo National River for gathering plants within the park’s boundaries.<sup>2</sup> Representatives from the Cherokee Nation’s formally constituted body of elder knowledge keepers—the Cherokee Medicine Keepers—lent their expertise on land-based knowledge and stewardship practices that provided the basis for such a landmark agreement. I hope to offer some context for the project given my previous scholarly work and my longtime relationship to the Medicine Keepers.

Like many Indigenous nations, Cherokees have faced displacement from our ancestral homelands. Although

this marked a devastating period in our history, over time we developed new connections to the lands that now make up northeastern Oklahoma. Our ancestors were fortunate to recognize many of our cherished medicine plants in the oak-hickory forests at the easternmost extent of our new territory. Many of our communities reestablished themselves in this region of the Ozark Mountains, which contains dramatic hills and valleys that are a similar feature of our Southern Appalachian homelands (Carroll 2015).

Yet, also in common with other Indigenous nations, our people suffered the crippling effects of the federal allotment policy of the late 1800s, worsened by Oklahoma statehood in 1907. As a result, the Cherokee people lost nearly 98% of our tribal lands to encroachment and “surplus” sales. Once comprising 4.42 million acres in fee-simple ownership, today our tribal trust lands number only 100,000 acres in scattered, “check-boarded” parcels (Carroll 2014a). Further, we face increasing pressures to preserve our natural environment

due to development and outsider encroachment. This continued loss of land threatens our cultural practices and knowledge that are tied to land-based ways of life.

These political and cultural concerns animated the formation of the Cherokee Nation Medicine Keepers in the fall of 2008. During a special meeting with Cherokee Nation staff regarding the status of Cherokee environmental knowledge, elders were deeply troubled by the rapid decline in its transmission as compared with when they were growing up. On that day, they declared to make a concerted effort to revitalize land-based ways of life among younger Cherokees with the hope that they be continued for generations to come. Within this goal, they conceived the statement, *nvwoti asquangododi*—“to keep the medicine going,” which, along with their formally adopted name, acknowledges the role that traditional medicine plays in maintaining Cherokees’ relationships with the land. Cherokee plant medicine includes not only the chemical properties of plants that act as “medicine,” but also the faith and spirituality of the patient and healer. This is why it is especially important to revitalize Cherokee plant knowledge—because, in turn, it revitalizes a way of life centered on spirituality and relationships to the land and cosmos.

Inherent to maintaining relationality with the land is continuing the practices associated with environmental knowledge. In a recent project I carried out with the Medicine Keepers (Carroll et al. 2018),<sup>3</sup> numerous elders stressed that if the people do not use the plants, the Creator will take them away. This philosophy assumes that proper, respectful use of plants for medicine, food, and crafts contributes to the well-being of plant communities, and also conveys that with respectful use comes the practice of beneficial stewardship responsibilities. Thus, many Cherokees feel a profound obligation to steward their Oklahoma lands, even while maintaining relationships to the original homelands in the East. As one of my elders put it, we are obligated to “honor the spirit of this land” as a matter of upholding our relationships with the nonhuman world, with place, and with the Creator. Doing this entails passing on the gifts that the Creator gave Cherokees—embodied in both the ancient environmental knowledge that remains from the homelands, and the “new” knowledge that Cherokees received and developed after their arrival in the western lands. It entails maintaining the responsibility to act as caretakers of a place that, while



**FIGURE 1.** Buffalo Point Lookout at Buffalo National River.

it is not *the homeland*, it is nevertheless *a homeland*. To honor the spirit of the land is to acknowledge and act on the responsibilities that come with being Indigenous, displaced from original homelands or not.

And yet, as many other Indigenous nations know, human-induced climate change and contemporary agricultural and development practices compromise our ability to maintain our relationships with the land (Bennett et al. 2014). The Cherokee Nation is located at the confluence of two vastly different climate zones—to the west, a semi-arid tallgrass prairie zone, and to the east, an eastern deciduous forest zone. Documented and projected rising temperatures, along with landscape fragmentation caused by human activities, are creating significant stress on native plant habitats across the Great Plains and the Southeast (Carter et al. 2014; Shafer et al. 2014). These forces threaten the health of plant communities supported by eastern deciduous forests, which Cherokee people continue to rely on for medicine, food, crafts, and other cultural and economic purposes. The resulting species loss and shifting species ranges will further inhibit our people’s access to these plants, and, as our tribal biologist Pat Gwin has noted, could be viewed as no less than another forced removal—only this time, we stay put.

The gathering agreement with Buffalo National River offers Cherokee people a way to continue their traditional relationships with plants that in many cases are more plentiful and healthier within the park boundaries than on our limited tribal trust lands. Further, park lands support Cherokee cultural-use plants that already no longer grow in Oklahoma. The agreement also ac-

knowledges our ancestral and political relationships to the lands within the park. Although Indigenous people of the North American continent have known the park lands since time immemorial, our historical association to the area of the Buffalo River reaches back to the early-to-mid-18th century, when Cherokees were migrating westward due to increasing encroachments upon our southeastern homelands by Euro-American settlers. This group of Cherokees—often referred to as the Old Settlers—sought to avoid conflict with Euro-American people by establishing new settlements west of the Mississippi River. Further, Buffalo National River and its tributaries are within historical treaty lands granted by the United States government to the Old Settlers in 1817. Although another treaty in 1828 overturned the 1817 land grant, the agreement between the National Park Service and the Cherokee Nation allows Cherokee people to reconnect with these historically associated lands as a collective source of traditional sustenance, cultural knowledge, and health.

Lastly, the agreement represents an acknowledgement of the troubled history of the National Park Service, and can be seen as an attempt to right historical grievances. As scholars have increasingly emphasized, the early conservation movement in the United States often entailed removing Native peoples from their homelands in order to create what are now known as national parks. This process, known as “conservation enclosure,” coincided with the establishment of Indian reservations throughout the country, and marked both a physical and philosophical separation between humans and “nature” in the United States (see Carroll 2014b). Although this period is commonly celebrated for its protection of national lands and resources, when viewed through the eyes of Indigenous peoples, the park system embodies yet another story of dispossession (Spence 1999).

Nevertheless, national parks have played an important role in protecting lands and resources from exploitation. This situation indicates an unusually fortunate paradox: that although the formation of many national parks entailed forcibly relocating Native people from their homelands and ancestral areas, the park system has ensured that those lands remain relatively untouched from the detrimental effects of development and environmental contamination that plague many tribal lands today. It seems fitting that in the age of international decrees such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples—which affirms the right of Indigenous peoples to “maintain, control, protect, and develop” their distinctive knowledges and lifeways—that Indigenous nations in the

United States can pursue agreements to sustainably gather plants within the national parks. This agreement thus contributes to a significant step forward in reconciling historical injustices, acknowledging the continued relationships that Indigenous peoples have with ancestral lands, and promoting the cooperative and mutually beneficial stewardship of plants on national park lands.

I have written previously about the Cherokee story on the origin of disease and medicine and its significance in understanding Cherokee relationships to land (Carroll 2015: 57–82). That story recounts how, long ago, the animals decided to take revenge on the human beings, who had been disrespecting their animal relatives by killing them indiscriminately and without the proper acknowledgement of gratitude for their gifts of life. In retaliation, the animals created diseases to inflict on the human beings—for example, the spirit of Little Deer is said to cause rheumatism in hunters who take a deer without giving thanks. Ultimately, despite the disrespectful behavior of the human beings, the plants took pity on them and offered themselves as the many medicines Cherokees know today. This story teaches not only the obligation of Cherokee people to respect our animal relatives (both by learning from past mistakes and in understanding the power that animals can wield), but also that we owe a debt of gratitude to the plants for coming to the people’s aid when they needed them most.

There are many other Cherokee stories about our relationships to the plant and animal world that I won’t relate here, but all of them describe in different ways the obligations that human beings have to respect the gifts that the Creator has given us. I return to the concept that my elders have stressed to me: If you don’t use them, the Creator will take them away. Many have told me stories of how they personally witnessed plants disappear over time when the people in their communities stopped using them. The wisdom in this saying teaches us that using the gifts the plants offer us is the best way to honor them. After all, to neglect something given freely and out of love is to be in poor relation. Herein lies a lesson that everyone can learn from and put into practice in their lives. This perspective urges us all to consider our interactions with the natural world as a reciprocal relationship rather than an impersonal exchange. It calls on us all to treat plants and other more-than-human beings as relatives deserving of respect and rights to live in good health.

I was honored to work with my elders and tribal resource managers on this agreement, and to participate

**FIGURE 2.** The Cherokee Medicine Keepers, University of Arizona research team, and Cherokee Nation staff at Buffalo National River.

Back row (left to right): Clint Carroll, Dawnena Squirrel, Feather Smith, Heather Hyealim Lim, Pat Gwin, Nancy Rackliff, Raylene Lafoon Vann, Gary Vann, Caven Clark, Christopher Sittler, Richard Stoffle, Kevin Daugherty, Suika Rivett. Front row (left to right): Phyllis Edwards, Bonnie Kirk, Anna Sixkiller, Mariah Albertie.



actively in the nation-to-nation relationship between the US federal government and my Cherokee Nation. I collaborated with a research team from the University of Arizona, who worked with the Medicine Keepers to collect information about each plant to be included in the agreement (as required by the federal gathering rule). This process respected the cultural protocols of Cherokee knowledge transmission by only requesting basic information about each plant and allowing the elders to discuss them according to their own comfort levels. During our field activity in the park in 2017, representatives of the Medicine Keepers identified 76 plants used by Cherokee people that will be available to Cherokee citizens who make a request to gather to the Cherokee Nation secretary of natural resources. In the agreement, park and tribal officials identified four different locations within Buffalo National River that are eligible for gathering activities. Annual consultation between the park and the Cherokee Nation will assess gathering activities so as to maintain the health of the plants and park lands.

Relatedly, the Medicine Keepers and I are actively conveying Cherokee environmental stewardship ethics and knowledge to younger generations. Along with a staff of tribal biologists, we are working with a cohort of five Cherokee students to train them in Cherokee knowledge and language, botany, biology, and tribal natural resource management strategies. This land-based education project, funded by grants from the National Science Foundation and the Indian Land Tenure Foundation,<sup>4</sup> aims to build a cohort of tribal environmental leaders that can creatively address future issues from culturally grounded perspectives. Significantly, students will be able to see the agreement enacted during an upcoming group visit to the park in spring 2020.

Throughout the course of our work at Buffalo National River, I witnessed the shared excitement between park managers who know the land and plants well, a dedicated research team from the University of Arizona who has years of experience working with Native people, and our tribal representatives and elders who were eager to participate for the wellbeing of the land and

our future generations. Some of our elders were able to see plants growing in the wild that they hadn't seen in years. As I watched them walk through the woods, it was like they were seeing old friends. This memory leaves me with a profound feeling of hope that through this historic agreement, our younger generations will also share the experience of our renewed connection to this place.

#### Endnotes

1. These phrases were taught to me by Cherokee National Treasure, Medicine Keeper, and first-language Cherokee speaker, Mr. John Ross.
2. This project was funded by the Midwest Regional Office of the National Park Service (NPS MWRO) and the Board of Regents at the University of Arizona through the School of Anthropology. An ethnobotanical study was developed at the request of NPS MWRO as part of its preparation for implementation of the "Gathering of Certain Plants or Plant Parts by Federally Recognized Indian Tribes for Traditional Purposes" rule, 36 CFR Part 2 (Code of Federal Regulations, title 32, sec. 2.6. 2016). This rule allows federally recognized tribes to gather plants within national parks with which they are traditionally associated. (FRS Project Code: 3011630, Award Number: P14AC01222, Project Number: UAZDS-421.)
3. See also the associated 30-minute video, "Cherokee Voices for the Land," on YouTube at [https://youtu.be/B2h\\_CUF9scc](https://youtu.be/B2h_CUF9scc).
4. For project details and updates, see <http://knowingtheland.edublogs.org>.

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