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Power and planning: a critical discourse analysis of tribal and non-tribal Oregon wildfire protection plans

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Abstract

Background Since the late 1800s, the US government has largely removed Indigenous fire stewardship practices from the landscape by implementing a top-down fire suppression system that criminalized traditional fire practices and denaturalized the role of fire in forested environments. A century of routine fire suppression produced dense, homogenous forests capable of sustaining high-intensity wildfire that exceeds the suppression capabilities of land management organizations in many regions, spurring federal leaders to modify management approaches. As part of this change, numerous federal policies and plans have advocated for further involvement of Native American tribes and incorporation of Indigenous knowledge within management decisions. These initiatives represent opportunities to simultaneously expand tribal burning rights and reduce wildfire risk, but imbalanced power dynamics stemming from the historic and ongoing colonization of tribal nations continue to limit successful collaboration. The nature of these power imbalances is multifaceted, and this paper interrogates the ideological forces that uphold the settler-colonial relationship. We conduct a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to analyze the discourses and frames used by tribal and non-tribal wildfire protection plans (WPPs), noting how different narratives are used to reinforce or contest common perceptions of wildfire and, more broadly, the legitimacy of a fire management system built on wildfire suppression and anti-Indigenous ideologies.

Results Our analysis reveals notable differences in how tribal and non-tribal plans (1) contextualize wildfire risk, (2) characterize wildfire itself, and (3) encourage wildfire risk reduction strategies. Non-tribal plans deployed relatively ahistorical, depoliticized narratives, whereas tribal plans used narratives that contested the legitimacy of settler authority and emphasized the sociopolitical dimensions of wildfire risk.

Conclusions We argue that wildfire planning is a site of discursive contention, where tribal and non-tribal plans compete to shape perceptions of wildfire history, contemporary risks, and more broadly, the legitimacy of the settler-colonial fire management system as a whole. Furthermore, we explain how the sampled plans converge with or diverge from dominant historic discourses that have substantially influenced environmental action and policy. We conclude by arguing that collaborative agreements involving tribes may present opportunities to reframe fire narratives and transfer authority to tribes seeking to exercise their sovereignty.

Keywords Wildfire, Collaboration, Discourse, Framing, Planning, Cross-cultural, Power, Tribes

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Resumen

Antecedentes Desde las postrimerías de los 1800 s, el gobierno de los EEUU ha removido mayoritariamente las prácticas y administración de las políticas indígenas de manejo del fuego de los paisajes, mediante la implementación de un sistema de supresión vertical —de arriba hacia abajo (*top-down*)— que criminalizó las prácticas de manejo del fuego tradicionales y desnaturalizó el rol del fuego en los ambientes forestales. Esta centuria de supresión rutinaria del fuego produjo bosques más densos, homogéneos y capaces de generar incendios de alta intensidad que exceden las capacidades de supresión de las organizaciones de administración de tierras en muchas regiones, impulsando a los líderes del gobierno federal a modificar sus estrategias de manejo del fuego. Como parte de este cambio, numerosos planes y políticas federales han abogado por un mayor compromiso de las tribus de americanos nativos y la incorporación del conocimiento indígena dentro de las decisiones de manejo. Estas iniciativas representan oportunidades para expandir simultáneamente los derechos de las tribus y reducir el riesgo de incendios, aunque la dinámica de desbalance del poder derivado de la colonización de las naciones tribales continúa limitando una colaboración más exitosa. La naturaleza de ese "desbalance del poder" es multifacética, y en este trabajo nos preguntamos sobre las fuerzas ideológicas que sostienen esta relación entre colonizadores y colonizados. Condujimos un análisis llamado Análisis del Discurso Crítico (*Critical Discourse Analysis,* CDA) para analizar los discursos y los marcos conceptuales de planes de protección contra el fuego (*Wildfire Protection Plans*, WPPs) llevados a cabo por tribus indígenas y aquellas agencias no indígenas, determinando cómo las diferentes narrativas son usadas para reforzar o responder a percepciones comunes de los incendios y, más ampliamente, la legitimidad de un sistema construido en base a la supresión e ideologías anti-indígenas.

Resultados Nuestro análisis reveló notable diferencias en cómo los planes tribales y no tribales 1) contextualizan el riesgo de incendios, 2) caracterizan el incendio o el fuego mismo, y 3) encaran las estrategias de reducción del riesgo de incendios. Los planes de las agencias no tribales despliegan narrativas relativamente históricas, despolitizadas, mientras que los planes tribales usan narrativas que confrontan la legitimidad de la autoridad de los colonizadores y enfatizan las dimensiones sociopolíticas del riesgo de incendios.

Conclusiones Argumentamos que el planeamiento en el tema incendios es un lugar de discusión controversial, donde los planes tribales y no tribales compiten para formar percepciones de la historia de los incendios, riesgos contemporáneos y más ampliamente, la legitimidad, como un todo, del sistema de manejo de fuego impuesto por los colonizadores. Además, explicamos cómo los planes de muestreo convergen o divergen de los discursos históricos dominantes que han influenciado la acción y las políticas ambientales. Concluimos arguyendo que los acuerdos colaborativos que implican a las tribus indígenas pueden presentar oportunidades para reformular las narrativas sobre los incendios y transferir la autoridad a las tribus que quieran ejercitar su soberanía.

Background

Since the 1800 s, the US government has largely excluded Native American tribes from wildfire planning efforts through legislative and organizational policies that criminalized Indigenous fire stewardship practices in favor of systematic wildfire suppression (Norgaard 2014; Pyne 2017; Boyd 2022). To effectively transform forested landscapes into vehicles for timber production, organizations like the United States Forest Service (USFS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) effectively normalized and institutionalized wildfire suppression at the expense of fire-inclusive practices such as cultural burning (Minor & Boyce 2018; Pyne 2017; Stephens & Ruth 2005; Hessburg & Agee 2003). The overuse of suppression in fire-prone regions, however, has backfired, as the absence of frequent, low-intensity fire has substantially altered forest ecologies throughout the US and increased their susceptibility to catastrophic megafires (Ryan et al. 2013). These high-severity fires require more labor and resources for suppression, continuing the feedback loop of suppression-dominant management (Hai et al. 2023). To compound the issue, forests have become increasingly developed with homes and recreational amenities, increasing the quantity of "high value" areas in need of protection (Paveglio et al. 2018). Problematically, institutional capacities for wildfire adaptation have been outpaced by growing risks to human values (Nielsen-Pincus et al. 2019; Fischer & Jasny 2017).

The growing wildfire problem in the Western US has received substantial attention from activists, policymakers, environmental managers, and media over the past few decades, placing pressure on federal agencies to expand and improve wildfire mitigation efforts. Over the past 25 years, the federal government has attempted to address capacity shortages through policies like the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (2003), the Cohesive

Strategy (2010), and the Wildfire Crisis Strategy (2024), among others. Notably, many of these initiatives also advocate for broader tribal collaboration, representing a shift in the federal government's tone on tribal stewardship. However, these initiatives have yet to come to fruition, as many political, legal, and cultural barriers continue to limit tribal participation and authority in collaborative spaces (Pinel & Pecos 2012; Reo et al. 2017). More broadly, the pro-suppression character of federal and institutional policy remains intact, which complicates the feasibility of expanding Indigenous fire stewardship on a meaningful scale (Boerigter et al. 2024).

Technical impediments to tribal collaboration such as capacity shortages have been discussed extensively within government and academic literature, but less attention has been given to the ideological differences that underlie the institutional policies and behaviors that undermine tribal authority (Christianson 2014; Reo et al. 2017). Tribal worldviews are often undervalued or *othered* by settler institutions (Cross 1997; Hankins & Ross 2012; Vinyeta 2022), and the technical issues that limit tribal involvement are superseded by a legacy of dismissiveness toward Indigenous knowledge and priorities. Without interrupting this colonial tradition, increasing tribal involvement in land management may be ineffective at best and co-optive of tribal initiatives at worst (Martinez et al. 2023; Nadasdy 2005).

We offer a critical perspective on contemporary efforts to expand tribal participation in wildfire planning, examining the ideological assumptions of wildfire planning discourses, and how they may impact the potential for tribal collaboration. In this paper, we conduct a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) on tribal and non-tribal wildfire protection plans (WPPs), which characterize wildfire-related problems and structure the implementation of wildfire risk reduction projects.

In the following, we provide a brief historical overview of the relationship between Native American tribes, the federal government, and wildfires. We then discuss the connections between power, discourse, and the environment, and their relevance to wildfire planning involving tribes. Our results detail the different frames used by WPPs, and we conclude by discussing the potential promises of narrative reframing and power-shifting collaborative agreements.

From Indigenous stewardship to bureaucratic management

Many Native American tribes share millennia-old relationships with fire and the landscapes of North America (Boyd 2022; Hankins 2024; Pyne 2017). Essays within Boyd's *Indians, Fire, and the Land in the Pacific Northwest* (Boyd 2022), for example, explain how the tribes of the PNW ignited low-intensity fires and stewarded lightning-induced fires to maintain open forest structures. Burning was (and still is) intricately connected to tribal cultures and traditions (Boyd 2022; Christianson 2014; Berkes 2017). For instance, Steen-Adams et al. (2019) describe how the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs would burn to facilitate huckleberry growth, a first food needed for religious rituals, gifting ceremonies, and rites of passage for youth. Burning the forest also reduced forest fuels and thus, the risk of hazardous wildfires. In this way, objectives like wildfire risk reduction were often embedded within multifaceted strategies that considered social needs, ecosystem health, and food availability (Quaempts et al. 2018, Mistry & Berardi 2016). Furthermore, intertribal conflicts and land disputes often supplanted the stewardship practices of one tribe with another's, creating a dynamic, heterogeneous landscape (Wilkinson (2012), Keeley 2002). The fluctuation of land tenure and stewardship practices of pre-colonial America contributed to ecologically diverse forests that were generally more resilient to wildfire, disease, and biodiversity loss (Boyd 2022; Turner et al. 2000). While tribes still tend to the forests of the PNW, the attempted genocide and displacement of many tribes have greatly reduced the amount of land stewarded by Native peoples (Dick et al. 2022; Christianson 2014; Norgaard 2014).

The European settlement of the PNW displaced many Indigenous peoples from their homelands, causing an abrupt change in forest stewardship and thus a significant ecological shift in forests (Lake et al. 2018). The material demands required to grow the American economy led the federal government to replace the heterogeneity of Indigenous stewardship practices with a standardized, top-down approach that sought to maximize the economic benefits provided by forested landscapes, primarily via timber and land development (Pyne 2017; Long & Lake 2018; Marks-Block & Tripp 2021; Hanberry et al. 2012; Covington et al. 2018). To protect timber and development investments, the USFS implemented organizational policies like the "10 AM" rule, which mandated that all wildfires were suppressed by 10 AM on the following day (Loveridge 1944). Without the presence of fire, forests became dense and brushy; analogously, they became less emblematic of Native priorities like food cultivation or hunting and more reflective of settler goals like timber production. In this sense, the forests of the US, as well as other colonized countries such as Canada and Australia, have become territorialized through top-down management decisions that remove Native influence and institute settler governing authority (Cary 2023).

Systematic wildfire suppression has had a particularly negative impact on North American tribes. Norgaard (2014) explains how outdated fire suppression policies

continue to criminalize the cultural burning practices of the Karuk tribe in Northern California. Restrictions on burning rights, particularly for tribes without reservations, have caused first food scarcities, loss of personal and communal self-determination, increases in dietary diseases, declines in mental health, and forced assimilation into Western culture. In short, wildfire and its presence/absence on the landscape carries a profound significance to many tribes for several cultural, spiritual, and environmental reasons.

Currently, Indigenous communities, politicians, and land managers across the continent are working to restore tribal relationships with fire, one of which involves building capacity and political leverage through federal-tribal collaboration (Diver 2016; Norgaard 2014, Lake & Christianson 2019). Policies like the Indian Self-Determination Act (1975) and the Tribal Forest Protection Act (2004) have strengthened tribal burning rights, but direct tribal authority is mostly limited to trust lands within reservation boundaries, restricting the scale of native stewardship on ceded lands and beyond (Wilkins & Stark 2017). On most public lands, suppression-oriented discourse and policy still guide forest management, which may complicate collaboration with tribes seeking to bring fire back to the land (Sherry et al. 2019, Marks-Block & Tripp 2021).

The ecological consequences of forest management bureaucratization and native displacement demonstrate that forests are cultural landscapes, where the biophysical makeup of forests becomes reflective of the cultural values and priorities that guide their management (Sherry et al. 2019). Thus, delegating management authority back to tribes has the potential to ignite a physical transition within US forests, where forest structures, ecological functions, and wildfire behavior, among other things, can be managed to more effectively reflect Native priorities and reduce wildfire risk in the process.

Collaborative governance and management of forested landscapes has been widely suggested as a means to share resources between tribes and non-tribal agencies to accomplish mutual goals (Pinel & Pecos 2012; Natcher et al. 2005). However, the realities of collaborative governance have not necessarily aligned with these ideals, in part because the distinct treaty rights and federal obligations owed to tribal nations are often overlooked, misunderstood, or undermined by non-tribal collaborators (Goschke 2016; Castro & Nielsen 2001; Nadasdy 2005). Furthermore, the extent of power sharing in collaborative agreements is often insufficient, as collaboration is typically structured around Western paradigms, protocols, and norms and sometimes involves vastly disproportionate finances, staff, and other resources between tribes and their non-tribal counterparts (Ranco et al. 2011; Reo et al. 2017). As a historical practice, collaboration has been anything but a panacea for tribes seeking to practice their sovereignty. Still, despite its flaws, shared governance has the potential to devolve more management authority to tribes—a point we discuss in more detail within our conclusion.

Power and discourse

Introducing more opportunities for Indigenous leadership, however, will require the active removal of narratives and ideologies that reinforce barriers to tribal involvement and reproduce the settler-colonial relationship at large. This study uses CDA to destabilize the narratives that uphold this relationship. Within the realm of wildfire planning, WPPs serve as a valuable form of discourse that articulate the narrative justifications behind wildfire risk mitigation projects.

CDA as a methodology is primarily concerned with the relationship between power and discourse, calling attention to dominant narratives that enable certain ideas and behaviors while suppressing others (Van Dijk 2015). We adopt Fairclough (2001)'s seminal approach to CDA, which claims that power is 1) the exertion of force on the social and physical environment, and 2) the articulated legitimization of this action. Discourse, according to Fairclough, is used to produce and legitimize social realities that structure collective interactions with the physical environment. For example, a wildfire manager may use scientific discourse regarding the ecological benefits of prescribed fire to justify the implementation of a prescribed burn near her community.

Discourses are often persuasive because they selectively frame information. Framing (depicted in Fig. 1) is the process by which information is selected, compiled, and articulated through stories, speeches, and literature to mobilize support for a framer's priorities (Tewksbury & Scheufele 2019; Entman 1993; Kaufman et al. 2003; Kaufman & Smith 1999; Slovic 2001). Similarly, framing involves *avoiding* contradictory or unnecessary information that may undermine or overcomplicate a framer's position. Frames often operate by characterizing some phenomenon as socially undesirable, blaming a perpetrator, and identifying the proper *fixes* and *fixers* (Altheide 1997). Thus, framing can be used to construct authority for the *fixers* of a problem (Steffek 2009), and more broadly, to influence how others perceive the environment, define problems, and rationalize solutions (Aggestam 2024; Kaufman et al. 2003; Van Gorp 2007).

Discursive framings are rooted in cultural ideologies, often subconsciously inherited through socialization and education (Kubal & Becerra 2014). Frames are constructed using group experiences, memories, traumas, and values, all of which share more similarities for

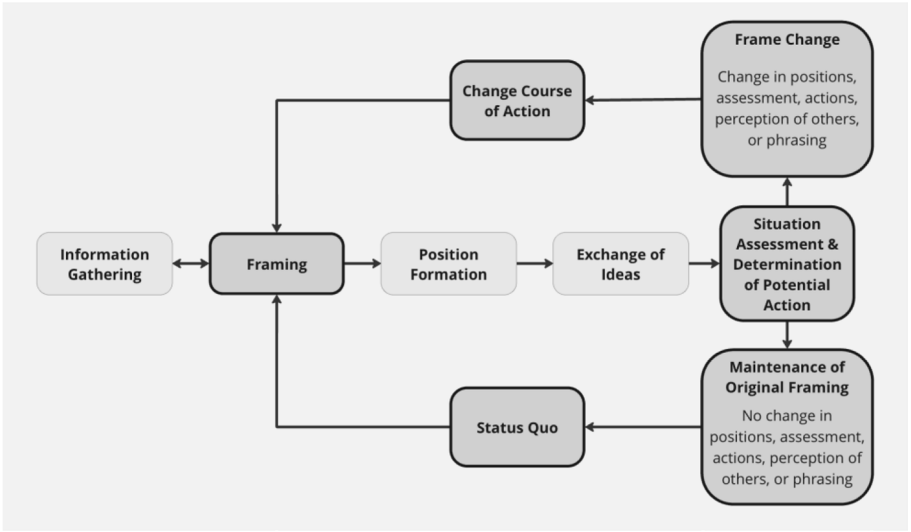

Fig. 1 A conceptual depiction of "framing", or the construction of perceived problems and solutions. Adapted from Kaufman et al. (2003)

people of the same culture. Frames are also intergenerational, given that they are often informed by events that occurred before a person's lifetime, tethering individual identity to group historical narratives (Gongaware 2003). The pervasiveness of group narratives is largely dependent on a group's sociopolitical positioning, where groups with more political influence can more easily embed their ideologies within power structures that shape socio-ecological environments (Fairclough 2001; Boerigter et al. 2024). If unchallenged, these narratives may appear objective or natural to social order. However, widely accepted frames can be contested by resistant discourses articulated by less powerful groups (Bartlett 2012). In this way, the power to frame is neither positive nor negative, but instead, a tool that can be wielded simultaneously by both dominant and disenfranchised groups to influence normative beliefs about what actions and actors are legitimate (Morrison et al. 2017).

Discursive constructions of land and wildfire

Discourses in wildfire protection planning play a critical role in structuring wildfire management. The federal government's control over forested landscapes is largely legitimized via environmental narratives (Vinyeta 2022). While an exhaustive tracing of these discourses is beyond the scope of this paper, the *wilderness myth* provides a topically relevant example of how discourses construct authority for certain groups to implement their will on the environment.

The *wilderness myth* suggests that European settlers found pristine, empty landscapes as they settled the Western US, despite the fact that Indigenous peoples inhabited and actively managed many of these landscapes since time immemorial (Nash 2014; Boyd 2022). Only after the forced displacement and genocide of Indigenous tribes were Western landscapes available for settlement (Vinyeta 2022). Thus, the *wilderness myth* can be understood as a discourse that legitimizes settler claims to Indigenous territories and silences historical accounts that describe the violence of settlement and tribal displacement (Gomez-Pompa & Kaus 1992). Influencing many prominent figures of the preservationist movement, such as John Muir, Theodore Roosevelt, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, among others, this ideology was effectively institutionalized into US policy, shaping perceptions of land ownership and management for years to come (Deur and James 2020; Callicott 2000).

Many Indigenous academics, historians, and authors argue that the *wilderness myth* naturalizes past and ongoing injustices faced by Indigenous peoples, erodes Indigenous claims to sovereignty, and limits Indigenous influence on natural environments across the continent (Deur and James 2020; Whyte et al. 2019; Gilio-Whitaker 2019; Denevan 1992). Combating the erasure of Indigenous histories, these resistant discourses have been leveraged to influence federal policy regarding tribal sovereignty, natural resources, and traditional stewardship practices. The *wilderness myth* and the resistance to it exemplify how groups leverage discourses to shape sociopolitical power dynamics and the environment itself.

Wildfire protection plans as sources of wildfire discourse

In this paper, we analyze WPPs as discursive frames that structure wildfire management. The perception of what wildfire *is*, what consequences it produces, and how it should be addressed is influenced by both dominant and

resistant discourses. Using CDA, we analyze the frames used by tribal Multi-Hazard Mitigation Plans (MHMPs) and non-tribal Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs), which influence perceptions of wildfire and guide implementation of wildfire risk mitigation projects.

CWPPs are locally crafted documents that establish planning contexts, define community risks, and direct future strategies. The Healthy Forest Restoration Act (2003), which encouraged the development of CWPPs, requires planners to collaborate, target hazardous fuels, and reduce structural ignitability. However, these requirements are relatively flexible to interpretation at the local level, encouraging local planners to address the specific needs of their communities (Jakes et al. 2011). Generally, plan contributors include fire departments, county commissioners, foresters, city planners, and emergency managers, among others, each of which contributes different perspectives based on their organizational responsibilities and missions. Our sample also includes tribal MHMPs, which contain local plans for mitigating hazardous risks like wildfires, floods, and mudslides. MHMPs stem from the Disaster Mitigation Act (2000), which offers funding to communities that complete an MHMP. For most tribes in Oregon, MHMPs are the primary source of wildfire-related information, as most tribes have not adopted CWPPs. Despite their differences, CWPPs and MHMPs are comparable documents, as they (1) stem from similar policy mechanisms, and (2) include community-level articulations of wildfire risk, local vulnerabilities, and suggested mitigation strategies.

Ultimately, we explore the following questions: (1) How do tribal and non-tribal Oregon WPPs discursively construct the context, causes, and consequences of wildfire risk? and (2) How are WPPs informed by pre-existing discourses?

Methodology

Critical discourse analysis

CDA is the study of discourses and their role in producing social order. Fairclough (2001) emphasizes the fundamental attachment between discourse and physical changes to the environment, making CDA not just a theoretical exercise, but an active attempt at reshaping material conditions and dismantling harmful systems of domination.

As shown in Fig. 2, CDA involves three phases: *description, interpretation,* and *explanation*. *Description* analyzes linguistic features of a text such as overemphasis, sentence structure, and symbolism. *Interpretation* analyzes the intended audience and medium of communication. *Explanation* situates discourses in the broader sociopolitical context in which they have been produced,

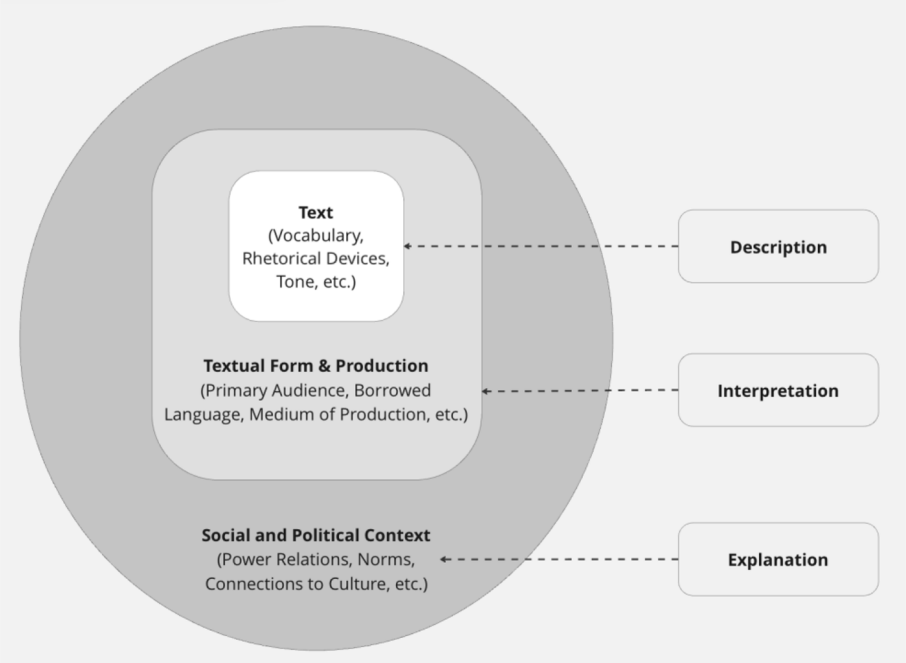

Fig. 2 A diagram of the three phases of CDA. *Description* involves the analysis of texts themselves, while the subsequent phases expand beyond a text. *Interpretation* considers the form and production of a text, and *explanation* connects a text to the large sociocultural context in which it was produced. Adapted from Fairclough (2001)

drawing connections between texts to past discourses and analyzing their role in reproducing social order.

Study context and sampling

Our sample (shown in Table 1) consists of six non-tribal CWPPs and three tribal MHMPs from Northeast, Central, and Western Oregon. These three regions all have extensive, complicated histories involving tribes, settlers, and wildfires, making them quality places to study wildfire discourse. All study regions contain two counties and one reservation, and all sampled non-tribal plans cover areas that contain ceded lands from present-day tribal nations.

We completed a CDA of the sampled WPPs, conducting multiple in-depth readings and codings of each plan, followed by critical, interdiscursive comparisons between plans. Only fire-related and general information from the tribal MHMPs were analyzed, as the sections related to other hazards were not relevant to our research questions. Common themes, differences, and supporting evidence were identified by the lead author and discussed by all co-authors. For a detailed summary of our sampling, coding, and analysis procedures, see Appendix 2.

Reflexivity and interpretation

Our results explain the differences in discursive framing between tribal and non-tribal plans. However, this paper is not meant to be prescriptive about how a plan *should be* crafted, nor is it meant to make generalizable statements about wildfire planners from tribal or non-tribal backgrounds. CDA is an interpretive methodology, avoiding the notion that there is a universal, generalizable truth to be found and applied across contexts. Instead, we analyze how perceived truths (e.g., the belief that wildfires are inherently dangerous) are produced and shaped by socio-political forces, and how these forces shape fire environments in turn. Like the plans themselves, our writing is informed by our past experiences, disciplinary training, and cultural upbringing, all of which influence our research. The authors of this paper descend from both Native and non-Native backgrounds, and our research has been influenced by a variety of Native and non-Native perspectives. Our goal is not to "accurately" reflect or judge the intentions of WPP authors, but to situate institutionalized discourses within the social and historical contexts that influence their production.

Results

Reducing wildfire losses was a common goal among all WPPs, and consequently, most plans contained more similarities than differences. However, the differences between plans detailed below demonstrate that tribal and non-tribal plans conceptualize wildfire differently. Specifically, we found that our sample of tribal and non-tribal WPPs diverged most prominently in their (1) historical framings of wildfire, (2) characterizations of wildfire itself, and (3) approaches to addressing risk. In the following, we provide narrative descriptions and quotations as evidence of these discursive dimensions, which are illustrated in Fig. 3.

Framing wildfire history

The tribal and non-tribal WPPs contextualized wildfire using different historical narratives. Two of the three tribal plans contextualized wildfire risk within the historical context of colonization, whereas the non-tribal plans included more abbreviated historical narratives that obscure historical accounts of tribal displacement (Appendix 1).

Using tribal histories to frame wildfire risk

The tribal plans in our sample (specifically the CTUIR and CTSI Tribal MHMPs) contextualized wildfire risk as a symptom of tribal displacement and the subsequent disruptions to the natural fire regimes of Oregon. The CTSI Tribal MHMP provided detailed context about the historic fire regime of the region, the abrupt leadership change during colonization, and the effects of fire suppression:

> *Our old people of the early settlement period knew wildfires. Much more of the country had been maintained with "prescribed burns" used to keep berry picking places cleaned up and in peak production, hunting areas/forage good, traditional food patches such as Camas, Tarweed Seed, Acorns (and many*

Table 1 The study sample includes six non-tribal CWPPs and three tribal MHMPs from 3 different regions of Oregon

Region	Tribal plans	Non-tribal plans	
Western Oregon	Confederated Tribes of the Siletz Indians Multihazard Mitigation Plan (CTSI Tribal MHMP) (2020)	Lincoln County CWPP (2018)	Tillamook County CWPP (2006)
Northeast Oregon	Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation Multihazard Mitigation Plan (CTUIR Tribal MHMP) (2016)	Umatilla County CWPP (2005)	Union County CWPP (2016)
Central Oregon	Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Multihazard Mitigation Plan (CTWS Tribal MHMP) (2016)	Jefferson County CWPP (2016)	Wasco County CWPP (2024)

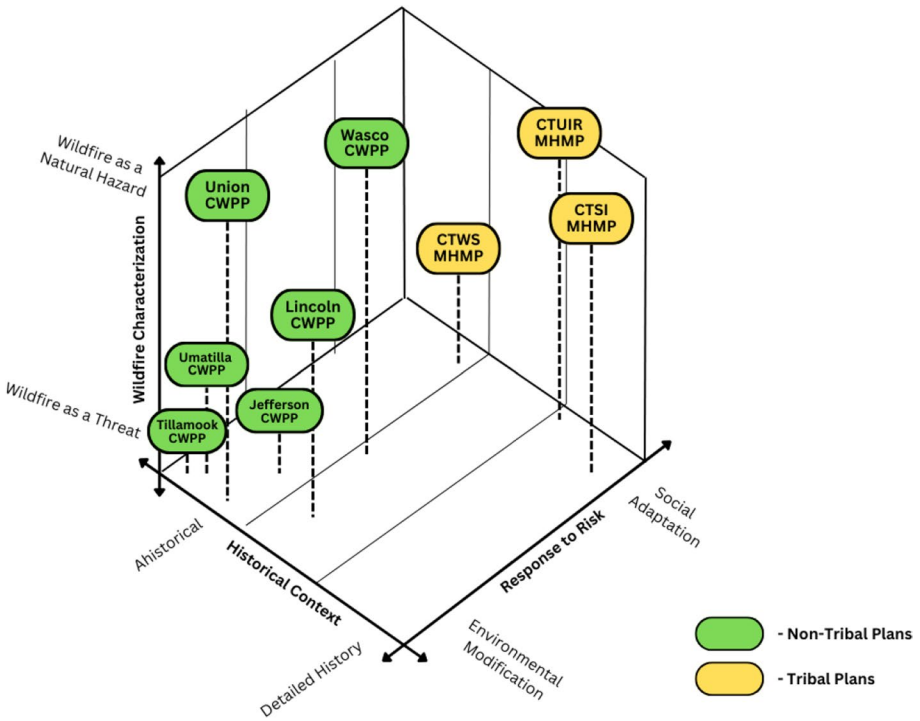

Fig. 3 A conceptual diagram of the sampled WPPs, as they relate to the three themes in our results. Each plan is situated along three different spectrums—*Historical Context* (ranging from "Ahistorical" to "Detailed History"), *Wildfire Characterization* (ranging from "Wildfire as a Threat" to "Wildfire as a Natural Hazard"), and *Response to Risk* (ranging from "Environmental Modification" to "Social Adaptation"). In general, non-tribal plans included abbreviated regional histories, characterized wildfire as a threat, and advocated for environmental modification to reduce risk; tribal plans generally included detailed historical accounts, characterized wildfire as a natural hazard, and advocated for social adaptation to reduce risk

> *others) in peak production. The epidemics reduced populations so drastically that much of the country was suddenly not maintained—became quickly brushy—full of accumulating ladder fuels—that had been frequently handled with low intensity burns at appropriate seasons before. (p. 71)*
> *–CTSI Tribal MHMP*

The plan repeatedly connects disruptions of the historic fire regime to the sociocultural well-being of the CTSI, highlighting the interconnectedness of community and ecosystem health. They use pointed language to describe settlers as overtly careless about the CTSI's well-being. By linking colonization to contemporary concerns about first foods and community safety, the CTSI frame wildfire risk as a consequence of routine wildfire suppression and, more broadly, connect the legacy of colonization to the degradation of Tribal resources.

The CTUIR Tribal MHMP also characterizes Tribal displacement as a primary disruptor of healthy fire regimes:

> *Many historical references document the use of broadcast burning by Tribal members for managing root and berry harvesting areas as well as grazing areas. However, with the onset of western settlements, the diminishment of the Aboriginal Title lands to a much smaller defined reservation and the federal government's sale of reservation lands into non-Indian ownership, the area available for subsistence living was greatly diminished. Having such a restricted area for First Foods habitat heightens the impact of wildland fires to the CTUIR Tribal culture and traditions. (p. 59)*
> *–CTUIR Tribal MHMP*

Like the CTSI, the CTUIR explain contemporary wildfire risk as a byproduct of Tribal displacement.

Compared to the other tribal plans, the CTWS MHMP's discussion of colonization was minimal. While they mention pre-contact stewardship practices, they do not discuss the impacts of Tribal displacement on wildfire behavior. Instead, they include more recent accounts of CTWS economic development over the past 100 years.

Ahistorical narratives in non-tribal plans

The non-tribal plans included more abbreviated historical narratives. The extent of historical contextualization

varied among non-tribal plans, but no plans incorporated much detail about their tribal neighbors, the lands they ceded, or how colonization impacted wildfire risk. The Tillamook County CWPP, for example, included only the following information on the former and current Indigenous inhabitants of Tillamook County:

> *Tillamook County was established December 15th, 1853 and was named after the Killamook Indians. The first settlers arrived to find much of what is found today with its rich natural resources. Home of the famous Tillamook Cheese, the county is known for its many dairies. (p. 6)*
> *–Tillamook County CWPP*

Here, the "Killamook Indians" are acknowledged more as a historical relic than as the ancestors of present-day tribes that continue to live nearby—the Tillamook are ancestral to many enrollees of the CTSI, the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, and the Clatsop-Nehalem Confederated Tribes, all of which have administrative offices only a few miles away from Tillamook County today. Unlike the CTSI plan, the Tillamook County CWPP does not discuss the interactions between the Tillamook and the settlers that would shape the fire behavior of the region.

Some of the non-tribal plans included regional ecological histories, but their historical accounts conceal the identities of those responsible for undesired ecological changes. The Union County CWPP, for instance, condemns the routine suppression of wildfires with a particularly passive voice:

> *The wildland fire environment, particularly over the last 40 years, is inconsistent with historic stand conditions for multiple reasons. First, with the amount of successful fire suppression, it has altered fire size and intensities since the 1900's. If left unimpeded, these suppressed fires would have likely been more frequent, low severity, landscape size fires providing a cleansing of forest stands. Successful suppression has resulted in fire regime changes from relatively frequent intervals to much longer intervals with higher severity (significant mortality) impacts to overstory vegetation that historically would have experienced low levels of mortality. (p. 105)*
> *-Union County CWPP*

Despite its critical tone, this passage uses a passive voice, allowing the authors to describe the consequences of wildfire *suppression* without attaching an identity to the wildfire *suppressors,* such as the USFS, BLM, etc. This framing rhetorically divorces past management mistakes from the still-existing organizations that made them, creating a historical smokescreen that distorts the past and protects present-day institutional authority.

Similarly, non-tribal plans used selective language to describe pre-suppression era wildfire conditions, avoiding mention of the Indigenous stewards that created the conditions endorsed by many plans:

> *When early explorers, missionaries, and settlers first entered the Blue Mountains in the mid-1800s, they encountered a vegetation mosaic that was the result of longterm wildfire interaction. Many areas were dominated by open, park-like forests of ponderosa pine, often with a luxuriant undergrowth of tall grasses reaching as high as their horse's belly. Those attractive landscapes had been created and maintained by low-intensity surface fires occurring at frequent intervals, usually every 8–20 years. (p. 225)*
> *-Union County CWPP*

In this passage, the wildfire resiliency lauded by the plan is disconnected from the tribes who cultivated it, suggesting that these conditions were produced without intentional human influence. Furthermore, the plan does not discuss how colonizers disrupted Indigenous fire stewardship or institutionalized wildfire suppression.

Some non-tribal plans, such as the Jefferson County CWPP, used slightly more specific language about historic wildfire suppression, but like other non-tribal plans, it omitted the influence of Indigenous fire stewardship: "For thousands of years wildland fires have moved across Oregon's landscape. In the early 1900's, European settlers began to suppress these fires resulting in unnatural fuels buildup" (p. 9, Jefferson County CWPP). Here, they acknowledge European settlers as the conduits of wildfire suppression and fuel accumulation, but do not recognize the relationship between the fires that "moved across Oregon's landscape" and their Indigenous stewards.

Characterizing wildfire

The tribal and non-tribal plans also used different frames to characterize wildfire itself. Non-tribal plans tended to frame wildfire as a threat to human values, whereas tribal plans tended to frame wildfire as a natural hazard.

Wildfire as a threat

Most non-tribal plans imbued wildfire with a primarily threatening or destructive character. Consider the following: "Wildland fires require some type of suppression response because they are burning out of control or are threatening to spread out of control" (p. 37, Umatilla County CWPP). Here, wildfire is characterized as incapable of controlling itself, requiring human intervention to curb its destructiveness. Note the negatively connotated phrases like "threatening" and "out of control"

used to imbue wildfire with qualities of malevolence and irrationality.

Similarly, many non-tribal plans characterized wildfire as antithetical to human values like infrastructure, homes, and natural resources. For example, the Jefferson County CWPP pits wildfire against estates developed in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI): "Fire coming out of the canyon could create a problem; however, Jefferson County Fire Department (JCFD) forces should have the ability to mitigate and protect [from] a fire moving towards Shamrock Estates" (p. 41, Jefferson County CWPP). Notice that this passage problematizes wildfire itself rather than the development of fire-prone landscapes, suggesting that the estates have an inherent right to exist on the landscape, while fire does not. This denaturalizes the role of fire on the landscape, marks it as a target, and deflects attention away from other sources of risk.

Analogously, the Jefferson County CWPP included a vivid description of a hypothetical wildfire disaster:

> *When an east wind and typical summer conditions exist, a canopy fire traveling up from the east could not be extinguished by ground crews until the fire travels to lighter fuels. The flying brands and embers raining down as well as the heavy smoke accompanied by low visibility, difficult breathing conditions would keep the entire JCFD in structure protection mode until the fire passes the development. (p. 40)*
> *–Jefferson County CWPP*

This passage includes embellished imagery of "flying brands and embers raining down," "heavy smoke," "low visibility," and "difficult breathing conditions," cueing the reader to imagine a life-threatening situation. Like other non-tribal plans, this plan uses fear-based language to describe wildfire. Most non-tribal plans acknowledged that wildfires are natural to Western US forests but still tended to characterize wildfire as inherently destructive.

The Wasco County CWPP was the main exception to this pattern. This plan, developed in 2024, was far less antagonistic toward wildfire, describing it as a natural phenomenon with destructive potential. Wildfire hazard, which was differentiated from wildfire itself, was explained as the interaction between human values and wildfire. See the following segment from the plan's introduction:

> *[O]n August 13, 2020, the Mosier Creek fire broke out, burning 28 structures, including eight homes [...]. Though it was contained in about a week, almost 1,000 acres of rural residential and forest lands were impacted. A few days later, another fire sparked evacuations in the west end of The Dalles, and the White River fire reached 17,442 acres in the Mt Hood National Forest and adjacent private lands prompting evacuation alerts in South County [...]. These served as a powerful reminder of fire's role on the landscape [...]. Although wildfire has shaped the region's landscapes for millennia, the 2020 wildfire season underscored the importance of planning, collaboration, and action to address future incidents. (p. 1)*
> *–Wasco County CWPP*

While this passage recounts a frightening situation, it explicitly guides any potential fear toward support for human adaptation. The language here is similar to the fear-based language used in other non-tribal plans, but contains some subtle, yet notable distinctions. For instance, they state that fire has shaped Western landscapes for millennia, characterizing it as common and natural rather than villainous. The authors also express humility by stating that the 2020 wildfires were a"powerful reminder of fire's role on the landscape," implying that the county had failed to perceive their limited ability to control fire, and as a result, experienced catastrophic losses. This passage encourages the reader to revere the power of wildfire and understand the limits of human control.

Wildfire as a natural hazard

Tribal plans tended to characterize wildfire as a natural hazard, similar to other potentially destructive weather events. The CTUIR Tribal MHMP, for example, acknowledged that wildfire can produce both desirable and undesirable effects:

> *Hazardous events happen somewhere in the world every day. Whether such events become a disaster depends on whether there are injuries, deaths or significant property, natural resource or cultural damage. (p. 47)*
>
> *–CTUIR Tribal MHMP*

The CTUIR describe how wildfires may impact first foods and community safety, but their warnings avoid an overt antagonization of wildfire. In the previous quote, they explicitly differentiate hazards, such as wildfire, from disasters, such as loss of life or property. This distinction characterizes wildfire not as *inherently* threatening but *potentially* threatening without sufficient preparation, reflecting a more complex view of wildfire that encourages adaptation and preparedness rather than fear.

Furthermore, the tribal plans framed wildfire as an ecological necessity, staking ecosystem health on the

presence of fire. The CTSI, for instance, resisted the idea that wildfires are inherently destructive, implying that fire is not the problem, but part of the solution to addressing risk. They complemented this idea by characterizing risk as an overlap between natural hazards and human development:

> *In addition to wildland/urban interface fires, Oregon experiences wildland fires that do not threaten structures, and also occasionally has prescribed fires. The principal type affecting Oregon communities is interface fire, which occurs where wildland and developed areas intermingle with both vegetation and structures combining to provide fuel. As more people have moved into wildland interface areas, the number of large wildfires impacting homes has escalated dramatically. (p. 142)*
> *–CTSI Tribal MHMP*

Notice the last sentence, in which they describe risk as originating from WUI development rather than from wildfire itself. While subtle, this passage contrasts with the previous example from the Jefferson County CWPP, in which wildfire was characterized as a problem *for* estates in the WUI.

The CTWS Tribal MHMP, while slightly more antagonistic toward wildfire than other tribal plans, indicated that wildfire is not inherently threatening, but hazardous because of its potential to consume structures and human lives. The plan repeatedly articulates that the "threat" of wildfire originates from living in wildfire-prone landscapes, rather than from wildfire itself:

> *These factors combined with periods of population growth and development intensification can lead to increasing risk of hazards, threatening loss of life, property and long-term economic disruption if land management is inadequate. (p. 133)*
> *–CTWS Tribal MHMP*

The CTWS plan characterizes risk as the intermingling of natural hazards and human values, and thus, avoids describing wildfire as anything more than a natural phenomenon.

Addressing risk

Tribal and non-tribal plans also diverged in their suggestions for addressing wildfire risk. Tribal plans encouraged community adaptation to wildfire through social mechanisms like mutual aid, whereas non-tribal plans recommended environmental modification.

Mitigating risk through community adaptation

Tribal plans encouraged community resilience as a means to mitigate wildfire risk. Consistent with tribal framings of wildfire as a natural hazard, their approach to reducing risk consisted of "reduc[ing] the area where hazards and vulnerable systems overlap," (p. 24, CTWS Tribal MHMP). Accordingly, tribal plans placed a stronger emphasis on addressing social vulnerabilities compared to non-Tribal plans. The CTUIR Tribal MHMP also embodied this sentiment:

> *Resiliency is the ability to return to normal performance levels following a high impact/low probability disruption. Applying this notion of resiliency involves two things: mobilizing the means to reduce vulnerabilities and increasing the capacity to swiftly bounce back from major man-made or natural disasters. (p. 13)*
> *-CTUIR Tribal MHMP*

The tribal plans in our sample did not ignore the necessity of wildfire suppression and fuel manipulation under appropriate circumstances, but they contextualized these tactics within a multipronged approach that balances community preparation, ecosystem restoration, and fuel reductions.

Furthermore, the tribal plans framed social adaptation as a moral imperative to reduce risk for vulnerable populations. The CTUIR and CTWS plans discussed how wildfire exposure depends on factors like socioeconomic status, ability, age, and race. These differences and how they are planned for, according to the tribal plans, can determine whether a wildfire becomes a disaster:

> *A disproportionate [disaster] burden is placed upon special needs groups, particularly children, the elderly, the disabled, minorities, and low-income persons [...]. [I]t is essential that CTWS consider both immediate and long-term socio-demographic implications of hazard resilience. (p. 72)*
> *–CTWS Tribal MHMP*

The CTWS devote a section of their plan to mitigating risk for vulnerable groups, explaining how wildfire exposure changes depending on socioeconomic factors. In this way, wildfire destruction is framed as both a political and environmental issue, in that the ability to adapt to environmental hazards is directly tied to systemic social issues like racism, economic inequality, and ableism.

To address the political drivers of wildfire exposure, the CTSI called for an inclusive, diverse planning process:

> *A successful planning process involves bringing tribal members, such as tribal leaders, tribal elders, and other partners together to discuss their knowledge, their perception of risk, and how to meet their needs as part of the process. This inclusive process works within the traditions, culture, and methods*

> *most suitable to a tribal government, so that participants better understand the unique vulnerabilities to the tribal planning area and can develop relevant mitigation actions. (p. 5)*
> *–CTSI Tribal MHMP*

Like the CTUIR, the CTSI's proposed response to wildfire risk was primarily social in nature. Notably, they tie the social emphasis of their plan to CTSI traditions and culture, rhetorically connecting social adaptation to a shared identity amongst Tribal members. The CTUIR employed a similar framing, highlighting a "cultural ethic" that intertwines the well-being of all Tribal members together:

> *Although not a formal policy, program, or procedure, the enrolled Tribal members of the CTUIR have cultural ties to one another that bring members of the Reservation together to assist during times of need. Caring for one another is a cultural ethic that needs to be recognized as a "post-disaster" response. (p. 147)*
> *–CTUIR Tribal MHMP*

The CTUIR emphasize the importance of social support networks, which strengthen capacities for disaster preparation, evacuation, and recovery (McGee & Christianson 2021). They imply that CTUIR enrollees share a responsibility to protect each other, tied together by millennia-old traditions. They also critique normative perceptions of post-disaster response, arguing they devalue the importance of social adaptation. This critique emphasizes the idea that risk mitigation is largely a social practice.

Mitigating wildfire risk by altering wildfire behavior

Non-tribal plans mostly emphasized the alteration of wildfire behavior by controlling human ignitions, expanding thinning operations, creating defensible space, and suppressing wildfires, rather than addressing social vulnerabilities. Consider the following example from the Tillamook County CWPP:

> *Humans will always be the major contributing factor to fire starts during all weather conditions. Of the three fire behavior components (fuel, weather, topography), fuels are the one variable that humans can easily influence and modify. This plan is aimed at reducing fire effects by reducing fuel loading as well as educating the public on wildland fire prevention. A reduction in fuel loading will create conditions that are essential to safety and efficiency in fire suppression efforts. (p. 6)*
> *–Tillamook County CWPP*

Here, fuel alterations are centered as the primary mechanism for reducing wildfire risk. The role of human ignitions and public education is also articulated in the previous quote, but mostly for the sake of controlling ignitions.

A similar framing is used in the Jefferson County CWPP, in which the authors praise communities that have completed thinning projects:

> *In 2010-11, a massive CWPP fuel treatment project vastly improved escape routes for civilians and access for fire departments. The home survivability for the area has increased many times over because of the fuel treatment. [...] We hope to repeat this same success in other problematic areas of our County. This project stands as an effective example of a CWPP success. (p. 36)*
> *–Jefferson County CWPP*

Here, the Jefferson County CWPP categorizes certain areas as "successful" or "problematic" depending on the amount of fuels surrounding them. Categorizing communities in this way is understandable, but the plan's risk assessments appear to be narrower than those of their tribal counterparts, given that social vulnerabilities are mostly overlooked.

The Union County CWPP takes a similar stance, declaring fuel reduction as a "common cause":

> *Since 2005, several thousand acres of fuels reduction have been accomplished in Union County for wildland fire mitigation near communities. This marks the first step for local agencies and landowners in progress toward collectively working together for a common cause. This cause must be carried forward to areas that are still at risk while preserving investments already established. (p. 259)*
> *–Union CWPP*

Union County identifies fuel reductions as a "common cause" which contrasts with the CTUIR's "cultural ethic" of mutual support amongst Tribal members. While these unifying sentiments are not necessarily incompatible, the difference between the two indicates that tribal and non-tribal planners may have fundamentally different ideas about how risk should be mitigated.

The Wasco County CWPP was the main exception to this pattern amongst non-tribal plans. They stressed the balance of community adaptation and fuel alteration using a multipronged approach:

> *Restoring landscapes to a resilient state and promoting fire's natural role in ecosystems where appropriate must be an integral part of increasing the county's resilience to wildfire and becoming fire adapted.*

> *To achieve this, an ecosystem-based approach to fire management that incorporates prescribed fire in overall land management planning objectives is important in achieving the desired fire effects and mitigating undesirable fire effects on the ecosystem and the public. (p. 42)*
> *–Wasco County CWPP*

Notice that this plan, like the tribal plans, emphasizes socio-ecological resilience rather than control of wildfire itself, encouraging a combination of ecosystem restoration, prescribed fire, and post-wildfire recovery. Unlike the tribal plans, however, the Wasco County CWPP's discussion of social vulnerabilities was relatively limited. They acknowledged that wildfire exposure varies across demographics but lacked an analysis of *how* wildfire impacts different groups. The plan mostly portrayed "the public" and their exposure to wildfire in general terms, flattening differences in risk for groups of different ethnicities, financial capacities, ages, and abilities.

Discussion

While all plans prioritized the protection of human life and assets, tribal and non-tribal planners used different frames to characterize and contextualize wildfire. These differences reflect ideological discontinuities between tribal and non-tribal planners, which may complicate collaborative wildfire planning. While different communities, tribal and non-tribal alike, are not monolithic, similarities manifested within both groups of plans, suggesting that tribal affiliation (or the lack thereof) affects how wildfire plans are articulated. Tribes across Oregon have different cultural traditions, relationships to non-tribal institutions, and geographical surroundings, but many have shared experiences around forced displacement, colonization, and fire exclusion (Boyd 2022), which likely shape wildfire planning rhetoric. Inversely, many non-tribal planners are representatives of government agencies, which influence their framings of wildfire. Non-tribal WPPs appear to be molded by pervasive, institutionalized narratives that erase tribal histories and antagonize wildfire, and tribal WPPs resist these narratives by recontextualizing wildfire risk as a symptom of tribal displacement and settler-colonial forest management.

Historical framing

Tribal and non-tribal plans used different historical frames to contextualize wildfire; tribal plans incorporated detailed histories of colonization, tribal displacement from traditional lands, and wildfire suppression, whereas non-tribal plans included brief, general, and comparatively depoliticized historical narratives, seldom grappling with tribal displacement and its transformation of regional ecologies and fire regimes. This ahistorical slant has been found in other studies of non-tribal plans, such as Jacobson et al. (2022), which found that Colorado CWPPs avoided historical details about the state's history of wildfire suppression.

The differences in historical framing reflect the pervasiveness of Western discourses from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries surrounding land ownership and management authority. Settlers and the US nation state have long mobilized discourses of displacement that, among other things, discount the ubiquitous Indigenous presence and ecological footprint across the continent as justification for the removal of Indigenous peoples from their traditional homelands (Deur and James 2020). These discourses both reflect and enhance emergent accumulations of power by Western institutions over the past few centuries. In this way, discourses like the *wilderness myth* have been weaponized to substantiate the legitimacy of Euro-American territorial claims and to undermine competing claims by Indigenous societies seeking to retain their presence, title, and traditional management practices (Deur 2002). As suggested by Gongaware (2003)'s proposition that frames are intergenerational, the inclusion of these discourses in contemporary wildfire plans is not likely a conscious decision made by non-tribal planners to suppress tribal histories; rather, their inclusion reflects the hegemonic nature of these discourses themselves across time, as they reshape historical memory in the image of colonizers' agendas (Raissouni 2021; Kaplan 1996). Discourses of displacement have so aggressively displaced Indigenous presence, practice, and knowledge throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that contemporary understandings of wildfire history are riddled with tacit contestations of Indigenous power and knowledge. This pattern has become normalized to the point where the "default" ways of writing WPPs omit tribal histories, despite their relevance to regional fire ecologies. In this way, historical discourses of displacement are insidious and continue to undermine tribal decision-making by limiting the comprehension of Indigenous perspectives, history, and practices for everyone involved– academics, agency staff, and very often, tragically, even Indigenous people themselves. Consequently, the ahistorical narratives in our sample of non-tribal plans should not be interpreted as conscious decisions to erase tribal histories, but instead, as discursive ancestors of settler narratives that have been institutionalized and mobilized through centuries of settler policy and environmental action. This speaks to the totalizing force of institutionalized discourses of displacement like the *wilderness myth*, where its ideas create a widespread form of tunnel vision for wildfire planners,

limiting their perception of histories, ideas, or concepts that contest the legitimacy of settler occupation (Deur 2002; Kaplan 1996; Raissouni 2021). These types of narratives have been used to further colonial aims around the world (Behera 2022; Powell 2012; Mills 2005) The omission of tribal histories found in our study represents a continuation of this pattern, naturalizing the settler occupation of Native lands and reproducing the institutional environments that enable anti-Indigenous policies to come to fruition (Coulthard 2014).

The historical frames used by the tribal plans in our sample (aside from the CTWS Tribal MHMP) are more critical of Western institutions and their efforts to control fires, Indigenous peoples, and Indigenous practices—explaining how these institutions exacerbated wildfire risk for tribal communities. By recounting pre-contact stewardship, the disruption of these practices, and the ecological consequences of colonization, the tribal plans contest the dominance of settler narratives. In lieu, they rhetorically position Indigenous peoples as foundational and integral to the landscapes and ecologies being planned for, and frame non-tribal institutions as disruptive, recent occupiers of tribal homelands. In this way, tribal plans discursively oppose settler discourses and the erasure of tribal histories prior to European contact. This finding is consistent with Mouffe's (2013) argument that resistant discourses tend to denaturalize dominant discourses by making visible the traces of power that might otherwise go unnoticed.

The differences in historical framing used by tribal and non-tribal plans in our sample demonstrate that active attempts to erase Indigenous peoples and cultures for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have deeply influenced environmental discourses, just as they have profoundly altered the fire ecologies of the PNW in favor of timber-related priorities (Deur 2002; Boyd 2022). In this way, WPPs are a site of discursive contention, where settlers and tribes rearticulate different historical narratives to serve culturally specific ecological priorities. In turn, by illuminating traditional fire management, its ecological effects, and the consequences of Indigenous displacement, the historical narratives of tribal fire plans are arguably more robust and germane; in this sense, they illuminate fire management issues largely eclipsed in relatively ahistorical non-tribal WPPs.

Framing wildfire itself

The tribal and non-tribal plans in our sample also diverged in their framings of wildfire itself. By antagonizing wildfire, non-tribal plans discursively position themselves (and sympathetic audiences) as dialectical opposites to the supposed malevolence of wildfire. Depicting wildfire as a villain implicitly crowns suppression-oriented agencies as the heroes of this narrative, thus reinforcing their management authority (Chalaya & Uldanov 2024; Crow et al. 2017). By this same logic, those who start fires for whatever reason may be perceived as dangerous or uncivilized (Vinyeta & Bacon 2024). While fear-based narratives may be useful for generating urgency amongst the public to adopt risk mitigation practices like fuel reductions and home hardening (Brenkert-Smith et al. 2012, Armbruster et al. 2022; McFarlane et al. 2011), they also deteriorate trust in fire-adaptive projects like prescribed burns, and more broadly, contribute to reactive, overly simplistic perceptions of risk amongst the public in the long term (Ryan et al. 2013; da Silva et al. 2019).

The hero-villain dialectic, as it pertains to wildfire, stems back to the early 1900 s, when forestry practices involving the use of fire were dismissed as irrational and unscientific by proponents of wildfire suppression (Pyne 2017). These narratives, along with the policies that stemmed from them, are symptomatic of the long-standing settler ideologies that have denaturalized the role of wildfire in forests and justified wildfire suppression as the default fire management practice. Furthermore, the commonality of fire-averse narratives has harmful implications for present-day tribes who rely on the ecological and cultural functions of fire. Burning practices are important to cultural celebrations, first foods cultivation, hunting traditions, and wildfire risk reduction for many tribes (Steen-Adams 2019, Norgaard 2014). Using fear-based characterizations of wildfire, then, may contribute to policies and practices that impede tribal burning rights and *other* groups who diverge from pro-suppression ideology (Hoffman et al. 2022).

Tribal characterizations of wildfire, which were less antagonistic, resisted pro-suppression discourses. All tribal plans emphasized the necessity of fire in Oregon ecosystems, indicating that wildfires cannot and should not be fully controlled. In this sense, tribal plans resisted the Western view that wildfires are inherently destructive.

Response to risk

Similarly, the tribal plans in our sample stressed the importance of human adaptation to wildfire. The wildfire problem, to tribal plans, was largely framed as a sociopolitical matter, placing responsibility on humans to address systemic issues that exacerbate wildfire risk for vulnerable groups. This discourse reflects a sense of humility, acknowledging the limits of human control over environmental phenomena like wildfires. Furthermore, tribal plans situated their mitigation strategies within a system of cultural ethics, traditions, and values, encouraging a bottom-up, community-driven approach to reducing

risk. Comparatively, tribal suggestions for mitigating risk were more sensitive to local needs and issues than their non-tribal counterparts. This authorial approach mirrors recent literature on wildfire adaptation, which encourages fire managers to create place-based strategies that address the unique risks faced by different communities (Paveglio et al. 2018; Paton & Buergelt 2012; Bosomworth et al. 2017; Dunlop et al. 2014). In this way, the sampled tribal plans actively incorporated social and political sources of risk, whereas non-tribal plans mostly obscured them.

Non-tribal strategies were more focused on environmental modifications, mirroring suppression-era discourses that offer simplified representations of wildfire risk as a universal threat to all Americans (Minor & Boyce 2018; Vinyeta & Bacon 2024). Like Smokey Bear's message, "only YOU can prevent wildfires," the non-tribal plans explained risk in very general terms, as though wildfire risk is ubiquitous and can be addressed through one-size-fits-all solutions. Like the tribal plans, they emphasized the importance of a collaborative, community-driven approach, but the underlying goals prioritize environmental modification, remaining largely silent on the sociopolitical forces that create inequitable wildfire outcomes. Without discussing the relative differences in wildfire risk exposure faced by different social groups, let alone the divergent relationships of these groups with fire and fire suppression historically, the "collaborative" approach of non-tribal plans rhetorically flattens the racial, economic, and cultural dimensions of wildfire exposure (Neale et al. 2019). Aggestam (2024) also notes the common usage of depoliticized wildfire frames in Europe, primarily within policy arenas dominated by technocratic influence, suggesting that corporate interests may have an outsized influence on mitigation strategies in the US as well.

Conclusions

As demonstrated by this research, tribal and non-tribal narratives frame wildfire differently. Despite these differences, tribal co-management projects present opportunities to both reframe institutionalized narratives that devalue Indigenous priorities and shift management authority to tribes.

Through collective reframing, a process in which different frames are exchanged between groups, frames can be combined or reconciled to produce mutually desirable outcomes (Kaufman et al. 2003; Ranco et al. 2011; Reo et al. 2017). While collective reframing involves compromising with dominant systems, it can also create political leverage for tribes to influence institutionalized discourses and the actions that follow them (Diver 2016). This leverage is not sufficient to eliminate inequity, but it can expand the range of tools accessible to tribes in the future (Kaufman & Smith 1999).

Furthermore, collaborative agreements present opportunities to shift power and management authority to tribes seeking to exercise their sovereignty (Diver 2016). Such agreements must include specific power sharing strategies that actively address settler-colonial power dynamics, ontological differences between Western and Indigenous knowledges, and the distinctive needs and treaty rights of all involved tribes (Reo et al. 2017; Barcalow & Spoon 2018, Mistry & Berardi 2016). Similarly, collaborative agreements must target technical barriers such as capacity shortages and economic disparities to ensure that collaborative projects benefit tribes (Zurba et al. 2012). While collaborative governance has not historically lived up to its promises for tribes, formalized commitments such as co-stewardship agreements present a lucrative mechanism for transferring authority to tribes (Martinez et al. 2023; Pinel & Pecos 2012).

More broadly, discourses of displacement need to be intentionally disembedded from organizational decision-making to improve planning outcomes for tribes. As exemplified by Kahneman & Tversky (1979), the power to influence public opinion belongs to the framer, so reframing wildfire could both improve cross-cultural collaboration and change broader perceptions of wildfire. Power and its disproportionate expression is inherent to planning, but the lack of historical and political perspectives in our sample of non-tribal WPPs demonstrates that the existence of power differentials is either contested or overlooked in many planning realms. This likely impacts collaborative processes in significant but unforeseen ways. Our research suggests that collective reframing may provide opportunities to dissemble harmful environmental discourses and facilitate cross-cultural learning and power sharing.

Limitations

While our research explains the rhetoric of WPPs, the extent to which WPPs influence the implementation of wildfire protection projects remains unclear. Additionally, the authors' intentions for including or excluding certain discourses cannot be analyzed through textual analysis only. Investigating planner intent may further explain how institutional forces like organizational rules and norms influence the inclusion and exclusion of certain discourses in wildfire plans. Lastly, CWPPs and MHMPs are comparable but ultimately stem from different policies and funding sources, so future research may be needed to understand how plan typology influences the inclusion of certain discourses. In-depth interviews with WPP authors would be a beneficial avenue for extending this research.

Supplementary Information

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Supplementary Material 1.

Supplementary Material 2.

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CH gathered, analyzed, and interpreted data and wrote the manuscript. Edits, support, and revisions were provided by MNP, GS, and DD. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Data availability
The dataset generated and/or analyzed during the current study is available on each county or tribe's website:
Wasco County CWPP
Jefferson County CWPP
Union County CWPP
Umatilla County CWPP
Lincoln County CWPP
Tillamook County CWPP
CTSI MHMP
CTUIR MHMP
CTWS MHMP

Declarations

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