

ABOUT THE ARTWORK

The Dance of the Sage Grouse: Bridging Culture and Conservation

"I have always been fascinated by this dance and one day, early in the spring of 2019, I was privileged to see it in person. Thanks to the wonderful staff at NRCS I was able to fulfill this dream. This artwork depicts the sage grouse dancing in early spring with the Stillwater Mountain Range in the background. I depicted a sea of sagebrush, the habitat of the sage grouse with the ghosts of tribal traditional dancers among them. For Nevada tribes, they provided tasty food and feathers for regalia and decoration. The sagebrush itself is used for many different things, including shelter, medicine, tea and spiritual cleansing. Nevada Natives are very concerned with the preservation and conservation of land and wildlife habitats, including the pine nut tree groves and water resources."

"We are acutely aware of the need to protect and nurture this environment," said Louinda. "Our tribes take our sacred dances from the movements of the sage grouse, deer and all animals native to this area. People that don't live here just see a vast barren desert, but nothing could be further from the truth. I love Nevada, my home."

Louinda's painting features various sage grouse, including the Greater Sage-grouse seen with the spotted tail on the left and the looming sharp-tailed grouse with wings spread in the center. The Native American dancers are translucent to show the expanse of the sagebrush sea.

"Our people have been here for more than 10,000 years—and how did they survive this climate? I wanted to show the desert not as barren, but as a living ecosystem. You have to look close to see the individual animals, birds, plants, insects and seeds. I wanted to show how tribal people use what they learn from nature and represent it themselves—it's all connected. This is our world view: everything's a circle," Louinda explains.

"In Native country I hardly hear them called grouse. We call them sage hen. These dancers are traditional dancers that are mimicking the dance of the birds. Their headdresses are made of porcupine hair, feathers and fur. When they dance, they bend way down to their knees as pictured, with their back feathers up."

The dancer on the left is wearing horns on his head in reverence to all wildlife. He is holding an eagle feather fan to show respect to the birds. Both dancers are holding weapons symbolizing the hunt. Normally, they are dressed in subdued colors, and the materials are natural, earth tone colors. The back feathers are called "bustles." Many times, the older men of the tribe do the traditional dancing. When small, and you start dancing, it's called "entering the circle."

The white on the left dancer's hat is fur, and the white on the dancers' fans and feet—referred to as "eagle fluffs"—is made from eagle feathers. Louinda's painting shows the vibrant colors of a Nevada sunrise.



MEET THE ARTIST

Louinda Garity

Washoe Tribe, Nevada and California

Louinda has been drawing since she was 8 years old. At 16, she seriously began honing her art skills by attending the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico, the premier art school for Indigenous artists. Louinda enjoys painting portraits and landscapes of Nevada, so the 2018 poster contest title and theme (Mountain Islands and Sagebrush Seas: Creating resilient landscapes through an understanding of heritage, culture and conservation) lent themselves perfectly for her to paint a unique landscape with dancing figures.



Checking off the bucket list: Louinda sees a sage grouse lek for the first time during mating season.

THE USDA, NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE (NRCS) AND TRIBAL RELATIONSHIPS

NRCS recognizes and celebrates the many different cultures of the partners and producers with whom we work.

Artist Louinda Garity of the Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California was the runner-up for NRCS' annual national Native American Heritage Month poster contest in 2018 with this oil painting. The title of Louinda's artwork is "The Moon When the Hu'ze'ha nu'ga." In the Northern Paiute language, this translates to: "The Month When the Sage Hen Dance."

Her artwork not only shares Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) as it relates to tribal stories and knowledge, but also speaks to the cultural significance of sage grouse and their ecosystem. This TEK coincides with NRCS' efforts to work with farmers and ranchers to preserve sage grouse habitat.



THE DANCE OF THE SAGE GROUSE: BRIDGING CULTURE AND CONSERVATION,

NRCS and Native American Tribes Share Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and Conservation Success in the West



The Confederated Tribes of Colville Reservation's Conservation Efforts Benefit Sage Grouse and Bitterroot

In the semi-arid rangeland above the community of Okanogan, Washington, Jean and Buzz Berney have grazed cattle on the Confederated Tribes of Colville Reservation for the past 51 years. Jean, a Colville Tribal member, worked with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to improve the rangeland ground near Little Goose Lake.

Bluebunch, Great Basin wildrye, and Wyoming sagebrush make the range unit an ideal habitat for the greater sage-grouse, an iconic, ground-dwelling bird of the West that has experienced significant population declines. Through NRCS' Sage Grouse Initiative, Jean was able to implement several conservation practices that benefited both the rangelands and the wildlife.

"We've always been interested in the wildlife and maintaining the wildlife no matter where we are, whether at our home or on my range unit out on the reservation," said Jean. "All wildlife is important to us."

"For the Little Goose Lake Range Unit, the Sage Grouse Initiative work reduced the amount of fence by over 5 miles, which was a collision hazard for low-flying sage grouse birds," said Will Keller, NRCS rangeland management specialist, who has worked with Jean and Buzz.

A new well and solar-powered pump allowed a grazing rest rotation to be implemented that benefits sage grouse nesting habitat. NRCS helped Jean improve the production of the native perennial vegetation that is beneficial for sage grouse and plant biodiversity. Grazing infrastructure improvements coupled with management from willing participants helps improve the rangeland for culturally significant plants like bitterroot that provide subsistence for the Colville Tribe's root feasts and ceremonies.

Photo Credit: Gina Kerzman, NRCS



Oral Histories of the Sage Grouse

From Noppadol Paothong's book **Sage Grouse Icon of the West: Sage-Grouse Legends of the Wasco and Northern Paiute**
By: Wilson Wewa, Spiritual Leader, Columbia River Plateau

I have been collecting oral histories of my people all my life... The stories reflect the reverence my people feel for sage-grouse and all of nature.

A long time ago, there was a lady who lost her husband. In her grief she wandered out into the desert and was crying in her sorrow. Then she heard noises like singing, so she went to investigate, and it was the noises from the sage-grouse. They were singing and dancing. The sage-grouse leader knew that she was in sorrow and talked to her and told her that she can't remain in sorrow all the time and that it would make her sick. He told her, "I'll give you this song and dance," and so they incorporated that dance among the Wasco people. It became a dance of renewal of life, a dance of joy.

There are other Tribes, too, that have stories about the sage-grouse. The Northern Paiute people have a similar story: The hunters had gone out to hunt the deer and the antelope. When they were out in the desert, they heard that popping kind of noise. They wondered what made that noise, and when they came over the hill, it was the sage-grouse "facing off" to one another. So from the sage-grouse the Paiute people learned how to make war on other Tribes. Sometimes when you come together like that, the birds will go back apart from one another. That would be a peaceful way, but there are times when they actually crash into one another with their wings and hit one another, and that's when they war. In those days, there were lots of sage hen compared with now. In Central Oregon, all that area was pretty much just nothing but sagebrush...

Photo Credit: Noppadol Paothong



another, and that's when they war. In those days, there were lots of sage hen compared with now. In Central Oregon, all that area was pretty much just nothing but sagebrush...

Burns Paiute Tribe: A Commitment to Habitat Renewal

The Burns Paiute Tribe is an active conservation partner in eastern Oregon by working with the Bonneville Power Administration to purchase two off-reservation properties through the Wildlife Mitigation Program. These properties include Logan Valley in Grant County and Jonesboro in Malheur County. They also purchased property in Beech Creek in Grant County, Oregon Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is a main supporter, providing funding and technical assistance as the Tribe manages its land for cultural, conservation and economic needs.

The Jonesboro property is prime sage grouse country, where the Tribe manages a little over 6,000 acres of tribally owned uplands and 38,000 acres of Federal and State grazing allotments. The rugged deep canyons, covered in juniper and sagebrush, can present a management challenge. They are removing juniper to enhance the sagebrush steppe habitat to aid in the recovery of this iconic bird with an Environmental Quality Incentives Program contract through the national Sage Grouse Initiative.

"On their own they've conducted inventories and monitoring activity. They have a good sense of what's out there and what needs to change," said Lynn Larsen, Malheur County District Conservationist.

Burns Paiute Tribal Vice-Chair Eric Hawley shares his vision for the land. "We come to stewardship from such a variety of perspectives. Culturally we look at concerns based on heritage, tribal sovereignty and a search for independence. Our land management incorporates these ideas and seeks management to protect and enhance wildlife and fisheries. Our Council is also interested in economic sustainability. It is truly a balancing act."

Even so, it's an act the Burns Paiute perform well in partnership with the USDA Farm Service Agency and NRCS.

Photo Credit: Kathy Fargo, NRCS



NRCS Projects With Goshute Tribe Result in Return of the Sage Grouse

On the border of Nevada and Utah is the Confederated Tribes of the Goshute Reservation where the Tribal members work with NRCS to make significant improvements to their range. The Tribal lands consist of about 113,000 acres with 71,100 acres of that being rangeland and 42,000 acres being timber. The Tribe held local working group meetings to establish project priorities, then began addressing their resource concerns through Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) contracts with NRCS. Early on, the Tribe fenced off springs and installed livestock pipeline and troughs for livestock and wildlife.

"Cheat grass has been an issue, so the Tribe has treated about 5,500 acres and re-seeded 650 acres so far," said Matthew Phillippi, NRCS Utah State Biologist. "Through CSP, they have placed escape ramps on their troughs for wildlife and are monitoring rangeland transects to determine short-term and long-term range trends for vegetative production, plant cover, utilization, livestock stocking rates, and sage grouse habitat. The Tribal members have even been trained to monitor the transects all on their own." On roughly 5,500 acres, the Tribe has installed range planting, upland wildlife habitat enhancement, prescribed grazing, livestock pipeline, and watering facilities.

"With EQIP, we were able to put in pipeline for cattle and other wildlife, including the sage grouse," said Rupert Steele, Tribal Chair. "The sage grouse used to come into our communities where the water was, and now they're back. We improved our stock tanks, and the sage grouse are using it. Working in conjunction with other agencies, working together as a partnership, has been beneficial."

The Tribe understands that conservation measures not only improve their rangeland, but also show reverence to the wildlife that inhabit their land. "Any animals we see out there, we learn from them - how they follow the food and water. And for (tribal) dances, we mimic them—like how the sage grouse dances—out of respect for them," added Steele.

Photo Credit: Heather Emmons, NRCS



NRCS' American Indian Alaska Native Employee Association Elders' Council

NRCS' American Indian Alaska Native Employee Association (AIANEA) established an Elders' Council in 2001. The employee association's National Council determined that the AIANEA should function like that of a Tribe and have a Council of Elders to provide guidance. Since AIANEA is a nationwide organization, the members of the Elders' Council represent the six regions of AIANEA: Northeast, Southeast, South Central, Midwest, Northern Plains, and West.

The Elders provide guidance to the operation of the AIANEA and provide education through presentations at AIANEA National Training Conferences, newsletter articles, participation on NRCS State Technical Committees and NRCS Regional Tribal Conservation Advisory Councils. The Elders are also an instrumental part of NRCS Working Effectively with American Indians training sessions, providing cultural training across the country to NRCS and partner employees. The most important gift from our Elders are the traditional prayers they provide, as well as the personal communication, compassion and caring they show toward AIANEA members.

Elder Norman Lopez, who lives in Towaoc, Colorado, on the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe Reservation, established the AIANEA Drum Group in 2001 and gifted the association with native songs, asking members of the Drum Group to learn them and sing them during public performances and at annual conferences.

Photo Credit: Heather Emmons, NRCS and Elder Norman Lopez



Fort Peck Reservation's Cultural Changes Bring Back Wildlife

Home to the Assiniboine and Sioux nations, the Fort Peck Indian Reservation in Roosevelt County, Montana, is making changes to bring more wildlife back to the reservation.

Understanding the link between healthy grazing lands and healthy wildlife populations, the reservation used an Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) contract to improve management of rangelands by establishing a grazing system, fencing and water management. As range condition has improved, many different wildlife species numbers have increased.

To help restore sage grouse, NRCS and the Tribes mapped areas of good sage-grouse habitat and identified a high number of sage-grouse leks (mating areas) on the reservation.

The Tribes also tackled sage grouse mortality due to fence collisions by placing reflectors on fences to help the sage grouse avoid them when they land.

Through NRCS technical assistance and EQIP, the tribes have expanded their buffalo herd on 27,000 acres in seven range units. Fencing and water development were key in developing a grazing management system that worked for buffalo. A reservation fence-building crew built 700 to 1,000 miles of fence per year to divide pastures so the buffalo could rotate and not overgraze an area.

Universities have monitored what buffalo grazing has done to change the Fort Peck ecosystem. The results are more insects and birds, many that have not been seen on the reservation for 100 years. It's because of the way the buffalo manage their own ecosystem—leaving a variety of short, medium, and tall grasses after grazing, which benefits many different wildlife species.

Photo Credit: NRCS Montana



TEK Exchange at Wind River Indian Reservation in Wyoming

NRCS' Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) staff and partners heard firsthand from the Wind River Reservation Tribal members in Wyoming as part of a Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies' (WAFWA) Sage and Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse Workshop. These species-specific workshops provide a forum for wildlife professionals, including SGI staff, to interact with each other on new research and management, and how to use this new information to promote better species management across the sagebrush landscape.

Workshop attendees observed members of the Wind River Indian Reservation perform the "chicken dance" that celebrates sage grouse and Native Americans' relationship with the bird. They gained Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) from the Tribal members as they shared about: the meaning of the dance; how they handmade the regalia they wore; their holistic approach to conservation as a Tribe dating back to their ancestors; and their reliance on the bird to nourish them physically and spiritually.

NRCS launched the SGI in 2010 as a highly targeted and science-based landscape approach to proactively conserve sage grouse and sustain the working rangelands that support western ranching economies. This innovative partnership of ranchers, agencies, universities, non-profit groups and businesses all embrace a common vision - achieving wildlife conservation through sustainable ranching. NRCS' sage grouse efforts are part of Working Lands for Wildlife, through which NRCS provides Farm Bill technical and financial assistance to help ranchers restore and protect habitat for sage grouse. Visit sagegrouseinitiative.com to learn more.

Photo Credit: Tom Koerner, US Fish and Wildlife Service



AVAILABLE NRCS RESOURCES

The NRCS website hosts technical resources available to the public, partners, and our employees alike, including technical notes and publications, to assist with knowledge, awareness, and understanding when NRCS works with other cultures. Check out our publications relating to ethnobotany, culturally significant plants, indigenous stewardship methods, and more at: www.nrcs.usda.gov.

Search any of these topics as keywords:

- Indigenous stewardship methods
- Culturally significant plants
- Working with Native American Tribes

GET STARTED WITH USDA



USDA offers a variety of farm loan, risk management, disaster assistance, and conservation programs to support farmers, ranchers and Tribes. The first step is to visit your local USDA Service Center to talk with staff about your goals for your land and see what programs will meet your needs. Find your local USDA Service Center and learn more about beginning farmer and rancher opportunities at farmers.gov.

MAP KEY

- = TEK Stories
- = NRCS Success Stories

ABOUT THE MAP

This map indicates where sage grouse are located in tan and the orange indicates where Tribal lands are located. Many Tribal lands occur in sage grouse territory, making these areas prime locations to do conservation work that benefits sage grouse and other wildlife. NRCS has worked with several Tribes to implement successful conservation measures that have improved sage grouse and wildlife habitat, while also improving the Tribes' endeavors on their land.