International foresters visit Flathead Reservation to study tribes' example

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PABLO – The big orange zone on Terry Tanner’s Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness map drew a lot of interest from a mini-United Nations of forestry gathering on Thursday.

“We just celebrated its 30th anniversary last month,” Tanner told the group of visitors from as far away as Nepal and Brazil. “For a long time, white people have been telling indigenous people how to manage their lands. Indigenous people have to have their voices heard.”

The spine of the Mission Mountains divides a federal wilderness area from the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes’ wilderness. The orange-colored tribal zone has virtually the same rules of no motorized access or commercial development as the green-shaded federal side. But the CSKT leadership made its own management plan, independent of any federal agency.

Developing that independence was a major goal for many of the 25 participants in the third annual Rights and Resources Initiative workshop put together with the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. This year’s theme was “rethinking forest regulations,” and including indigenous voices was a crucial issue on every continent.

Montana State Forester Bob Harrington said previous conferences made visits to the Flathead Reservation, with favorable response.

“This part showed as one of the most valuable experiences we could produce,” Harrington said. “Unfortunately, it doesn’t put a dent in the number of people we’d like to expose to these issues.”

The values of tribal and Native groups might be quite different from the dominant society and its economy. Kootenai tribal cultural expert Vernon Finley recalled how his people’s creation story had the Creator bringing forth spirits of all things on Earth, and introducing humans last.

“We’re the humblest, youngest brother in all creation,” Finley said. “We don’t have direct communication with the Creator the way the spirits do. So how could we assume we could own something so much older than us?”

That understanding complicated treaty negotiations between Indian tribes and U.S. government officials who assumed the tribes shared similar ideas about land ownership, Finley said. On the Flathead Indian Reservation, the result was the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs managing tribal timber resources for decades without regard for Native traditions or practices.

“Forestry was one of the first, larger departments that made a concerted effort to follow traditional practices,” Finley said. “They met with elders, took them on field trips, and asked how to do things with...
International foresters visit Flathead Reservation to study tribes' example culturally sensitive methods.”

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That caught the attention of participants like Fabiola Munoz Dodero, deputy director of the Peru Forest Sector Initiative. With nearly 2,000 separate indigenous groups all seeking to have their interests respected, the Peruvian government last year started requiring consultations with native people before logging takes place on their homelands.

But the government faces big challenges to keep up with contract loggers who abuse landscapes and disappear before anyone can bring a case.

“The most important thing to work on with our native communities is to understand the value of their values,” said Dodero. “Most of our communities don’t have a system to manage their forestry in a competitive way.”

On the Flathead Reservation, Tanner said about one-seventh of the tribal forest reserve is in the Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness. Logging is prohibited there, but allowed in many other parts of the reservation. The tribe now cuts about 20 million board feet of lumber a year, roughly one-third of what it cut in the 1970s and '80s.

Having indigenous groups take responsibility for their own land management is crucial, said Andy White, Rights and Resources Initiative coordinator. In several international cases, groups wanting to protect their homelands have been forced to designate them as national wildernesses or parks, and lose their right to harvest or manage those lands in the process.

“That's a very big issue for us,” said Grace Balawag, of the Indigenous People's International Center for Policy Research and Education in the Philippines. “Promoting traditional forest management practices often runs counter to how the government wants to manage protected areas and parks. It has to be done cooperatively.”