

## Bridging the Gaps That Divide

David H. Journey and Serra Hoagland



The US Constitution provides that Native American tribes are sovereign-dependent nations and their interactions with the federal government, including the cession of the tribal lands that formed America, are governed by a complex set of treaties. For decades, federal law and public policies have defined the formal, legal relationship between agencies such as the US Department of Agriculture Forest Service (USDA FS) and federally recognized Indian tribes. However, this formalized partnership has never been an easy one, long strained by misunderstanding, misgivings, missed opportunities, and political expediency. When President William J. Clinton issued Executive Order 13175 (“Consultation and Coordination with Indian Tribal Governments”; since approved and upheld by the two subsequent Administrations) in 1996, could any different outcome be expected?

An opportunity to forge a new partnership arose in 2001, when during the revision of the Ouachita and Ozark St. Francis National Forests (hereafter, “Forests”) respective land and resource management plans, the Forests were asked to conduct face-to-face consultations on the Arkansas and Oklahoma homelands of the federally recognized Oklahoma Tribes (Absentee Shawnee, Caddo, Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Citizen Potawatomie, Creek, Delaware, Eastern Shawnee, Kaw, Quapaw, Seminole, Shawnee, and Osage, among others; hereafter, “Tribes”). The management of cultural and natural resources is extremely important not only to the Forests but also to many Tribes that were removed from their homelands, making the development of a viable forum permitting both formal and informal dialogues between the USDA FS and the Tribes vital. The first of these consultative meetings, organized in 2002, was given the name “To Bridge A Gap” (TBAG) by Bobby Gonzales, Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) coordinator for the Caddo Nation, to signify the differences among the various people, cultures, governments, and participating agencies.

The success of the first TBAG meeting led to its rapid expansion to include the entire Southern and Eastern Regions of the USDA FS, all 39 Oklahoma Tribes (and tribes

from other states), other government agencies, numerous academic institutions, private industry, and archeological/engineering consulting firms. Now entering its 14th year (Table 1), the annual TBAG meeting represents an official government-to-government interaction planned and funded by all parties and focused on mutual interests in the management of archaeological, natural, and cultural resources of the Forests. TBAG provides a venue for Tribes to develop bonds of trust and communication and establish practical ways of restoring ecosystems while seeking to benefit all participants. These interactions and opportunities are expressed in the TBAG logo (Figure 1).

The ultimate goal of TBAG is to provide a permanent platform with a central setting for Tribes to meet with other stakeholders and interested parties. For Tribes, some of the benefits that immediately began to accrue involved the introduction to federal employees who are mandated to protect and preserve public resources and cultural heritage, including the location and protection of sites related to those Tribes with patrimony interests on federal lands. Other recent positive Tribal outcomes from TBAG include the achievement of National Historic Preservation Act Section 101D2 Status for Tribal Historic Preservation Offices, the granting of special use permits for collection of Forest resources for ceremonial purposes, a discussion of Traditional Cultural Properties and Rock Art studies, and NAGPRA repatriation and reburial issues. Tribal Elders can now more readily provide the Forests guidance in NAGPRA-related repatriations of human remains and funerary objects. In addition, Osage and Caddo Elders meet privately to discuss protocols on repatriation of human remains recovered from federal lands within their joint homelands.

The USDA FS may be the biggest beneficiary of the TBAG meetings. USDA FS staff members develop personal relationships with sovereign dependent Nations and individuals who review and consult on specific projects and operations. Locally, the Forests have received Tribal feedback on land exchanges and developed master agreements to improve the consultation process and solicit Tribal input. Regionally, consultations have expanded to include the Daniel Boone National Forest (for the Shawnee), Alabama and Mississippi National Forests (Chickasaw and Creek), and Allegheny National Forest (Delaware). Heritage Resource Technician training programs are provided

Received October 8, 2014; accepted January 19, 2015.

**Affiliations:** David H. Journey ([djourney@fs.fed.us](mailto:djourney@fs.fed.us)), USDA Forest Service, Russellville, AR. Serra Hoagland, USDA Forest Service-Eastern Forest Environmental Threat Assessment Center.

**Acknowledgments:** We gratefully acknowledge all Native American tribes who participated in the To Bridge a Gap Meeting. Of special note are the late Larue Parker, Chair of the Caddo Nation, Bobby Gonzales and Robert Cast of the Caddo Nation; Terry Cole, Sue Folsom, and Ian Thompson of the Choctaw Nation; Andrea Hunter of the Osage Nation; and Johnnie Jacobs of the Muscogee Nation.

**Table 1. Locations and hosts of the TBAG meetings over the years.**

TBAG	Year	Location	Federal hosts	Tribal hosts
1	2002	Durant, OK	Ouachita and Ozark-St. Francis National Forests	Choctaw Nation
2	2003	Durant, OK	Ouachita and Ozark-St. Francis National Forests	Choctaw Nation
3	2004	Anadarko, OK	Ouachita and Ozark-St. Francis National Forests	Caddo Nation
4	2005	Norman, OK	Ouachita and Ozark-St. Francis National Forests	Absentee Shawnee Tribe
5	2006	Okmulgee, OK	Ouachita and Ozark-St. Francis National Forests	Muscogee (Creek) Nation
6	2007	Norman, OK	Ouachita and Ozark-St. Francis National Forests	Chickasaw Nation
7	2008	Ft. Smith, AR	Ouachita and Ozark-St. Francis National Forests	Choctaw Nation
8	2009	Durant, OK	USDA FS Southern and Eastern Regions	Choctaw Nation
9	2010	Tulsa, OK	USDA FS Southern and Eastern Regions	Muscogee (Creek) Nation
10	2011	Norman, OK	USDA FS Southern and Eastern Regions	Chickasaw Nation
11	2012	Durant, OK	USDA FS Southern and Eastern Regions	Choctaw Nation
12	2013	Norman, OK	USDA FS Southern and Eastern Regions	Delaware Nation
13	2014	Fayetteville, AR	USDA FS Southern and Eastern Regions	Eastern Shawnee Tribe
14	2015	Seneca, MO	USDA FS Southern and Eastern Regions	Eastern Shawnee Tribe



**Ouachita and Ozark-St. Francis National Forests**

**Figure 1.** The To Bridge a Gap logo was developed by Sue Folsom (Cultural Preservation Director) and Terry Cole (Tribal Historic Preservation Officer), both of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. Seven feathers represent seven generations, the colors are symbolic of the four corners of the Earth, and the hoop or circle represents the circle of life. Together, these symbols signify the unification of the earth's resources and people.

to the Tribes by the Forests. USDA FS managers can also learn much from the Tribes, who possess a wealth of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), developed over innumerable generations being intimately con-

nected to the land. In a recent report to Congress on the status of Indian forest management practices, the Indian Forest Management Assessment Team (IFMAT) III recognized the unique value of TEK (Gordon et al. 2013). According to this document, the natural resource management practices conducted by Tribes can act as a valid model for environmental sustainability, especially given their holistic, long-term, and integrative nature. The USDA FS recognized this benefit in the recently established Tribal Engagement Roadmap for Research and Development:

TEK can provide insights into how our nation's forest and grasslands respond to human interventions and changing climates. It can suggest new strategies to manage these areas for a variety of ecological goods and services, social and cultural uses, and economic benefits. (USDA FS 2014, p. 5)

So, in addition to helping to provide the collaborators needed by the USDA FS to implement landscape scale resource management, the two-way, cross-cultural dialog integrating TEK and western science may help achieve broad-scale environmental sustainability for both USDA FS and Tribal resources (see, e.g., Emery et al. 2014, Hummel and Lake 2015).

This forum likewise advances the forestry profession through presentations and case studies on contracting, education and communication, fire, forest ecology, geospatial technologies, policy, urban and community forestry, and natural resource management. The sharing of successful part-

nerships, presentation of state-of-the-art scientific research and knowledge, and provision of the information necessary to develop grants and contracts with Tribes also aids all parties. All of the work involved in the TBAG meeting has paid dividends that are being nationally recognized. Among other awards, in 2006, USDA FS Regional Forester Chuck Meyers awarded participating Tribes and Forests the "Gridlock Breaking Award" for improving government-to-government relationships, streamlining consultation and review processes, and building bonds of trust between Tribes and the USDA FS's Southern Region. TBAG has become a model for other national forests across the country, as well as other federal agencies, including the National Park Service, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Bureau of Land Management, and the Federal Communications Commission.

Continuing the tradition, the next TBAG meeting will be held from Mar. 30 to Apr. 3, 2015, in Seneca, Missouri, hosted by the Eastern Shawnee Tribe at their Indigo Sky Hotel. Those interested in attending or seeking further information on this particular meeting should contact Robin Dushane, Tribal Historic Preservation Officer at (918) 533-4104.

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