

Journal of Research Practice
Volume 10, Issue 2, Article N18, 2014



Research Note:

Giving Back Through Time: A Collaborative Timeline Approach to Researching Karuk Indigenous Land Management History

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Index Terms: feminist geography; community-based natural resource management; participatory research; Klamath River Basin

Suggested Citation: Diver, S. W. (2014). Giving back through time: A collaborative timeline approach to researching Karuk Indigenous land management history [Research note]. *Journal of Research Practice*, 10(2), Article N18. Retrieved from <http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/414/375>

Note. This research note is part of the thematic section, Giving Back Through Collaboration in Practice, in the special issue titled “Giving Back in Field Research,” published as Volume 10, Issue 2 in the *Journal of Research Practice*.

As a graduate student researcher, I struggle with understanding how to make my work more useful for the communities that I work with. Academic research often excludes local communities from knowledge production by using the written word instead of oral communication, employing specialized academic language, and reinforcing multiple layers of social hierarchy. This reality has led me to focus on collaborative research methods that incorporate visual formats as a means of giving back to community research partners. As one such example, I launched the Karuk Lands Management Historical Timeline project—a collaborative research initiative with the Karuk Tribe in Northern California. Together, student and community research partners produced a 15-foot long artistic timeline on land management history and community impacts within the Karuk Tribe’s ancestral territory. The [visual timeline](#) is available online and on display at the Karuk People’s Center in Happy Camp, California (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. This section of the Karuk Lands Management Historical Timeline represents an artistic, 15-foot display that summarizes land use policies, management practices, and environmental health conditions affecting Karuk people and landscapes from 1850-present.

This research note introduces our collaborative timeline research methods and analyzes some of our successes and challenges around giving back to community partners. Our approach emphasizes both product and process, where the research product—a visual timeline—created a transformative community education tool, and where the research process helped build reciprocal co-learning relationships between academics and community members. Importantly, the project evolved in relation to our commitment to feminist research principles that include respecting situated knowledge, practicing reflexivity, and working from the viewpoints of marginalized communities. The amount of time dedicated to relationship building was an integral part of the collaboration.

My graduate research focuses on natural resource governance with Indigenous communities in the Pacific Northwest. As a non-Indigenous person, I first learned about Indigenous land rights issues while working for a non-profit organization to support grassroots Indigenous and environmental leaders in the Russian Far East. During my first summer of graduate school, the Karuk-UC Berkeley Collaborative (KBC) group invited me to visit the Klamath River and meet tribal managers at the Karuk Tribe’s Department of Natural Resources (KDNR). In our meetings, tribal leaders voiced a need for academic research that could address current land management challenges faced by the Tribe, and expressed interest in studying barriers and opportunities to collaborative resource management. Working with tribal members, I began developing a research project on this topic.

I initiated the research with a literature review, which I conducted in the context of a graduate course on citizen participation. Together with four classmates and Karuk colleagues, I started a group project to document the history of land management in the mid-Klamath region from 1850 to present. We, the student researchers, began with reading and analyzing reference materials, including over 100 items from tribal and

government archives, libraries, and other sources. In order to synthesize this vast pool of data, we devised a timeline format.

Visiting the Klamath River and learning from the local community was essential to the project. We students set out from Berkeley on an 8-hour drive, winding up the Klamath River canyon. During our travels, we shifted from 50-minute class blocks to “river time.” Our planned 2-hour morning session turned into a day-long conversation and a salmon barbeque with community members. For the first item on our agenda, I had planned on presenting our archival research, but instead, our community partners started us off with a Karuk cultural resources training. We tasted roasted peppernuts, handled basket weaving materials, compared different types of acorns, and learned how Karuk cultural burning was essential to maintaining tribal access to traditional foods and fibers.

Our student researcher group then presented the initial timeline research findings. Together with community partners, we took a red pen to the 15-foot timeline poster that spanned the community room walls. We had frank discussions about local resource politics. We listened to the frustrations of Karuk tribal managers around their efforts to fulfill culturally embedded resource management responsibilities on federally designated National Forest land. We discussed the ways in which federal and state policy had impacted Karuk people and their traditional lands, as well as Karuk community responses to these impacts. After returning to Berkeley, these conversations helped us as student researchers to refocus our efforts, based on the lived experience of Karuk people.

At the end of the semester, we submitted our draft timeline for review to our community partners and professors. It is important to note that the timeline was text-only at this point in time (see Figure 2). Through critical dialogue, we realized that the text-only timeline did not reflect the place-based community that we had just visited. We decided to redesign the timeline around Klamath River images. Over the next semester, we organized the Klamath Art Contest. Local youth submitted artwork representing their relationship to the river—images of favorite family swimming places, eerie river fog, Karuk legends, and the mountainous mid-Klamath landscape. In return, we sent the contestants small prizes and certificates, and also recognized youth artists in the final timeline. Sketches of people and animals now populate our rendition of the Klamath River, which runs through the center of the timeline to create what our tribal partners refer to as a “cultural riverscape.”

	Pre 1850 PRE-CONTACT	1850-1853 GOLD RUSH	1853-1900 LAND TENURE CHANGES	1900-1950 FORESTRY AND DAMS	1950 - 1965 INTENSIVE RESOURCE USE
STATE AND FEDERAL POLICIES		<p>Early 1850s Declaration of California statehood The entire Upper Klamath of the Klamath region.</p> <p>1851 Karuk representatives sign Captain McCoy's proposed tribal treaties as Wintu and Ampawaput, but treaties are left unratified.</p> <p>1852 Treaty for selling to outsiders the right to gold, and other provisions to be discussed in the general treaty to sell the entire region.</p> <p>From 1852 Fish and game laws discourage and in some cases prohibit the majority of the Karuk from mass harvesting salmon with nets and weirs.</p>	<p>1853 Congress authorizes the president to create Indian reservations from public domains through executive order.</p> <p>1855 The Klamath River reservation is created.</p> <p>1856 The Oregon State Constitution and the Oregon reservation is created. The Karuk reservation is established as a reservation within the boundaries of the Klamath reservation. The Karuk reservation is established as a reservation within the boundaries of the Klamath reservation.</p> <p>1860 Congress passes a law authorizing the president to create no more than four Indian reservations within the State of California.</p>	<p>1905 Beginning of Forest Service management of Karuk lands.</p> <p>1911 The Weeks Act is passed, leading to additional fire suppression.</p> <p>1912 The Weeks Act is passed, leading to additional fire suppression.</p> <p>1947 The lower section of Karuk aboriginal territory was made part of the Six Rivers National Forest, with a District Office in Orleans.</p>	<p>1960 Multiple Use-Sustained Yield Act of 1960 is passed.</p> <p>1964 Wilderness Areas are established in the Klamath Basin.</p>
PUBLISHED DOCUMENTS					
HUMAN MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS	<p>7,000 BCE Estimated origin of native presence in the Mid-Klamath region.</p> <p>Pre 1,100 BP Arrival of ancestral Karuk in northern California.</p> <p>Pre-contact 1800s, Salmon are estimated to have made up close to 30% of the energy and total protein in the pre-contact diet of the Karuk.</p> <p>1827 - 1830 Interior Klamath explorations conducted by Jedediah Smith, followed by Ogden.</p> <p>1848 Missionaries arrive in the Klamath Mountains.</p> <p>1848 Number of Karuk people declines.</p> <p>Until 1850 The Karuk used frequent, low intensity burns to manage the land.</p>	<p>1850s Karuk traditional fire management systems are disrupted.</p> <p>1852 White settlers burn the sacred villages of Yutamin and Katamin.</p> <p>1852 Displacement of Karuk tribe by white settlers and new ones.</p>	<p>1853 Beginning of Karuk Tribe's landless status.</p> <p>1860 - 1930 Hydraulic mining input millions of yards of sediment into the Klamath and its tributaries.</p> <p>1890 - 1910 "There were 33 hydraulic mines working between Sames Bar and Wintuport... The first substantial diversions from the river began around 1890".</p> <p>1905 Link River Dam blocks fish passage to upper Klamath River.</p>	<p>1918 California Oregon Power Company (Copp) builds first of three hydroelectric dams without fish passage in Klamath Basin.</p> <p>1920s Boarding schools lead to nutritional deprivation and assimilation for Karuk children.</p> <p>1927 "We only get the falls up there to get our fish and salmon".</p> <p>1928 "The White Man will not allow us Indians to have our head that is salmon and deer".</p> <p>1933 The in-river Klamath Basin commercial fishery is closed.</p> <p>WWII era Mid-Klamath forests heavily logged to meet demand for nation building.</p>	<p>1955 Forest Service road construction into Ti Creek watershed.</p> <p>1960s Treatment of timber stands with aerial herbicides.</p> <p>1962 The Iron Dam is completed, blocking salmon access to 120 km of Klamath River mainstem habitat and tributaries.</p> <p>1960-1989 Forest Service builds extensive road system in Mid-Klamath uplands for logging access.</p> <p>1964 Trinity and Lewiston Dams are built on upper Trinity, the largest tributary to the Klamath River.</p>
ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITION AND HUMAN HEALTH	<p>Pre 1850 Up to one million salmon enter the Klamath River annually.</p>	<p>1830 Beginning of steady decline of aquatic conditions and fisheries resources in the Klamath Basin.</p> <p>1850s Invasive grasses displace culturally important plants.</p>	<p>1860s Bear population moves to winter ground at Salmon Summit.</p>	<p>1900-1920s Non-native blackberries are imported to Irvine Creek and increase likelihood of severe fire events.</p> <p>1931 The spring run of salmon spawning has declined from being the major run to the point of "relatively little economic importance".</p> <p>1934 - 1946 Ti Creek, flush with fish, continues to provide function as a family fishing site.</p> <p>1940s "When I came here in the 1940s the water was contaminated".</p>	<p>1955 Ti Creek stream channel shifts after floods.</p> <p>1960s - 1970s Algae levels increase in Klamath Basin.</p> <p>From 1964 Flooding leads to large debris flows in areas impaired by forest road building and clearing.</p>

Figure 2. This is a section of the initial, text-only version of the Karuk Lands Management Historical Timeline, prior to our redesign.

Although there is not ample space here to fully describe and analyze our collaborative timeline methods, I will highlight several “giving back” moments that we experienced, both in terms of our collaborative research process and product.

(a) The timeline product helped to situate historical information around the Karuk Tribe’s lived experience. By linking Karuk knowledge with existing academic literature, the timeline provided additional legitimacy to local knowledge. By referencing policies that had displaced Karuk people and their management practices from the mid-Klamath region, the timeline provided structural explanations for current social and environmental problems. One Karuk partner commented that the timeline’s effectiveness came from describing “the community story and the managerial story together,” thereby producing a credible historical record that could help influence policy makers.

(b) The timeline highlighted steps already taken by the Karuk Tribe to achieve its vision for eco-cultural restoration, which proved to be an empowering experience for tribal managers. One of our Karuk collaborators told us, “I usually feel like I am beating my head against the wall, but now I feel like we are getting somewhere.” By laying out the historical context, the timeline demonstrated how much the Tribe had accomplished in rebuilding Karuk governance institutions, despite colonial histories of cultural displacement and resource extraction. This context also helped explain why the tribe’s current restoration efforts were so challenging, particularly with negotiating management decisions affecting cultural resources on land now designated as federal forest. Thus, the timeline created a new history of mid-Klamath land management that could talk back to the dominant historical record and reaffirm contemporary Karuk self-determination efforts.

(c) The timeline process supported reciprocal learning relationships between researchers and community partners. Traveling to the river helped students to gain a more situated understanding of Karuk knowledge. Meeting in person allowed everyone to feel more comfortable asking questions and facilitated co-learning. It was through conversation and dialogue that student researchers gained a better understanding of the priority issues for Karuk managers, and that community partners were able to provide their guidance on the project. Given the rich, place-based nature of our discussion, the timeline provided a key framework for helping student visitors locate and understand community experiences, even when students lacked contextual information. As one Karuk colleague explained, “It was all about the sharing of information to create an educational unit.”

(d) Presenting research findings through a visual format and including youth perspectives helped make our historical analysis more accessible and relevant to community members—both in terms of process and product. One Karuk partner commented on the vital importance of including youth perspectives in the final product; this created an opportunity for the next generation of community leaders to have a voice on current land management issues. Youth artwork also provided a personal connection for local audiences, who were often drawn to the illustrations contributed by their family members or other local youth. Furthermore, our decision to take the time required for revising the timeline demonstrated our commitment, as student researchers, to honoring the place-based, inter-generational perspectives of Karuk people, as part of relationship building.

Creating the collaborative timeline relied on an iterative process, with many challenges along the way. One challenge was allowing enough time to ensure a successful collaboration. Because of the iterations, this project required about 9 months to complete—about twice the amount of time we had planned for. However, extending the time frame resulted in a respectful process and a more impactful product. A second challenge was determining how to best represent the timeline collaboration, given the diversity of the Karuk community. We were careful to describe the project as a close collaboration with the Karuk Department of Natural Resources that had been approved by Tribal Council. Yet, we acknowledge that the project would benefit from broader community engagement over a longer time period. Our third challenge was the linear nature of the timeline, which does not currently allow for updates. We would like to develop an interactive, web-based format that allows for a living and changing document. This interactive version would ideally place greater emphasis on thematic linkages, and allow for user comments on evolving issues. As a final challenge, the Karuk resource managers that we worked with were mostly male. By reviewing transcripts of interviews with female Karuk leaders, we did include more women’s perspectives, yet this remains a project limitation. More recently, the Karuk Department of Natural Resources has shifted its activities towards traditional foods and fibers. The traditional foods framework creates an opening for additional community voices, including more female perspectives, to engage with current natural resource management issues.

In reflecting on this experience, the timeline changed my perspective on giving back. I had previously assumed that giving back was primarily an altruistic activity. Yet through the collaborative timeline, I found that establishing an effective community-engaged

research project meant that both sides benefit, and giving back is better understood in the context of reciprocal relationships. Even while student researchers attempted to emphasize community benefits, I found that students benefited immensely from the collaboration. The timeline project helped students gain a deeper understanding of Karuk perspectives on Indigenous land management—a perspective that is rarely taught within the academy.

For myself, as a graduate student beginning my dissertation research, the timeline was a highly effective approach to conducting an initial literature review. Instead of my reading historical materials in a vacuum, the collaborative timeline helped me begin my research from a situated perspective—emphasizing the lived experience of community partners. The timeline was also a quick way to demonstrate my usefulness as a researcher to the community, as opposed to waiting several years for a completed dissertation. In this way, the timeline process helped me to initiate a longer community-engaged dissertation project.

The most important aspect of the collaborative research, however, was the time spent creating a more reciprocal relationship between student researchers and community partners. This partnership did not proceed according to a prescribed agenda. Rather, it was a give-and-take process that evolved over time. During our community visit, local collaborators taught us how to be good partners. This meant staying flexible and moving slowly—taking the time required to learn together. Because of our respectful process, this became the first of many collaborative projects that I have now undertaken through the Karuk-UC Berkeley Collaborative (KBC), further described by fellow KBC member Daniel Sarna-Wojcicki (in this issue).

When interacting with my colleagues, I realize how fortunate I am to share a first language with community partners who are located within a day's driving distance of my home. Still, I hope that the collaborative timeline approach provides a tool that supports others pursuing feminist research methodologies—through facilitating co-learning and generating place-based visual research outputs.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the generous contributions of:

- timeline co-authors Lisa Liu, Naomi Canchela, Sara Rose Tannenbaum, Rafael Silberblatt, and Ron Reed
- Professors Marcia McNally and Randy Hester
- the Karuk-UC Berkeley Collaborative, especially co-founders Ron Reed, Jennifer Sowerwine, and Tom Carlson
- the Karuk Tribal Council
- the Karuk Department of Natural Resources, including Leaf Hillman and Bill Tripp
- tribal member Kathy Barger

- community collaborators, including Petey Brucker, Will Harling, Frank Lake, Luna Latimer, and Ben Riggan
- contributing student artists and their teachers
- the Karuk People's Center and the Clarke Historical Museum, including museum curators Helene Rouvier and Ben Brown
- the Fortmann women's researcher group at UC Berkeley, including Clare Gupta, Margot Higgins, and Alice Kelly.

Received 24 October 2013 | Accepted 17 March 2014 | Published 1 July 2014

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