

Southeastern Indians Purposely Burned the Longleaf Pine Forest

(bolded words in text indicate key words and concepts)

Student Information:

Similar to forest managers of today, Indians of the longleaf pine forests purposely burned areas for centuries to create habitat for important plants and animals they needed for survival.

Teacher Information:

This picture depicts **Native Americans** around the Tallahassee FL area (the Apalachee) burning the longleaf pine forest. However, the practice of using fire was common to all tribes throughout the longleaf pine ecosystem.

The longleaf pine forest remained a significant source of food, medicine, tools, housing materials and clothing for most **indigenous** cultures of the Southeast. **Lightning-ignited fires** played a role in creating these desired provisions; however, because these fires were stochastic in character (and thus unreliable), Indians purposely burned areas to perpetuate many of the desired plants and animals in the forest around them. Over time, the frequent fires began to mold a forest comprised of fire-tolerant longleaf pine and other plant species.

Tribal **legend** of the Alibamo Creek Indians states that Fire belonged to Bear in ancient times. However, one day Bear neglected Fire and it nearly extinguished. People heard the cries of the ailing Fire and fed it with sticks and brush. From that point on fire belonged to human beings. The respect for fire by other tribes in the southeast is evident by their calling it “grandfather”.

John Lawson, an early explorer of the Carolina’s in the late 1600’s made note of the local Indians that “no people have better eyes, or see better in the night or day, than the Indians. Some allege, that the smoke of the Pitch-Pine (longleaf pine), which they chiefly burn, does both preserve and strengthen the eyes”.

The Apalachee Indians depicted in this picture are using fatwood **knots** from a longleaf pine tree to ignite the combination of wiregrass and pine needles. The fire that followed moved quickly across the ground, cleansing it of dead debris. This fire did not make its way up into the treetops of the longleaf pine.

Key Words and Concepts: indigenous, knot, legends, lightning-ignited fires, Native American.