

## **REFLECTIONS ON ELLENSBURG**

Personal Thoughts on a Tribal/District Training Opportunity

Working Together to Address Natural Resource Challenges:  
Tribal/Conservation District Skills and Strategies for a Better Earth

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On May 23, 2017, in Ellensburg (WA), approximately 30 people were privileged to have their respective paths come together for a shared journey of learning. Del Laverdure was the lead facilitator. He is of the Crow Nation in Montana. Del served four years in Washington, D.C., as Acting Assistant Secretary and Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs at the U.S. Department of the Interior.

The tone for the day was wonderfully set when Del invited the participants to join him outside and form a circle. It is my understanding that in Native culture, the circle is symbolic of equality, where no person is more prominent than any other person. If that understanding is accurate, this was an ideal way to congregate for the blessing that followed. Del gave the blessing in his native language and repeated it in English. What then followed was a first time opportunity for me: to witness and be part of a sage burning ceremony. The purpose was to cleanse and purify our minds of negative energy so that we would be open to learning from one another and embracing the information to be shared throughout the day.

I was and am grateful for this ceremony. In order to effectively partner with tribes on conservation projects, I recognize that I must know more about tribal customs, traditions and perspectives. Relationships are the heart of effective partnerships, and perhaps even more so when the partners come from different cultural perspectives. The day was a valuable reminder for me that I can do more to be an effective partner by investing time in learning about my partners. Practicing that kind of respect will support working together in partnership to advance healthy land, air and water (what I call LAW).

Back inside Del embarked on a teaching journey that made very effective use of experiences from his life to illustrate given points of his presentation. His ability to invite questions and dialogue, making the day interactive, was a welcome departure from more traditional training events I have attended. Del's poise, humor, respect, pride, thoughtfulness, experience, wisdom and patience were the perfect blend for leading and sharing the day.

Under Del's hand and voice we were guided through a number of topics:

- His background
- Some federal history on tribal relationships
- Developments since the 1980s
- Concerns about intergovernmental agreements
- Elements of successful agreements and relationships
- Starting to talk
- Lessons from cases
- Indian water rights

Specific examples were introduced: Skagit County and the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community; and the Nez Perce.

In the afternoon there was discussion of 15 issues that had been identified throughout the day for more attention.

I must also give praise to another presenter, our wonderful WACD Tribal Relations Committee Chair, Tanna Engdahl. It is an ongoing personal pleasure to count her as a friend (and her wonderful life partner, husband Lynn). Her spirit and passion as a recognized Spiritual Leader of the Cowlitz Indian Tribe is virtually inexhaustible and a source of inspiration for me.

Tanna shared information about her Nation, the tribes in Washington State, and commented on a possible partnership opportunity for conservation districts and tribes in responding to the culvert repair court case.

Accompanying this paper are the notes taken by scribe extraordinaire, Ray Ledgerwood, who wears three hats for the Washington State Conservation Commission: Regional Manager Coordinator / Program Facilitator / Southeastern Washington Regional Manager. Also available are the PowerPoints used by Del and Tanna.

This was an excellent day. Insights I gained include:

- We have three mothers: our birth mother, our home, and Earth.
- We have two shoulders. One is light. One is shadow. Feed the light shoulder.
- As you are busy as a human, doing; pause to be a human being. To pause is to invoke a sacred event. Simply pause when the need arises – take a respite, a breath, a moment before resuming the particular activity. In the pause, one can find internal refreshment and rejuvenation to rebalance and then continue the journey.
- Process reveals intention. Life is a process.
- The spirit of everything is in the earth.

- Something may be fixed in your mind as real, but not be true. Example: Many believe that tribes do not often lose in court. The fact is that 90% of court cases involving tribes are decided against the tribes. Beware of: “It’s real, but not true.” That is, we are all susceptible to assumptions which, if not periodically verified, may limit our ability to view an issue from another perspective. In turn, this can affect the development of relationships that are necessary to effect working partnerships.
- Find similarities first, then address differences.
- Find points of common ground and build bridges.
- Ask questions of those who are silent.
- Sometimes a breakdown leads to a breakthrough.
- Be who you are.
- Each word has a spirit of its own. Be careful what you speak.
- Rivers are the lifeblood of tribes.
- In the Cowlitz world, salmon and cedar are the foundation of lifeway.

I close by sharing in the Crow language, “Shinnuuck” – until our paths cross again.