Speaker 1:

Walk into the native prairie and close your eyes. What do you notice? Can you smell flowers blooming? Do you hear insects buzzing? Can you feel plants with a variety of shapes and textures?

The diversity of life around you is an example of how people can play a role in cultivating a diverse community of life if we commit to playing our part. People have influenced Skinner Butte's ecosystem for tens of thousands of years, but how humans have related to the landscape has changed over time. Dr. David Lewis explains how the first peoples of the Willamette Valley understood and intended the land.

Dr. David Lewis:

Indigenous peoples of the Eugene area and Lane County are the Kalapuya people. They thought of the land, not as a resource to be extracted from, but more as almost like a family member, like they're related to it.

So they have a relationship with it because they knew the land and the water and everything else around them. The plants and the animals all sustained them, made their lives good, and they thought of it as they saw themselves living a wealthy life because they had so much food and they had a lot of beauty around them.

And so they saw themselves in some way as kind of stewards of the land. By setting fires, they would be helping it to revive itself or sort of renew itself. Every year, the Kalapuyans would set fire to the prairies and let them burn. Between August and September of each summer, the fires would burn off the last year's growth of dead grasses and then prepare the way for plants that the tribes wanted to eat or process at some point.

Speaker 1:

When non-native settlers arrived, they brought with them new ways of viewing and interacting with the land.

Dr. David Lewis:

I think that's quite a bit of change that happened when settlers came into the valley, changes to how we think about the land. I think of it more as a philosophical way that settlers who came valued agriculture. So anything that was not agricultural or had too much water or something, they had to sort of fix that and change it quite a bit. In fact, only 1% of the valley is actually still a native landscape. The rest of it has been altered by either cities or by agriculture.

Speaker 1:

Removing fire, draining wetlands, and introducing invasive species dramatically changed Skinner Butte. Lauri Holts, an ecologist with the City of Eugene Parks and Open Space Division, talks about the ecological history of the park and how the park is working to care for the land today.

Lauri Holts:

Historically, at least pre-European settlement, the Butte had prairies on the west, south, and east slopes. And so those habitats were dominated by native grasses, native wildflowers that were primarily blooming in the spring and summer, and then with scattered oaks and potentially other tree species. And so at a place like Skinner Butte where we had historic prairies, we often strive to reestablish that within reason.

Speaker 1:

The lack of cultural burning, planting by European settlers, and the growth of invasive species has allowed forest to grow on the Butte in areas that used to be prairies. The dense vegetation creates new challenges for the park and surrounding neighborhoods.

Lauri Holts:

The ecological work that we are focusing on primarily is related to wildfire risk reduction. And the reason that's ecological work is that a lot of the woody material that we're removing is also consists of invasive species.

And so by eliminating what we call ladder fuels going up into the bigger trees, it reduces the risk of wildfire, which of course is a big deal with a park in the middle of the city adjacent to homes and businesses and historic homes.

And then removal of invasive species helps improve the habitat for native wildlife that really depend on native species and don't necessarily get the same either nutrient value or habitat value out of invasive species.

Speaker 1:

Planting and protecting native species is another way the city tends the land. The native prairie around you is one example of how the park's department is trying to reintroduce some of the lost diversity while creating better experiences for visitors and staff.

Lauri Holts:

15 years ago, the folks that were doing the regular mowing were struggling with it because there was so much seepage and moisture and it just made a muddy mess. And so we basically went in and dug up the turf and planted a whole bunch of native prairie species there.

And so all those native wildflowers that we planted are allowed to bloom and go through their full life cycle so that they can bloom and provide nectar and so on for pollinators, but also complete their life cycle and drop seed back into that area. And it can kind of be perpetuating a little prairie.

And some of the things that you'll notice out there, besides it being much taller and there being flowers mixed in with the grasses, if you were to walk into the middle of that prairie area in the summer and just stop and listen and watch, you would have hundreds of different insects buzzing and flying around you.

Whereas if you stand in the middle of a lawn that's four inches tall, at most, you might have a few bees buzz by or a few little insects, but it is pretty dramatic to see that difference and experience that.

Speaker 1:

While we cannot recreate the past, we can learn from contemporary indigenous experts and scientists to inform how we care for the land moving forward.

Dr. David Lewis:

I think that tribes, we've been here for more than 10,000 years, some people say as long as 30,000 years. And we know from our stories and from our way of thinking about the world that we learn to live here sustainably, and we believe that other people should establish that type of relationship with the land as well. I think it's better for everybody to have more long-term views and more respect for where we live.

Speaker 1:

To learn more, visit the city of Eugene's Parks and Open Space Division website and read Dr. Lewis's book: Tribal Histories of the Willamette Valley. This project was created by the Shelton McMurphey Johnson House Museum and was made possible, in part, by the National Endowment for the Humanities.