



Preserving Natural Resources and Cherokee Cultural Knowledge

The Revitalization of Traditional Cherokee Artisan Resources (RTCAR) initiative is a grantmaking program whose purpose is to assist the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI) as the tribe works to restore the traditional Cherokee balance between maintaining and using natural resources like river cane, white oak and clay. RTCAR has been undertaken to teach, protect and promote Cherokee traditional art, resources and land care for present and future generations.

Traditional tribal practices ensured that Cherokee people used natural resources with respect, but over the past century, development, agriculture and tourism in western North Carolina have taken a toll on the environment.

The imbalances that have caused modern-day shortages of nature resources have been especially apparent to Cherokee basket weavers, potters and carvers. When river cane that is used as a basketry material largely disappears throughout the southeast United States -- or when the population of butternut, an important dye, shrinks because of a blight -- the ability to sustain Cherokee cultural traditions is seriously challenged. For Cherokee artisans, it is impossible to separate the environment that surrounds them from the art that they create.

Identifying the Underlying Problems

Cherokee Preservation Foundation was established in 2000 to improve the quality of life of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI) and strengthen the western North Carolina region by focusing on cultural preservation, environmental protection and economic development.

One of the foundation's initial efforts was to help the EBCI address its dwindling basket artisan population. In the years following the opening of the Great Smoky Mountain National Park in 1934, many members of Cherokee families wove complex, beautiful baskets and sold them to park

visitors as a means of keeping food on their tables. Family members shared their cultural knowledge with each other, and their artistic traditions thrived.

As the 21st century began, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians was finally beginning to prosper after

150 years of financially trying times. The establishment of a casino on tribal land and the resulting economic development led to more career opportunities for members of the tribe.

Cherokee artistic production was no longer an economic necessity, and by 2000, only a few dozen artisans were weaving baskets. They all were elders.

This trend of choosing non-artisan careers threatened the cultural fabric of the tribe because in Native American communities, art is much a part of the culture as is the practice of using the tribal language and living the community values that have been passed down from one generation to the next. Cherokee Preservation Foundation began providing grants to bring elders and younger members of the tribe together to revitalize cultural traditions.



But a shrinking artisan population was not the only problem. Natural resources for artisans were already in short supply, and there was recognition that if the tribe was successful in attracting younger generations of Cherokee artists to learn and perpetuate their tribe's traditions, the supply of natural materials available for use needed to be ensured.

Creating a Comprehensive Solution

Consequently, Cherokee Preservation Foundation launched RTCAR to help the Eastern Band resolve a complex problem that many tribes now face: *Preserving the natural resources that are integral to cultural preservation.*

RTCAR's strategy is to make ample resources available to Cherokee artisans, and to ensure that traditional knowledge is preserved and used.

The program is funded primarily by Cherokee Preservation Foundation and operated through the Cherokee Studies program at Western Carolina University. Representatives from the EBCI, Western Carolina University, the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and Cherokee Preservation Foundation serve as advisors.

Natural Resource Strategy

The natural resource strategy involves mapping existing stands of river cane, expanding acreage and access to materials through land protection and stewardship practices, incorporating RTCAR's priorities in existing plans and research, and creating a clearinghouse to connect artisans with the necessary resources.

Partners in these efforts include the Qualla Arts & Crafts Mutual, tribal government resources, research teams at Western Carolina University and the University of Tennessee, GIS experts at the University of Georgia, land trusts, watershed associations, grassroots organizations interested in the botanical heritage of the Southern Appalachians, and many landowners.

An unexpected benefit to the entire region has been that as landowners and county planners have come to understand the importance of river cane in protection of wildlife habitats, stream bank stabilization and cultural preservation, they have been eager to get on board.

Cultural Preservation Strategy

RTCAR is also implementing a unique strategy of preserving cultural knowledge by engaging the Cherokee people in peer-to-peer sharing, promoting the Cherokee as experts and teachers in the research agenda, teaching about Cherokee culture, and connecting Cherokee artisans with groups that are engaged in their own preservation efforts.

Cultural projects include redesign of the Cherokee Botanical Garden, working on the landscape for the new school complex to ensure that culturally significant native plants shade and beautify the campus, and helping Cherokee High School expand its basketry program, thus putting the knowledge of traditional crafts in the hands of the next generation.

Ten years ago, only two EBCI basket makers were regularly making double-weave baskets. Today there are 23 weavers on the Qualla Boundary creating the difficult-to-make baskets, and 16 of them are current or recently graduated Cherokee High School students.

RTCAR's Concept May Be Useful to Others

Much has been accomplished through the RTCAR initiative in just four years as we have addressed intertwining issues involving culture and the environment. Today, a younger generation of artisans is committed to perpetuating Cherokee traditions. And by maintaining the natural balance, the environment will continue to provide inspiration – and supplies – for many generations of artists to come.

Other tribes face challenges with issues involving the interface between artistic traditions and the environment. Perhaps RTCAR can serve as a model program for Indian County. It may also be a starting point for other foundations as they cultivate relationships with Native American tribes.

For more information about RTCAR, call Beth Johnson at 828-554-6925, or visit RTCAR on the Web at www.rtcар.org.

