

## **A Framework Crystallizes**

At an [Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians Climate Camp](#) in 2019, Juan Cancel (the assistant director for the Tribal Heritage Preservation Office - THPO), Paul Backhouse (the director for the Heritage Environmental Resource Office - HERO), and James Charles (a consultant and attorney who has worked with the Tribe for the last 18 years) talked for hours about their ideas for addressing the concerns and risks from multiple threats to the [Seminole Tribe of Florida's](#) (STOF) cultural heritage and resources. Paul and James had previously attended an energy conference which initially sparked the idea of developing a climate change plan, followed by approval from Tribal leadership to pursue grant funding. The three went to the camp as part of the first phase of the process: developing a vulnerability assessment. The Team had always conceptualized a traditionally centered plan but what that might look like was not clear. It was those hours, spent away from the office, in a cabin in Montana, talking at length about the observations of impacts to cultural resources and engaging with other Tribes, where the framework for a culturally centered plan crystallized. Additionally, their mindset shifted: their approach would have climate change be the lens through which everything would be filtered. Back at home, Quenton Cypress, the community engagement manager for the HERO, would become a key figure in this process as well. The HERO was originally created to act as the umbrella for the THPO, the Environmental Resources Management Department, and the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum. This collaborative structure reflects and is consistent with the traditional beliefs of the Seminole people that there is no separation between environment and culture.

## **Rooted in the Land**

Throughout the 1800s, the US government and the indigenous people of the lands now called Florida, Georgia, Alabama, and Tennessee, were at war. US government scouts had come to the northern part of Florida near Tallahassee, looked around, and reported back that all Natives must be removed, by force if necessary, and that the US was free to develop the land. When colonizers began encountering Native people, the convenient myth was then created that the Native people had arrived after the development began, which was far from the truth.

In the 100 years of war that followed, the Seminole Tribe had the advantage of knowing the unique landscape; the US troops arrived wearing heavy coats and big boots to fight in the swamplands that the Native people knew inside and out through millennia of hunting, gathering, farming, and navigating. The wars were devastating to both sides; ultimately after great loss of life and resources, the fighting ceased, but no peace treaty or agreement was signed. Between deaths and forced relocations, the number of Seminole left in Florida had dwindled down to a few hundred people. Today, they are 4000 tribal members strong. Their traditional knowledge and practice have guided the Seminoles to thrive for thousands of years. Protecting this is what is driving them to carefully analyze the vulnerabilities and risks to their cultural resources, and put a plan in place for protection, adaptation, and resilience.

“Seminole Tribe of Florida” is the name given to one of the indigenous tribes of South Florida, although they are made up of many ancestral people. As a good analogy, the Tribe is likened to an oak tree or a cypress tree: rooted in the ground, coming from the same soil, roots, and trunk.

As the branches spread out, so do the people across the land. Every branch has more leaves and branches, but they are born from the same soil, and are the same people.



The STOF is now divided into seven Reservations and multiple Trust lands, and while each Reservation inhabits their own unique types of land and ecosystems and has their own cultural significance, they also collectively form the basis of the Tribe's social, cultural, religious, political, and economic life. Importantly, most areas of each Reservation have been impacted by various external, man-made developments, whether that is the development of cities, such as on the Hollywood Reservation, or by water control projects, such as on and around the Big Cypress Reservation. The STOF's lands are under pressure from multiple sources, interwoven with climate change, which means their entire culture is at risk.

### Observing Changes

In their work as heritage and cultural preservers, Quenton, Juan, and others in the office were noticing that archaeological sites were being impacted by sea level rise. They and other community members started asking questions about protecting and preserving their cultural resources, not only from the observed sea level rise, but by other, man-made impacts as well, such as previous wars, land reduction and encroachment, and development. Frequent observations were adding up into big concerns, and they knew these issues were not going to

go away. They also knew that not all of the impacts would necessarily be categorized as climate issues, but they could all be traced back to human impact. The impacts were transforming their everyday way of life, and combined were leading to the gradual change of traditional Seminole culture.

Which is why they knew that any resiliency planning, vulnerability assessments, or other adaptation work must have a culturally-based framework. They recognized that this assessment would be different from others conducted by state and local governments that they were aware of, which tended to focus more on the impacts to Western planning sectors like infrastructure, capital improvements, and human life, with a lesser amount of attention given to the cultural practices and resources that are critical to Seminole identity.

They are, of course, seeing the well-documented climate impacts that the rest of Central and South Florida are experiencing, such as rising annual temperatures; increasing heavy downpours, storm events, and flooding; escalating intensity, frequency, duration, and strength of hurricanes; increasing periods of extreme drying; increasing wildfires; expanding pests and diseases; increasing freshwater demands with saltwater intrusion and decreasing freshwater supply; rising sea levels; and accelerating loss of land. But the impacts to the Seminole from a cultural perspective does not start and end with that which can be observed in environmental science. Traditional medicine, hunting, and ceremonies are all vulnerable to climate impacts, and the threats to these cultural resources and practices must be incorporated in any future climate change planning.

### **Cultural Resiliency Planning**

The interconnected worldview of the oak tree and how their people all came from the same soil extends to the approach the Seminole embody in their resiliency planning efforts. They are looking at ways to be resilient, regardless of what the external pressure is (e.g., man made developments, climate change) and how it affects biodiversity. Since all systems are interconnected, loss in one area can lead to loss in another, and resiliency building in one area can create resiliency in another. The oral traditions and observations of tribal members and elders are valued as sound science, just as much as is western science.



Accessing that knowledge has been one of the greatest challenges the STOF has faced, primarily due to the coronavirus. South Florida was hit hard by COVID-19 at about the same time the STOF was launching their vulnerability assessment efforts, and the last thing anyone wanted to do was increase the risks to their members, particularly their elders. Trying to reach out to all the different walks of life in their community - including cattlemen and city dwellers, elders and youth, internet users and those less technology-savvy - creates challenges. There is power in hearing someone's words in person, a power which can be lost when presentations and conversations are moved online. But in the pandemic, all gathering opportunities were gone. They are finding that those with access to and experience with technology are easier to engage, and so finding ways to engage with the rest of the community - especially the elders - has become their mission.

The interviews they have completed generally show consistent responses in observations, regardless of whether the person is 18 or 67, that they are seeing profound changes in the environment. The Big Cypress Reservation used to be swampy, but now is much less so. There are different critters in the area. There was no freeze this winter. The summers are hotter. The plants they used to gather are now more difficult to find, or long distances must be traveled to find them. There is more bear, deer, and panther activity in the area (likely because they are being pushed out of nearby areas due to development). Pelicans were first observed flying towards the Big Cypress Reservation two years ago, likely to breed in new grounds because of the loss of old breeding grounds. The incidence of lyme disease is on the rise. And so on. How all these changes (among the many others) are impacting the Seminole's traditional practices, affecting cultural identities, and pressuring their ways of life are critical risks to identify.

The core team working on the three-phase adaptation planning effort (1- Risk-Based Vulnerability Assessment and data analysis, 2- development of an Adaptation Plan, and 3-



Implementation of the Adaptation Plan) is fortunate that all levels of the Seminole Tribal leadership supports the effort and believes in doing it, but moreover the team has one of the most important qualities for success of any team: they like each other. They work well together. They trust each other. So although the STOF are in their initial stages of this effort, there is no doubt they will create a truly Seminole plan that honors and respects the Seminole people, rooted deeply in the earth with branches expanded.

