



Monty Hawk Branham plays at NC NAYO. Photo courtesy of Sarah Cain.

## Fire for Biodiversity, Food, and Medicine: NC NAYO Workshop Connects Native American Youth with Prescribed Fire

By: Sarah A. Cain and David R. Godwin

### Overview

In June 2025, the Southern Fire Exchange partnered with the Cultural Burn Association and tribal nation members to present an interactive workshop at the 2025 North Carolina Native American Youth Organization (NAYO) Conference at UNC Wilmington. The workshop introduced youth aged 14-18 to the cultural and ecological significance of fire as a tool for biodiversity management, traditional food production, and medicine crafting. Hands-on activities through the creation of grass bundles and storytelling by Courtney Steed (Lumbee Tribe) and Monty “Hawk” Branham (Catawba Nation) provided a unique experiential learning opportunity, complemented by discussions about career pathways in fire science and management.

### The Need

Indigenous fire stewardship represents a vital but often underrecognized aspect of ecological and cultural landscape management, particularly in the southeast. The NC NAYO Workshop helped address a critical need to reconnect North Carolina Native American youth with traditional fire knowledge while linking these practices to modern fire science and career opportunities. This workshop supported awareness of cultural burning and prescribed fire science while empowering youth with tools to engage with land stewardship in meaningful ways.

### The Experience

Led by Courtney Steed, Lumbee fire practitioner and Executive Director of the Cultural Burn Association, over 60 youth attendees learned about the regional history of fire use by Native Americans.



JFSP Fire Science Exchange Network



**The mission of the Southern Fire Exchange (SFE)** is to increase the availability and application of fire science information for natural resource management and to serve as a conduit for fire managers to share new research needs with the research community. The SFE is part of the Joint Fire Science Program Fire Science Exchange Network, a national consortium of 15 regional fire science exchanges.

The participants then crafted grass bundles, recreating the same tools used in traditional burning practices. Monty “Hawk” Branham shared his deep cultural knowledge as a Catawba Nation elder and craftsman as well as played his flute, enriching the experience with stories and traditional teachings. The Southern Fire Exchange contributed a presentation on the science behind fire’s ecological benefits and fire-related career pathways.

### SFE’s Role

The Southern Fire Exchange coordinated the workshop and provided fire science expertise, educational materials, facilitation, and career mentoring. Sarah Cain, SFE Outreach Specialist, facilitated the workshop and helped design and deliver the fire science and career segment, integrating cultural perspectives with contemporary fire management knowledge. SFE’s involvement ensured that participants left with both traditional and scientific understanding of fire’s benefits and pathways to engage with fire professionally.

### Learn More

Visit <https://southernfireexchange.org> to explore how SFE supports training, partnerships, and science communication across the Southeast.

Visit <https://www.culturalburnassociation.org/> to learn more about the organization and their upcoming events.

## OUTCOMES

- Youth engagement with Indigenous fire stewardship and cultural heritage
- Hands-on learning through crafting and fire demonstrations
- Increased awareness of fire’s role in biodiversity, food production, and medicine
- Introduction to fire science and career opportunities through SFE resources and mentorship
- Strengthened partnerships among the Southern Fire Exchange, Cultural Burn Association, and regional tribal nations



Courtney Steed and Monty Hawk Branham present at NC NAYO. Photos courtesy of Sarah Cain.



Learn more about our partners, products, and activities at [southernfireexchange.org](https://southernfireexchange.org).  
Learn more about the Joint Fire Science Program and the Fire Science Exchange Network at [firescience.gov](https://firescience.gov).