Don Hankins

Environmental geographer and Miwkoʔ cultural practitioner

Don L. Hankins is an environmental geographer, university teacher, and Miwkoʔ—Plains Miwok—traditional cultural practitioner whose work centers on the lands and waters of California. He is a professor in California State University, Chico’s Geography and Environmental Studies Department and field director of the Big Chico Creek Ecological Reserve. His training includes an undergraduate degree in Wildlife, Fish and Conservation Biology and a geography doctorate from the University of California, Davis, completed in 2005. His working life extends from vegetation plots and student field trips to Delta restoration designs, Indigenous organizations, and negotiations about who can use fire on ancestral lands. 1, 2

The geographical center of his cultural practice is the Sacramento–San Joaquin Delta, while much of his teaching and field research takes place farther north, around Chico. He has also worked in Australia. These are distinct worlds with their own practitioners and responsibilities. His collaborations depend on the authority and relationships of people in those places. 2, 4, 14

A Bay Area childhood, a grandfather, and a language sought out

Mary Ellen Hannibal’s 2014 reported profile identifies Plains Miwok ancestry on his mother’s side and Osage ancestry on his father’s. She describes his parents as living at some distance from that cultural inheritance; his grandfather taught him through outdoor activities. At UC Davis, alongside his scientific education, Hankins pursued Native American studies. Catherine Callaghan’s dictionary helped him begin learning Miwkoʔ, and Callaghan directed him to an elder in a convalescent home. Finding other speakers was a long search. Hannibal also reported that he was teaching his children. Her account supports a history of recovery through particular people and patient study, rather than a claim that he inherited an uninterrupted, comprehensive education in every aspect of traditional practice. It does not establish tribal enrollment. 3

Language subsequently became a working instrument. In his 2018 Delta essay, Hankins connects waaliʔ—world and land—with place names, species, and responsibilities. His examples include Kosomne, associated with toyon, and Mokelumne, associated with a fish net. He describes land and water moieties, social divisions with associated obligations. These are his published explanations of Miwkoʔ knowledge. 6

Language recovery matters to his later career because a cultural account can explain why a

species, its harvest, or a particular place matters to people. His writings retain this account alongside scientific identification.

His undergraduate interest in wildlife conservation was similarly connected to cultural relationships. In a 2020 Water Talk interview, he recalled thinking about the predicament of species that were also important in Indigenous stories. He did not arrive at fire solely through firefighting. Animals, plants, water, and the relationships between them were already part of the question he was trying to pursue. 7

Condors, drawing, and the first research burns

Hankins' s work with California condors in southern California during summer and fall 1998 is documented in his own artist statement for Linda Yamane' s California Indian Condor Art, published by the Ventana Wildlife Society in 2020. Near places associated with Chumash stories, including Lion Canyon, he studied the birds' movement and social behavior. His ink drawing Molluk imagined them without the identification tags used in conservation work. Another work, The Day Before They Came, used ochre, charcoal, and duck fat collected within Miwkoʔ waaliʔ. Its imagery brings condor, fire, water, and ceremonial geography together. 8

Conservation observation and cultural imagination occupied the same life. His drawings provide evidence of work beyond publication: attention to movement, materials, and cultural meaning. They are art and the artist' s account of that meaning; they cannot independently demonstrate the ecological relationships depicted.

Hankins dated his first burn to 2002 in Hannibal' s interview. His doctoral-era research investigated Indigenous prescribed fire in central California' s riparian ecosystems—the vegetation and habitats influenced by rivers and streams. 3, 9

The study published in Ecological Processes in July 2013 used sites on Cache Creek, in Patwin territory, and the Mokelumne River, in Plains Miwok territory. Interviews with elders, practitioners, and land managers, alongside historical and linguistic material, informed hypotheses. Vegetation transects measured ground, shrub, and canopy layers; monitoring continued after burns. The first treatments followed autumn rains in 2002. Planned seasonal comparisons were altered by nesting birds, air-quality constraints, and staffing. Only a limited summer treatment could be implemented. The findings supported some benefits for native vegetation after fall burning, while annual variation and canopy responses did not substantiate every hypothesis. 9

The changed design shows how his vocation operates: deciding whether land is ready, defining a research comparison, and securing people and permission. Ecological and institutional calendars jointly shape the evidence a project can produce.

His institution-building began during graduate school. In UC Davis' s 2004–05 Preparing Future Faculty fellowship, Hankins organized a seminar connecting graduate students with

the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Yolo Basin Foundation, and California Indian Basketweavers' Association. Eighteen graduate students participated. Topics included research needs, funding, and contracting; the questions ranged from endangered-species genetics to plant toxicity. His written evaluation considered how a more focused format might improve participation. 10

That small event anticipates a recurrent task in his later life: making institutions able to work together. The university offers students and analytical skills; agencies and community organizations bring problems, land relationships, and needs. A workable connection requires someone to organize the encounter and understand the different conditions under which each party operates.

Australia and the social life of fire knowledge

A 2020 report by The World places an important Australian experience in 2003: flying over northern Australia while traveling for dissertation research, Hankins saw small, deliberately set fires. The account describes their significance as an example of Indigenous burning continuing within a landscape, rather than existing only in records of the past. His later fieldwork included the Kaanju Ngaachi Indigenous Protected Area on Cape York Peninsula; the UC Agriculture and Natural Resources interview pictures him sampling vegetation there. 11, 4

Australia offered comparisons involving ecosystems, communities, and land tenure. The question was how knowledge survives and how people retain access to country when the institutions employing practitioners operate under a different law and purpose.

With geographer Christine Eriksen, Hankins examined these social questions. Their 2013 Current Conservation article drew on narratives shared during burns, workshops, field trips, conversations, and interviews in California, New South Wales, and Queensland. They argued that knowledge was dynamic, and that the people carrying it could change across generations. They also described a contradiction: employment with firefighting agencies could reconnect Indigenous people with land while requiring practices or knowledge-sharing inconsistent with cultural protocols. Their discussion of gender reflects the communities and accounts they studied, rather than a rule applicable to every Indigenous society. 12

His collaborators can disagree about successful stewardship, entitlement to teach, and what may be shared. Such relationships are part of the work's substance.

His 2018 essay draws on Christine F. Black and Raymond D. Austin's Indigenous jurisprudence, Robin Wall Kimmerer and Enrique Salmón's ecological thought, Deborah Bird Rose's kinship work, and Ursula Heise's multispecies justice. These are textual influences; personal mentorship is not established. 6

Chico: a workplace, a reserve, and people learning together

At Chico, Hankins' s institutional base is a public university. His current directory records teaching access through scheduled student hours and appointments, alongside the reserve field-director role. These ordinary arrangements matter: field practice is embedded in a job with students, courses, meetings, and university responsibilities. His public record does not establish the proportion of his income supplied by university employment, consulting, or particular projects. His 2024 PNAS disclosure does establish that he researches, advises, consults, and contracts on ecocultural restoration, principally fire. 1, 13

The Big Chico Creek Ecological Reserve makes repeated, local work possible. In a 2015 proceedings paper, Hankins reported oak-woodland burns at the reserve in 2011 and 2012 and at the Cosumnes River Preserve in 2013. Local Indigenous involvement differed by place: Mechoopda and Konkow Valley Maidu participants at Chico; Ione and Wilton Miwok, other Miwok descendants, and California Indian Water Commission participants at Cosumnes. Fire crews, preserve staff, students, and volunteers also contributed. The work was partly supported by a National Science Foundation Coupled Natural–Human Systems grant. 5

The study used 20-by-20-meter vegetation plots and practitioner judgments of culturally significant resources. At Chico, native cover differed significantly among fire-history treatments; several other measures did not. At Cosumnes, results were less clear, with drought complicating recovery. Hankins presented the findings as preliminary. Counting usable basketry or food resources alongside ecological measurements changed what success could mean, while retaining the distinction between observations and statistically supported results. 5

In his 2020 Water Talk interview, Hankins described work at Twin Spring Meadows beginning in 2012. A roughly two-and-a-half-acre site dominated by yellow star-thistle became a place for repeated burning and observation. Moisture differences across the meadow helped contain an autumn fire. By the interview, three burns had occurred; native grasses and flowering plants remained green longer. Piezometers—devices for observing groundwater levels—allowed comparison of upland and swale conditions. These were his reported field observations and research approach, not a published estimate that every meadow burn increases water supply by a predictable amount. 7

A burn is one intervention within repeated visits: observing plants, water, and seasonal changes, then deciding what to do next.

His teaching also extends through other universities' networks. UC Davis' s Keepers of the Flame project identifies Hankins among Indigenous partners sharing time and knowledge, alongside Ron Goode, Diana Almendariz, Danny Manning, Valentin Lopez, Julie and Carly Tex, and Frank Lake. The program combines workshops with a course addressing Indigenous-led burns and protocols for respectful learning. Beth Rose Middleton Manning, Melinda Adams, and Deniss Martinez are among the scholars associated with it. 14

These relationships explain how a career can reproduce itself through people rather than only papers. A student can learn vegetation sampling in one setting, encounter a cultural practitioner in another, and eventually work in an organization capable of maintaining land. The path requires permission, trust, and continuity; attending a single burn does not confer another community's cultural authority.

[External image / 外部圖片] Staff and students taking part in a cultural burn coordinated by Don Hankins
Staff and students at a Chico State campus cultural burn coordinated by Don Hankins. The source identifies it as the first campus cultural burn in more than 170 years. Jake Hutchison, Enterprise-Record / Friends of the Ahart Herbarium · Rights retained by the source and respective rights holders; no open license stated. · Image source

What happens at a burn

Hankins's work is frequently grouped under cultural burning. For clarity, prescribed fire is intentional fire conducted to meet specified objectives under selected conditions. Cultural burning includes ecological purposes but is also situated in Indigenous responsibilities, relationships, and cultural goals. These categories can overlap operationally while differing in authority and meaning. The Good Fire II report, which he coauthored, argues for recognizing cultural burning as distinct from an agency simply authorizing prescribed fire. 15

On Science Friday in 2020, Hankins described reading wind, soil, weather, and vegetation moisture, and using landscape boundaries without automatically raking mineral-soil lines. In discussion with Karuk practitioner Bill Tripp, he explained how an agency's chosen timing can conflict with cultural indicators of an appropriate season or place. 16

A vivid example comes from Ryan Schnurr's account of a March 2022 burn at Verbena Fields, a restored site in Chico. Mechoopda practitioner Ali Meders-Knight led the event; Hankins participated with pitch sticks and shredded cottonwood bark used for ignition. Participants learned by taking part. Keeping Meders-Knight's role visible is necessary to understand his practice: a Miwok professor collaborating in Mechoopda country participates in another person's local work, rather than automatically leading it. 17

The distinction also prevents a misleading picture of Indigenous burning as uniformly gentle fire applied in exactly the same way everywhere. In his 2024 synthesis, Hankins recognizes a range of fire effects and purposes. His concept of ʔelelte-—reading—combines presence in the landscape, sensory attention, and cultural understanding. Remote sensing and models can help, but cannot substitute for that presence. He illustrates how sourberry can provide different resources at different stages after fire: regenerating shoots for basketry and older shrubs for berries. A mosaic of patches at different stages can accommodate these different needs. 13

Working method and cultural purpose are inseparable: minimizing fuel may not produce

usable weaving material. Competence includes recognizing different outcomes and knowing whose judgment is relevant.

In the 2022 Good Fire podcast's published notes, Hankins describes beginning burns with acknowledgement and prayer while emphasizing that protocols differ. He also discusses young practitioners learning the reasons for burning particular landscapes at particular times. The notes support these specific elements of his public account; they are not evidence for reconstructing private religious beliefs or ceremonies beyond what he chose to share. 18

The Delta: from objection to a working restoration partnership

Water is equally central to his work. The Delta's rivers, wetlands, farms, levees, and water-delivery facilities also occupy Miwkoʔ waaliʔ: a lived landscape of story places and relationships.

His 2018 Ecocultural Equality essay treats culturally significant species and places as integral to restoration and conservation. It brings Miwkoʔ geographical knowledge into a specialist water-science journal. His testimony submitted in the California WaterFix proceedings, on behalf of AquAlliance and as president of the California Indian Water Commission, puts the same commitments into an adversarial institutional setting. He objected to treating the Delta chiefly as water-delivery infrastructure and articulated ancestral responsibilities and rights. These are positions in his testimony, not a court ruling that all the rights asserted had been judicially established. 6, 19

Robin Meadows reported in June 2025 that Metropolitan Water District project manager Russ Ryan had approached Hankins about five years earlier. Family connections near Old River and Clifton Court Forebay, and childhood memories of sturgeon affected by infrastructure, made the invitation consequential. Ryan visited Big Chico Creek. Hankins and Northern Sierra Mewuk culture bearer Austin Stevenot, longtime family friends, became co-chairs of Webb Tract's Ecocultural Working Group. 20

The group advocated food, medicine, basketry, and pollinator plants, and preserving dunes significant to habitat and cultural history. Topography and berm suggestions helped reduce proposed wetland units from twenty to seven. Participation was budgeted early. Meadows reports planned access for gathering and ceremony, without establishing that every promised outcome had occurred. 20

Metropolitan's August 2025 project update also credits the group with proposing a water-delivery approach resembling the pre-reclamation sloughs. This corroborates participation in the physical plan, beyond a ceremonial endorsement. 21

The collaboration changed the setting of his activity: responsibilities articulated in regulatory objections could also shape a restoration plan through paid participation and

negotiated access.

Public funding makes this work possible. In July 2026, the Delta Conservancy released $13.1 million for Webb Tract’s wetland-construction phase, within a $20.9 million grant conditionally awarded to Metropolitan in 2023. The 5,500-acre, deeply subsided island is being planned for managed wetlands and rice cultivation. The announced goals include habitat, reversing subsidence, and reducing greenhouse-gas emissions. These are project purposes and funding decisions; they do not establish completed construction or measured ecological outcomes. 40

Making stewardship financially and institutionally possible

In the 2018 UCANR interview, Hankins described projects initiated because he saw a need, often with limited funding and insufficient time for the combination of fieldwork, publication, and outreach. He recruited students and community participants. He also warned that purported integration of Indigenous knowledge could subordinate it to agency requirements. This is evidence of constraints he publicly described, not proof that he personally worked without pay in every role. 4

The recurring economic problem is that land stewardship needs continuity while funding commonly arrives as a bounded project. A burn’s success may require people to return the next season, assess a resource’s quality, train younger practitioners, and maintain relationships with landowners or agencies. Those activities are labor. An institution can invite Indigenous expertise while leaving the people who supply it without the resources to sustain the work.

The Indigenous Stewardship Network addresses this organizational dimension. Its official history dates development to 2020, with co-leads Bill Tripp, Hankins, and Mary Adelzadeh working with an interim governing board and community input; a business plan was completed in late 2022. Its current board page identifies Hankins as Recorder and Tripp as Board Speaker. The staff includes network director Rhiana Jones, administrative manager Raven Wilder Surber, and program manager Deniss J. Martinez Cortez. This is a collectively built organization with governance and administration, not a personal platform belonging to its most visible academic co-founder. 22

The 2022 podcast notes describe philanthropic interest beginning in late 2019 and an effort to connect resources with practicing communities, support learning, and engage policy. They also record Hankins’s concerns about who defines competence when cultural practitioners are evaluated through outside credentials. Funding and certification thus create opportunities and possible dependencies at the same time. 18

This work has a recent academic expression. In 2026, Hankins joined Adina Merenlender and other coauthors in Building an Effective and Inclusive Stewardship Workforce. Supported by the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, the perspective paper considered training programs, practitioner conversations, and an expert convening. It identified

seasonal employment, low pay, housing and transport barriers, and weak career pathways. Recommendations included recognizing stewardship occupations in job classifications, aligning training with employment, and investing in Indigenous leadership. It is a practice-informed perspective rather than a controlled evaluation of the effectiveness of every recommended intervention. 23

The vocabulary has become broader—from a burn or a research plot to a workforce—but the practical issue is continuous with the graduate student organizing a seminar about research needs and contracting. Who can do the work, under which conditions, with which resources, and for how long?

Reports, laws, and the limits of recognition

Hankins' s policy work is documented in the Karuk Tribe' s Good Fire reports. The first, commissioned in 2021, was written with attorneys Sara Clark and Andrew Miller. Good Fire II, dated 2024, expanded the scope to the United States; its authors include Clark, Tripp, Hankins, Colleen Rossier, Abigail Varney, and Isobel Nairn. The reports examine barriers and propose solutions. Their recommendations should be distinguished from enacted law, and their collective authorship from a claim that Hankins alone caused a legislative change. 24, 25

The second report' s proposals include paid consultation, more durable tribal funding, workforce support, protection of Indigenous knowledge, and changes to environmental review, air-quality regulation, and liability. Its underlying argument is that cultural burning cannot be expanded simply by asking practitioners to supply more volunteer expertise within an unchanged system. 15

Several California laws changed parts of that system:

- AB 642, approved in September 2021, defined cultural burning and cultural fire practitioners, required a CAL FIRE cultural burning liaison, and directed engagement with tribes, practitioners, and universities. It also addressed training and permitting. These provisions gave cultural burning institutional visibility while retaining substantial state administrative structures. 26
- SB 332, approved in October 2021, limited recovery of specified fire-suppression and related costs for qualifying burns, subject to conditions and a gross-negligence exception. It exempted cultural burns by cultural practitioners from specified burn-boss and written-prescription requirements. It did not abolish private civil actions or provide universal immunity from all liability. 27
- SB 310, enacted in 2024, enabled cultural burn agreements with federally recognized California tribes. In February 2025, the Karuk Tribe and California Natural Resources Agency announced the first such agreement, addressing state permit requirements, geographical scope, safety, notification, and collaboration. The federally recognized eligibility category is a meaningful limit; this mechanism is not an equivalent route

for every descendant community or individual practitioner. 28

These changes help explain the subjects he discusses in public: sovereignty, credentials, permits, insurance, funding, and working relationships. Ecological knowledge alone does not decide whether a person can actually return to a place and burn it.

In the November 2025 Fire Ecology editorial he led with a broad group of coauthors, Hankins argued for treating Indigenous peoples as rights holders and sharing real authority in stewardship. One concrete example was his use of a memorandum of agreement to secure plant-gathering and fire-stewardship access for affiliated families on land administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service. The authors also noted the vulnerability of agreements that can be revoked. The article's proposals connect land return, access, consultation, and planning; they remain arguments for institutional change, not evidence that every proposed right or arrangement is already operative. 29

His state-level involvement continues. The June 5, 2026 meeting record of California's Wildfire and Forest Resilience Task Force lists him on its executive committee representing the Indigenous Stewardship Network. At that meeting, the task force released a draft 2026–31 action plan. His presence establishes a formal route into statewide deliberation; it does not establish authorship of every element of the plan. 30

Living through fire, teaching after loss

In 2024, Hankins evacuated Forest Ranch during the Park Fire and followed student Michael Steinberg's updates. 31

Afterward, KQED reporter Danielle Venton accompanied him at Big Chico Creek. With land steward Ian Colunga, he examined native milkweed that had resprouted and flowered again after the fire. Monarch larvae were present. The observation suggested questions about historical burning and seasonal resource availability; his suggestion that Indigenous people may have timed fire to obtain such a response was a hypothesis, not a reconstructed historical fact. Venton's September 2024 report places his reserve burning as early as 2009. It also documents severe damage, so the presence of renewed growth cannot reasonably be used to erase loss or treat an extreme wildfire as interchangeable with a planned cultural burn. 32

His teaching sometimes changes students' relationships with that danger. Syris Valentine's 2025 Atmos report describes Kyle Mason, an Acjachemen student whose family fled the 2018 Camp Fire. A 2023 class and subsequent burns with Hankins helped Mason experience fire differently. The same report discusses disagreement over a student burn organized with the Butte County Prescribed Burn Association on the Camp Fire's sixth anniversary, November 8, 2024. Mason found the date meaningful; some community members considered it insensitive. 33

This disagreement is an important part of the human world in which Hankins works. An

ecologically appropriate burn can still carry painful meanings. The report describes a separate community pyrotherapy initiative developed by Blake Ellis, David Mitchell, and He-Lo Ramirez; it should not be attributed to Hankins as its sole creator. Nor do reported feelings of healing establish a tested clinical treatment. His classroom contributes to a wider local effort involving cultural stewardship, public communication, mental-health expertise, and people recovering from disaster. 33

The limits of scale remain substantial. In a September 2020 CapRadio interview, Hankins described Indigenous burning across California as covering only a small area compared with the ongoing wildfire footprint, and cautioned that the present landscape could not simply be managed as though contemporary settlement and land tenure did not exist. That dated assessment helps explain his attention to institutions rather than offering a current acreage estimate. 34

A broader public role, with the field still at its center

Recognition has expanded the audiences for his work. The California Academy of Sciences inducted him as a Fellow in October 2024, identifying research, restoration, policy, and art in his practice. This was election to its fellowship, not receipt of the separate Fellows Medal announced in the same release. 35

The Oakland Museum of California listed him among collaborators for Good Fire: Tending Native Lands, shown from November 7, 2025 to May 31, 2026. Its collaborators included practitioners, artists, basketweavers, scholars, and tribal organizations. The exhibition's English and Spanish presentations carried these issues into a museum setting, alongside material culture and living practice. Hankins was one contributor to that undertaking, not its sole curator or spokesman. 36, 37

His recent academic responsibilities also make room for a wider range of future practitioners. Chico's Wildland Stewardship bachelor's program identifies him, plant ecologist Kristen Kaczynski, and experiential-learning scholar Jesse Engebretson among its faculty. Its four options—Environmental Arts, Fire, Human Dimensions of Land Stewardship, and Water—give institutional form to the disciplines already intersecting in his work. 38

In March 2025, California's Fifth Climate Change Assessment named him lead author for its Tribal and Indigenous Communities Report. The call sought Indigenous scholars, practitioners, community leaders, and youth, and offered negotiated compensation of up to $25,000 for supporting authors or $590 honoraria for contributors. Those are terms of the announced contributor program, not a statement of Hankins's earnings or proof of a final report's publication. They illustrate the practical effort to make diverse participation possible. 39

Across this life, the same person moves between a species he can identify, a word he learned to recover, a student beside a flame, a family's access to gathering land, and a

public institution's rules. His work requires scientific competence, cultural learning, teaching, and the administrative patience to make collaboration last. It remains dependent on other people: elders and speakers, local practitioners, students, reserve staff, coauthors, landowners, and funders. Its achievements are best assessed at those concrete points of contact—what was learned, who could participate, which decisions changed, and whether people can return to care for the place again.

Research current to October 3, 2026. Biographical dates and identity are stated only to the extent supported by the cited public record. The sources reviewed do not establish a birth date, a complete early employment chronology, tribal enrollment, or private financial arrangements.

Sources and reading

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