

## Staff Profile: Tony Cheng

Director

*“We have to make sure we’re doing all we can do with the time we’ve been given on this planet to make sure there’s something left for future generations in terms of forests.”*

### Tony’s Story

As those who have had the experience know, one emerges from any extended conversation with Tony Cheng ready to go forth and change the world. Sometimes we fall into the trap of assuming that people with the drive and capacity to inspire others had their goals intact from an early age. That’s why it’s surprising to hear Tony describe the familiar existential crisis that most graduates of liberal arts programs face in their early 20s—after four years of study driven mostly by interest and delight in political science, Tony found himself with a degree from Whitman College (Walla Walla, WA) and no clear path forward. Seeing jobs available in natural resources fields triggered happy memories of camping, backpacking, and hiking trips Tony had experienced as a Boy Scout in the woods of the Pacific Northwest. A latent passion and interest in forests drove idealistic interest in having a job that gave Tony the opportunity to be a steward of these forests.

## Tony in a Nutshell

**Best part of the job:** After 10 years I can go out on landscape and look out into the forest and see projects that CFRI had a hand in. That’s a tangible legacy.



**Most challenging part of the job:** How do we express our impact? When we go to however many meetings or sit in on so many conference calls, we have this much money, and we produced that many reports...how to we express the meaning of that to the public?

**Best field snack:** Gorp. I could eat it all day. It’s that sweet/salty combo.

**Outside CFRI:** Family is super important, and that means being the best husband and father I know how to be (right now that involves a lot of driving, doing shuttles for my kids). I also focus on my health and fitness, and enjoy creative cooking. Using any excuse to engage with the world through travel, cross-country skiing, hiking, camping, hunting, or fishing.

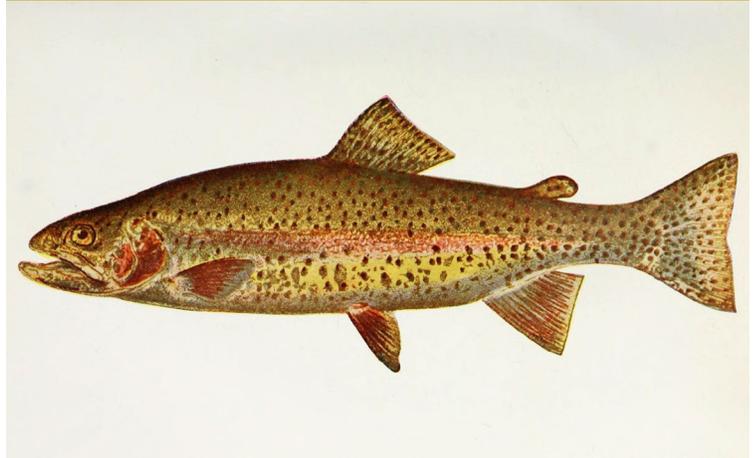


*Tony has played several instruments throughout his life, and guitar has stuck with him. He enjoys playing during sing-alongs with family and friends, and makes finger-picking compositions.*

After starting his master's work in forestry at the University of Minnesota out of "dumb luck," Tony was given a lot of freedom and opportunity for self-driven learning. The Humphry School of Public Affairs within UMN allowed him to meld his interest in public policy and forestry, and was a jumping off point to become involved with American Forests in D.C. His arrival at the NGO coincided with the spotted owl controversies of the early 90s. As this issue was spurring changes, Tony began to ask questions about how people's values end up manifesting in policy. He regularly wondered about "how people solve really big problems about use, value, and management of forests."

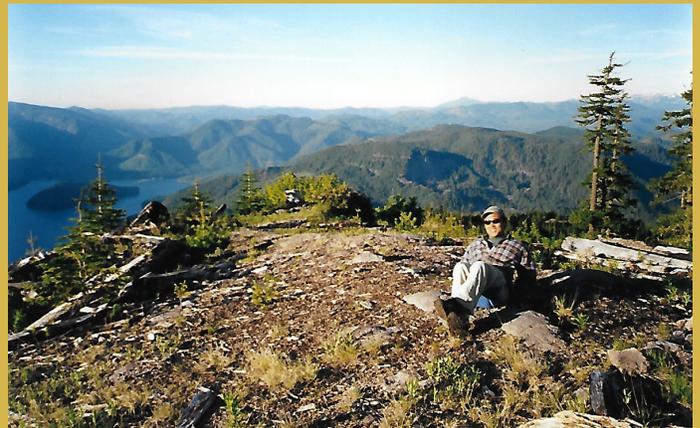
Throughout his master's work, Tony was a member of the Society of American Foresters (SAF), and he met his PhD advisor Steve Daniels at an SAF conference. Tony's PhD work at Oregon State University focused on collaboration as a way to resolve forest conflict. In the Pacific Northwest, conflicts about forest management affect communities in profound ways. Creating processes and systems for resolving conflict and developing policies has to honor the communities that rely on the forests. Or, as Tony puts it, this work "has gotta be about the people."

**Tony reflects on fishing:** "First of all, it's an excuse to go outside—it's good to have a task. It also appeals to the analytical parts of me. Going out in the water, and then thinking through the weather conditions, water temperature, air temperature, water clarity, and trying to use those to outsmart and trick the fish. It doesn't work most of the time."



### **Field Stories with Tony**

*When I was a grad student at Oregon State, I would go hunting for wild mushrooms in the fall. I'd locate old growth forest stands and just go groping around off-trail in the hunt. My roommate had just wanted to go on a standard hike, but I decided to take him to one of my familiar mushroom spots. It turned out not to be so familiar. There had been an enormous landslide in the area the season before, and as a result we had to park in a different area and then bushwhack through the woods. I got my mushrooms. By that time, we were at the bottom of the landslide, which looked even bigger from the bottom, and we weren't totally sure where the car was. We bushwhacked around more, thinking the drainage we were following would lead us to the trail. We were still out there at midnight, exhausted, dehydrated, becoming hypothermic, and not really thinking straight. All we knew was that we needed to get up out of the drainage where all the cold air was settling. We climbed up the side of this drainage about 500ft, built a fire, and stayed up all night keeping it going. When the light came up and we started to get our bearings, we took a compass reading and determined the direction we needed to head. We walked for 15, 20 minutes, came to the edge of a clear cut, and over on the other side we could see my car. We'd only stopped maybe half a mile away from it, but we really could have been anywhere in that watershed. That day I learned that no matter how short you think your outing will be, plan to spend the night.*



In 2000, Tony came to CSU as a professor. Since 2000 and 2002 were big fire years in Colorado, Tony's projects focused on organizing to plan for and deal with fire as with any other forest conflict. Seeking to optimize planning, collaboration, and conflict management, Tony built a social science research program that demonstrates how we can take a scientific approach to addressing human conflict: "science is a structured process for asking and answering questions. If you do that, you're a scientist. Social science is a science, and it's probably the most important science in forestry right now—the science of people...the biophysical problems are not the hardest problems to solve."

Tony stepped into the role of CFRI director in 2008. Under Tony, CFRI has grown in practically every way: to a full time staff of 13 (up from 2), a student field crew of around 20 (up from 0). CFRI has become part of the whole academic experience for the CSU community; we provide field experience, mentorship, and research opportunities for undergraduates, host graduate students, and engage with academic researchers and professors in the Department of Forest and Rangeland Stewardship. Outside CSU, our expertise and capacity has also grown. Monitoring has become a huge part of our reputation, and we bring a high level of spatial analytical capacity to projects that have grown in scale from a few thousand acres to hundreds of thousands. In the beginning, CFRI offered in-depth facilitation for a small number of groups. Now, we engage in collaboration around landscape-scale problems.

As a result of our growth, Tony has given up many delights of spending days out in the field. He does the critical yet mundane work of getting us all paid, and still gets to keep things interesting by engaging at the visioning level with our "amazing, smart, committed, fun, thought-provoking partners." Within our organization, Tony also recognizes the importance of his role in creating a healthy culture of work/life balance, and creating opportunities for populations that are traditionally underrepresented and undervalued in natural resources fields, including people of color and women. Tony is committed to providing opportunities for people coming into natural resources to take risks, grow, progress, and become leaders in the field.



***"We have to get out in the woods. The thing that brings us all together is the forest. And it's out there."***



***What Tony Wishes Everyone Knew about Forestry:***

***It's about people. Their values, the importance of listening, placing trust in each other that at the end of the day we all believe in the same thing.***