

The Wild in Wildfire

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The best sunset I ever saw was from Half Dome in Yosemite 30 years ago. The view from Half Dome is always sublime, but the sky that night was the kind that can change a young man's life. I'm sure sunsets like it helped give humanity its art, poetry, and religion. Sitting a mile above the valley floor, my personal concerns should have dissolved into those colours. Instead I was anxious and uneasy. As I watched the reds, oranges, and even greens roll across the dark blue background, the smell of smoke made it clear what had set that sky in motion. Forest fires were burning in Yosemite's wilderness backcountry. The glory of the sky was in direct opposition to the destruction I imagined taking place in the wilderness below me.

I didn't know much about forest fires. After a childhood filled with Smoky and Bambi, I imagined entire stretches of forest were being destroyed. I pictured a sea of blackened stumps in some of my favorite places. A fire in a national park was obviously bad, but to me a wilderness fire seemed like a profound tragedy. As a young rock climber and vigorous wilderness supporter, I felt betrayed by the fire. Generations of hard preservation work stretching back to John Muir were literally going up in smoke. Even though I knew intellectually that fire was a natural process, I saw it as an unwelcome "disturbance" in the order of things. It seemed natural only in the same unfortunate way that warts, cavities, and brain tumors seem natural. What I didn't know at the time was that several weeks later my life would begin to orbit around fire. I was about to start a long process of learning to think very differently about fire in the natural world, and especially about fire in wilderness areas.

As the summer climbing season wound down, I found a badly needed job on a Forest Service fire crew in Oregon. It seemed like the perfect job for a climber hoping to avoid year-round employment. I could make enough money in a few months to spend the rest of the year on the road, and it kept me outside and in shape. I also quickly learned it was just plain fun to work around fire.

On my very first day, we drove around in the woods throwing burning bags of what was essentially Napalm onto house-sized piles of logging slash. To my amazement, once the piles of branches and trees were fully engulfed, we would just drive away laughing. After years of Smoky Bear inspired paranoia, it seemed insane that my new fire crew was lighting 50-foot bonfires and then driving away without even looking in the rearview mirror. When I sheepishly asked if these fires would be okay, my new boss ribbed me, saying only a college educated city kid would worry about starting a forest fire on a rainy fall day in the Western Cascades. I quickly

learned that we would be lighting a lot more fires than we would be putting out. When we weren't traveling to wildfires, our job was to use fire for brush disposal. All fall, we used fire to clear mountains of scraps leftover from the logging industry. I obviously had a lot to learn about fire that they hadn't taught me in college.

My favourite part of the job was getting out of the clear-cuts and working in our ranger district's Three Sisters Wilderness Area. Any time there was work to do in the wilderness I was first to volunteer. As a kid, the Sisters were my first wilderness area. I grew up imagining adventures in the glacier-covered volcanoes that lurked just over the horizon. I would even climb trees just to get a glimpse of those mountains. All through college I would sneak up into the peaks whenever I could get a chance. Getting paid to hike into the wilderness to fight fires seemed like the best job in the world.

For one fire, I hiked across miles of lifeless lava flows to put out a single smoldering snag. When I arrived, I saw that a lone tree had become established hundreds of years ago on a tiny vegetation island the size of a living room and surrounded by an endless sea of black volcanic rock. I could see a small wisp of smoke coming out of new cracks where lightning had struck the live tree about 40 feet up. After a brief consultation over the radio, I was told to cut down the tree. It was old and scarred from multiple previous lightning strikes and it was the only living tree for almost a mile in any direction. Following orders, I brought the old tree down with my Pulaski. Chainsaws were forbidden in the wilderness. Regulations also required that I camp over night to make sure the fallen snag didn't reignite. Sitting there all night, without a fire, I had time to really consider what I had just done to help the unfolding of natural processes in the wilderness.

Just a few thousand years before, lava had covered the entire area. Now, tiny pockets of vegetation were just getting started. Even if the lightning strike had killed the snag, the resulting fire would not have brought it down. Live trees seldom burn down to stumps except in movies. Even in death, the standing snag would have continued to provide habitat options for many different species of both plants and animals as they recolonized the lava flows. For example, birds would have nested in the new cavities in the snag. As they built those nests and fed their young, they would have dropped seeds around the base and then supplied vital nutrients for the seeds with their poop. My act of wilderness management had certainly changed how those processes were going to unfold on that tiny vegetation island. The next day, I walked out feeling more than a little conflicted about my great new job.

As a child I was fed TV Westerns and Lewis and Clark stories. I imagined that wilderness areas were the hard-to-reach places at which our celebrated westward migration simply had not yet arrived. As I started college, I remember naively believing that wilderness was a description and

not a bureaucratic designation. By the time I graduated, I had learned a lot, and had become an environmental activist and avid supporter of wilderness protection. I remember many long and passionate dorm room discussions about the subtle nuances of wilderness management. My professors, friends, and I would argue about whether one should be allowed to use a helicopter for a rescue, whether metal trail signs were appropriate, or whether hunting, bikes, or even electric toothbrushes were anathema to the idea of wilderness. But I don't remember a single real discussion about the role of fire in wilderness.

After a few more years working on fire crew, it became clear to me that the way we were managing most of our wilderness fires in the 1980s was antithetical to the very notion of wilderness. I began to argue with members of my fire crew that for wilderness areas to be "wild" fire had to be part of that wildness. As the official book-smart member of the crew, I would point out that the Wilderness Act itself defines wilderness as areas that have been "affected primarily by the forces of nature." Fire is obviously exactly that sort of force. The more I learned about fire and its role in forest ecology, the more it became clear that fire was not a disturbance. It is a primary process like rain and sunshine, and it influences almost everything about the ecology of the forests. So it would seem the Wilderness Act calls for respecting fire as a natural process. Of course I had to acknowledge that the same act also betrays a human unwillingness to relinquish control over nature. The act specifically allows that, "measures may be taken as may be necessary in the control of fire, insects, and diseases."

As a "ground pounder" on a fire crew, I was on the front lines of those "measures" taken to control fire. By 1988, I found myself working at the Yellowstone fires, which made famous the controversial and mischaracterized, "let it burn" wilderness fire policy. At those fires, I learned to run a chainsaw while cutting down hundreds of wilderness trees in front of the huge fires burning in the park. As those fires stretched out, my crew had many opportunities to consider whether our "control" actions were really facilitating the unfolding of natural processes.

When we arrived, the fires in Yellowstone were still small. On our first day, we were not even allowed to use tools. Instead, we were told to work with ungloved hands to assure a light hand on the land. However, it only took one day to see that those tactics were not slowing the fire. It had been hundreds of years since the last big fires had burned in the area. As we tried to navigate the impenetrable dog-hair thickets of trees in the park, our standard joke was, "Ya know, what this place needs is a good fire to thin it out." In a few days, we were running chainsaws in the wilderness. After several weeks, we were using bulldozers to dig fire lines and helicopters to start backfires miles ahead of the advancing flames.

One day, we saw dozens of dead trout floating down a stream many miles into wilderness backcountry. My crew boss said she had never seen a fire kill that many fish before. We went

upstream to see what had happened. After finding hundreds more dead fish we found the answer. A WW2-era bomber had painted a 30-foot wide stripe of pink fire retardant across the stream. None of us knew that even a thin strip of retardant would kill fish like that.

By the end the 1988 fire season, I understood that wilderness fires were only going to be wild if they burned in a small and tidy fashion and didn't threaten homes or timber lands. After several more years of seasonal work, I also realized that summer was the wrong time of year for me to be working. I eventually found my way back into academia and summer vacations. I went on to pursue graduate school at the University of Arizona. Soon, I was studying wildland fire and working on a PhD project modeling fires in the mountains of New Mexico. I have been thinking about fire ever since.

Twenty-five years after that wondrous Half Dome sunset, I got married in the Yosemite high country. As my fiancé and I entered the park before the ceremony, I was happy to see a familiar smoke plume rising out of the backcountry. A firefighter friend even called from the fire line apologizing that he would miss the party, but he did guarantee good sunsets for our wedding. He was right, and this time the glorious sunsets didn't bother me at all. The flaming sky and the smell of smoke seemed as much a part of the Yosemite high country as the granite domes, meandering streams, and the smell of the pines.