

Raising the curtain on wildfire

Dispelling myths, revealing benefits and promoting effective planning for people and ecosystems.

Endearing, enduring Smokey The Bear has been the icon for wildfire prevention since 1944. During his youth as an ambassador for responsible behavior, Smokey spoke only of the dangers of wildfire. As he aged, he learned from forest managers and became wiser about fire. He began offering forest visitors a chapter of fire history that revealed a new and surprising side of the fire story. Fire can be beneficial. Not everyone wanted to believe it even though early American Indians understood this and used fire to their benefit. Smokey has his own website now. www.smokeythebear.com. It's worth a visit. But here's what is important to know.

When early Europeans drove their dreams across the continent, forests began to change. Logging, grazing of livestock and woodcutting for fuel were some of the reasons. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries a number of large fires occurred. Some resulted in the loss of many lives. This fear, combined with the threat fire posed to the commercial lumber industry led to a determination to prevent fire at all costs. This seemed logical to those who did not understand Mother Nature's master plan. We are clearer about it now.

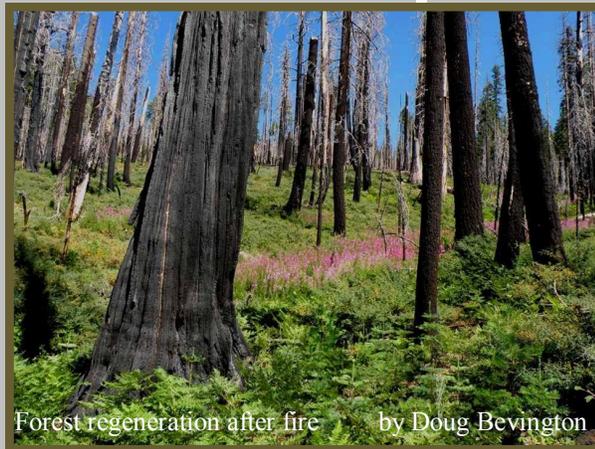
Fire has shaped the land for centuries. Ecosystems benefit from it and some even depend on it for regeneration. Some habitats are suited to lower intensity fires, others require intervals of higher intensity. How often fire needs to occur in each type of habitat is another part of the plan. On the long list of benefits created by fire is the fact that once a tree falls and decomposes into soil over time, nutrients vital to regrowth are returned to the soil. After a fire a mosaic of vegetation and wildlife appear on the scene. This new diversity ensures a healthy balance of all living things and can last years until the cycle of fire returns to perform its harmonizing role once again. That is, if it is allowed.

Smokey The Bear can tell you today about the consequences of years of fire suppression. Without fire to create important

habitat, including patches of standing dead trees, or 'snags', several things changed. Forests lost diversity. Some portion of this was restored when native bark beetles or competition between trees create new snags in denser forests, which provides essential foraging and nesting structure for wildlife. But these processes cannot replace the unique ecological role of fire.

Even when fires are intense, they bring essential benefits to habitats.

However, if commercial logging is allowed after fire, these benefits are virtually lost and the forest habitat is destroyed. Among critical losses is the removal of downed logs and standing trees killed by fire. These snags are essential for wildlife, particularly to woodpeckers that excavate nesting cavities in them, many of which benefit secondary cavity-nesters. But that's not all. Woodpeckers feed on the larvae of native wood-boring beetles, and flycatchers and bats eat the many bees and butterflies attracted to the colorful flowering shrubs that reproduce after intense fire. Furthermore, when logging and severe clearing does not occur the burned forest actually stores more carbon which it incorporates into new growth. Mother Nature's master plan is wiser than Smokey or people knew. We are still learning about it.



Forest regeneration after fire by Doug Bevington

How we can protect our homes from wildfire.

Science shows that clearing in wildlands at the urban interface beyond 200 feet of homes does not reduce risk to them. But homes don't have to burn in a wildfire. The most effective prevention is to create defensible space within 100-150 feet and use fire resistant building materials. That requires reducing your property's combustibility. Firefighters look for these homes because they are safer to go near and easier to save.

- Remove dead shrubs, dried grass, fallen branches and dried leaves.
- Trim and separate plants and shrubs to stop fire from spreading. Low tree branches and shrubs under trees allow a fire to climb higher and spread.
- Keep grass green and mowed.
- Keep chimney cleaned and screened.
- Locate storage sheds away from the home.
- Keep woodpiles, fuel tanks and other burnable materials 30 feet from structures.
- Keep your driveway accessible and your address visible.
- Have a 100 foot hose connected to an outlet and have water and a fire extinguisher readily available.
- Use the right equipment by using string vegetation trimmers to cut tall, dry grass.
- Remove rocks from dry grass and weeds. Metal mower blades hitting rocks start wildfires.
- Dispose of stove or fireplace ashes and charcoal briquettes only after soaking them in a metal pail of water for 24 hours.
- Have fire tools handy such as: a ladder than can reach the roof, shovel, rake and bucket for water.



Portions of this information are credited to
www.CAFireAlliance.com www.PreventWildfireCA.org

The Cavity Conservation Initiative
www.cavityconservation.com



The John Muir Project Earth Island Institute
www.johnmuirproject.org

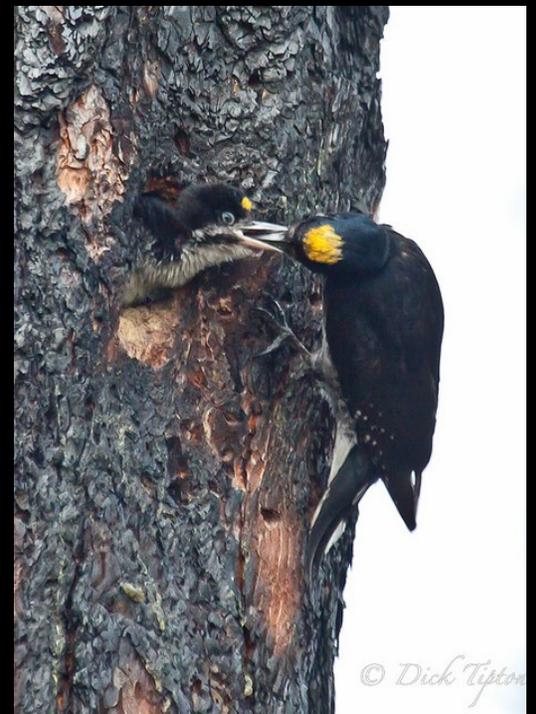
“Any fool can destroy trees; they cannot run away...” John Muir



Holes made by foraging woodpecker



Vegetation rejuvenation after fire



Black-backed Woodpecker

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