

Restoring Functionality to Fire Adapted Systems on the Gila

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Many years ago there emerged a realization that many of our public lands were out of whack due to, in part, years of aggressive and successful fire suppression. Smoky Bear definitely did his job and convinced us that it was our job to prevent forest fires! Bambi scared the baby boomers to death and convinced us that all fires were bad! Our goal was to suppress all fires, and we did a good job. On Forest Service lands here in the southwest, this relative exclusion of fire, coupled with logging of large and old trees and excessive cattle grazing, created a vast sea of extremely flammable material. Our forests are simply overgrown, mostly with small trees. Similar conditions exist throughout the west.

We've seen an escalating risk to communities and all those other special values that our public lands provide. Over the last 10 years we've experienced uncharacteristic fires throughout the nation. We are experiencing fire behavior unlike anything we've seen in the past. We are seeing larger acres burned. Effects on communities, watersheds, wildlife, recreation, etc. have been extraordinary as you no doubt are aware.

We have a growing consensus among public land managers and our communities that the restoration of fire-adapted ecosystems is the single most important thing that needs extraordinary leadership at this point in time. Natural resource managers recognize fire's natural role in fire-dependent ecosystems, and often use fire as a tool for managing fuels, maintaining watersheds and providing quality wildlife habitat among other things. Restoring fire's role in nature will result in overall resource benefits and provide for more balanced and healthier forests and grasslands. These healthy, fire adapted systems are like the goose that lays the golden eggs of quality recreation experiences; clean and ample water; pristine wilderness; beautiful views; fire-safe communities; clean air; quality wildlife habitat; and forage and wood products for future generations.

So what does this mean? Natural fire cycles? Lightning starts over 90% of fires on public land. Our forests in the US evolved with fire as an essential component of their lives. For example, here in the Southwest our ponderosa pine forests evolved with regular fire every 3 to 10 years. Lightning would strike, and low intensity fires would clear the ground fuels away. Fires frequently burned for weeks or months. The larger ponderosa pine's thick bark insulated them against the fire. Our ponderosa pine forests were almost savannah-like with lush grass and an open appearance. In the mixed conifer, the fires would often spread to the crowns and create openings where aspen would sprout. Our pinyon juniper forests were less dense and crowded. There was more water in our creeks, and more food for wildlife. It was as nature intended – a mosaic of habitats.

Managing natural fires is not "Let Burn." Natural fires, or wildland fire use fires as they are most commonly called, are closely monitored to ensure that they stay within a predetermined management area. Management action points are clearly defined to protect sensitive habitats and areas; to protect threatened and endangered species; to protect special recreational areas; and to protect cultural resources among other things.

When I became a Forest Supervisor four years ago, I didn't realize that I would become somewhat of a spokesperson for the restoration of natural fire cycles. I have been involved in

fire management for 27 years, with 13 of those years as either a District Ranger or Forest Supervisor. I've served on incident management teams for much of that time. For the very first time in my career I feel that we have an opportunity to make a significant difference in the health of our forest for generations to come. Forest thinning is certainly an important component, particularly in and around areas with developments. But, the key to making long-term improvements to the health of our forest must involve the reintroduction of fire either as a result of wildfire; or using management-ignited prescribed fire; or managing natural fires for resource benefit.

Education is the cornerstone. Here on the Gila, we have been using natural and prescribed fire for many years. We have areas on the Gila where we can truly say that natural fire cycles have been restored. We have seen an amazing benefit on the land. As a result of large scale prescribed fire on the Black Range District, for example, we have areas where grass is growing; there is water in the creeks; and wildlife is thriving due to the significant reduction in overstocked pinyon and juniper trees. We are beginning to see how we can reduce the overall high costs of fire suppression, while still protecting our communities.

Other Forest Supervisor's contact me from across the nation asking me how we did it. And what are the building blocks of a successful program? Organizational capability is vital. A key component is the development of a qualified, skilled, and committed workforce. But, the most important component is community readiness. Our communities need to learn about fire's natural role on the land. They need to see first hand the benefits of managing natural fires for resource benefit. Our communities need to be engaged as partners in this work. We are extremely fortunate here in Southwestern New Mexico to have a group of outstanding partners who are keenly committed to accelerating the pace to restore natural fire cycles and helping our communities protect themselves.

We must listen to our communities and help them, for example, understand why low levels of smoke in the air far exceed the potential health effects associated with emissions from with uncharacteristic wildfire. During a series of natural fires in 2000 we invited the Environmental Protection Agency to the Gila to listen to concerns within our communities regarding smoke emissions. We learned that, as a result of their studies, the health hazards associated with the relative low emissions that we produced paled in comparison to the catastrophic health effect occurring with the wildfires in Montana.

My heart was warmed last week when I spoke with a business owner near the Gila Cliff Dwellings. We had two fires burning in the vicinity that were being managed for resource benefit, so I inquired about the levels of smoke in the air. She went on to describe her support for using wildland fire use as a management tool to restore the health of our forest. As she spoke I realized that she was highly educated on the subject. She went on to say that she talked about this with all of her visitors so that they could understand that fire is closely linked to the health of our forest. This is what it takes to restore the health of our forest – a public that is ready, and who understands the role that natural fire must play if we are going to protect our forests for the future.

Remember the goose that laid the golden egg. The restoration of our fire dependent systems will enhance our ability to help our communities protect themselves, improve our wildlife habitat and watershed conditions; improve the quality of recreation experiences and visual quality; among many other benefits.

I'd like to ask you, ask teachers, to help us restore the health of our forests. Help us teach that not all fire is bad. Help us teach that low intensity fire is a natural and essential component of

healthy ecosystems. Let us know how we can help you do that. Talk to your students about the “golden eggs” of the restoration of fire adapted systems. As you leave here ask yourself - how can my passion for teaching help ensure, as so many Native Americans promoted, that we leave a legacy for the 7th generation?