

Whattya Mean "Let It Burn"?!?!

Often it isn't enough simply to get the correct data on which to build resource management. When these data dictate practices that run counter to the "conventional wisdom," then a public information dimension is strongly indicated.

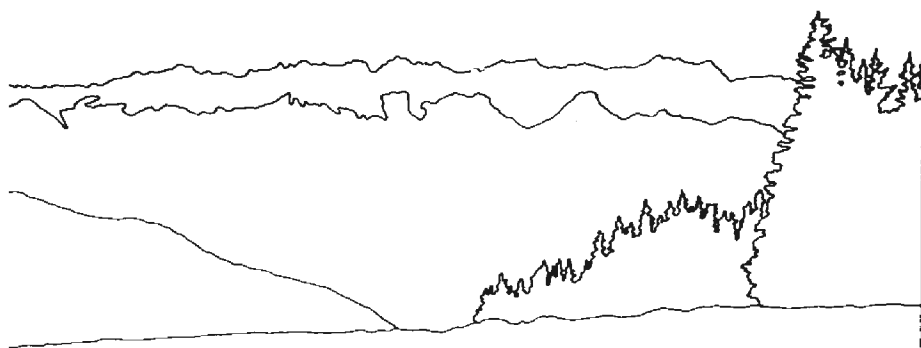
A perfect case in point involves the role of natural fire in management of forested areas. Human instincts and years of special pleading by Smoky the Bear have combined to create a public attitude of monumental skepticism toward fire as a management device.

At Olympic NP, Denison M. Rauw, research assistant in the University of Washington College of Forest Resources, conducted a two-year test aimed at assisting park management to establish contact with the local community, industry, state and federal land managers and park visitors with regard to the park's concerns on fire management. The idea was that fire management at Olympic NP must include careful consideration of resource values outside as well as inside park boundaries.

The two-year study began with distribution of a questionnaire to park visitors and peninsula residents, dealing with fire experience, fire knowledge and fire attitudes. During this phase, interviews were conducted with state, federal and private timber managers to define their attitudes concerning fires.



Fire ~ An Olympic Event



Despite evidence that residents and visitors had a fair grasp of the rationale behind prescribed burning, the 725 questionnaires completed and returned left no doubt that significant reluctance exists toward managing for natural fires in the park, regardless of management objectives.

Phase two was development of a slide tape program to increase public understanding. "Fire: An Olympic Event" was shown to park visitors and peninsula residents throughout the second summer. Phase three, conducted simultaneously, was administration of a quiz before and another after the slide tape program showings.

To the pre-season questionnaire, a majority of respondents agreed that not all fires are destructive and over half felt that fire benefits some species of wildlife, but their attitude toward establishing a natural fire zone within the park was nevertheless, negative. Sixty-five percent felt all forest fires should be controlled at any cost, whether in a national park or a national forest.

Most support for a prescribed burn was given for hazard fuel reduction and restoring native vegetation. Less was given for fire with respect to scientific research of insect/disease control.

Most significant finding from questionnaire analysis was that the independent variable — knowledge about fire — accounted for most of the total

variance of each fire attitude. Other independent variables — age, fire experience, education, residence, and previous fire losses — were only weakly associated with fire attitudes. The conclusion was obvious: that a change in knowledge would be most likely to influence a change in attitude toward fire.

Phase three — the pre- and post-show fire quizzes — showed statistically significant increases in fire knowledge after viewing the slide tape program. The average number of questions missed on the pre-show test was 3.5; the average on the post-show test was 1.8. Most dramatic change was scored on the wildlife question, where correct answers shot from 33 percent before the show to 88 percent afterwards.

The study gives solid statistical backing to the decision of managers and interpreters at a number of park sites to actively work toward increasing visitors' fire knowledge. At Olympic, park management is confident that this broader appreciation of fire will gain valuable visitor and community support for future fire policy.

The study was a joint research project of the NPS and the University of Washington CPSU. Also involved were Steward G. Pickford and James K. Agee, associate and assistant professors respectively at the University's College of Forest Resources.