

Prescribed Burn Interpretation Affects Visitors' Perceptions

Editor's note: Dr. Joyce A. Quinn, social sciences associate professor at Cal/State/U. Fresno, submitted the following summary of her recently completed study for Sequoia and Kings Canyon NPs concerning visitor attitudes toward NPS fire program and policy.

In response to a recommendation in a National Park Service report on fire management programs, a questionnaire was administered to 1000 people in Sequoia and Kings Canyon NPs during summer 1987 in order to identify visitor understanding of and reaction to the Park Service prescribed burning program.

The major objective of the research was to assess visitor awareness of and attitude toward prescribed burning and perceived threats to giant sequoia groves in Sequoia and Kings Canyon NPs. In accordance with directives of the report, the survey was designed to quantify visitor responses to forest fires management in the parks. Five major questions were addressed:

1. What is the visual reaction of visitors to seeing a burned area, smoke, or fire scars on giant sequoias in the park? Are these features readily perceived by the general visitor, and does the sight of them affect the visitor's park experience in a positive, negative, or neutral way?

2. Are visitors aware of the fire management program carried out by the Park Service? Is the visitor aware that the NPS has a program of prescribed ignitions and management of natural fires?

3. Do visitors understand that the fire management program is a tool designed to reduce wildfire hazards, encourage reproduction of the giant sequoias, and restore natural ecological processes?

4. What is the reaction to the NPS interpretive program? Is there sufficient information available to visi-

tors concerning the fire management program?

5. What is the preferred treatment of burned areas? Should the NPS try to hide fire scars or leave areas alone to regenerate naturally?

Conclusions

1. Burned areas and smoke are generally visible to less than half the park visitors and neither has an impact on enjoyment of the visit. More visitors noticed fire scars on giant sequoias (87%) but stated that the sight enhanced the beauty of the trees. Visitors who had read *The Bark* or had been to the Visitor Center were more aware of the NPS burn program and were also more likely to notice the effects of fire.

2. Approximately three-quarters of all visitors were aware that the NPS regularly sets fires and allows them to burn. Foreigners and first-day visitors were less likely to be aware of the fire management program. Visitors who had taken part in an interpretive program (*The Bark* or ranger-guided walk) or had been in the park for more than one day were more likely to know about NPS fire policy.

3. Most visitors were quite perceptive concerning the role of fire in natural ecosystems. Those who were not included first-day visitors, foreigners, and those who had not read *The Bark*.

4. NPS interpretive information was very effective in informing visitors of fire management policies and the ecological role of fire. Over four-fifths of respondents who had seen such information said that it altered their opinion concerning the role of fire.

5. An overwhelming majority of visitors, with the exception of foreigners, were in favor of leaving burned areas alone to regenerate naturally rather than try to hide the effects of fire.