

Politics of wildfire analyzed

Severely dry conditions and gale-force winds promoted the spread of wildfire in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem in 1988. This ecosystem comprises Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks, seven adjacent national forests, and several other federal, state, and private lands in Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming. Approximately 995,000 acres or 45% of Yellowstone National Park burned. Another 590,000 acres in surrounding areas were affected by the fires. Ecologists and land managers largely agree

that the fires were an ecologically important natural disturbance and that little could have been done to stop them. Policy makers on the other hand viewed the fires as failed policies, and many citizens lamented the destruction of the park, the loss of wildlife and beauty, and the adverse effects on the economy of surrounding communities. Many branded the federal government's fire policy a failure; however, scientific research and even casual observations revealed that wildlife in the burned areas abounds, trees are growing, and beauty prevails. The nearby communities did not suffer great economic hardships. In fact, nationwide publicity of the fires seems to have promoted the growth of tourism. The greatest damage may not have been from the fire, but from ridicule of the government by the public, abuse of public servants by members of the Congress, attacks on the integrity, intelligence, and professional abilities of civil servants and their associates by the media, and the public's loss of faith in the federal fire policy.

Pamela Lichtman (1998. The politics of wildfire: Lessons from Yellowstone. *Journal of Forestry* 96(5):4-9) contends that a realistic view of a fire policy must acknowledge that clear rules for every conceivable eventuality are not feasible. Before they can elicit support for natural fire and confidence in the federal fire policy, managers and ecologists must realize that the citizens' and politicians' view of wildfire as a crisis can undermine the stability of natural resource agencies. An honest appraisal of how much control humans have over wildfire must be clearly communicated to the public. The ecological objectives of a natural fire policy should be persuasively presented to resource constituencies and policy makers. Ideas and suggestions must be solicited

from the public. Collective decision making cannot be ruled out. Quite importantly, people who are involved in conservation of natural resources cannot dissociate themselves from politics. They must understand how land management policies and ecosystem processes are interpreted and reinterpreted by citizens, elected leaders, and the media. Multiple realities and relative standards cannot be eradicated, and ecosystem management cannot progress until these realities become less disparate.