

Sparks Abound, Data Sparse At Fire Meeting

by Sarah Greene

It was clear from the outset that the Smoky Bear philosophy of stamping out all fires is, itself, under fire. The symposium and workshop on Wilderness Fire Management Policy, Programs, and Issues in Parks, Wilderness and Other Natural Areas drew more than 600 to Missoula, Mont., the week of Nov. 14-18; federal, state, and private agencies, and universities from the US and Canada were represented.

The idea of prescribed fire to reduce fuels has long been accepted. What land managers now are struggling with is the concept of allowing lightning fires to burn, or of starting fires in certain areas in an effort to mimic the natural lightning fire cycle.

Clearly there is no easy way to do this, especially after more than 80 years of vigorous fire suppression in almost all ecosystems.

Whether the symposium was addressing policy issues, fuels build-up, natural vs. unnatural ignitions, planning, monitoring, operations, or economics, the same set of questions and/or considerations arose. Do we simulate Indian caused fires? Are the Indians a part of the "natural" fire cycle or not, and if so starting when? What is the intrinsic fire return interval? What kinds of natural conditions or processes are we trying to maintain/imitate and for how long? How do we coordinate fires with public use in terms of safety, air quality, and preconceived notions of what consti-

tutes a wilderness experience? How much is reasonable to spend on trying to imitate nature's fire regime? How do we assign a value or even should we, on using fire to maintain healthy ecosystem processes? What kind of and how much monitoring should be done?

All these questions generated discussion in a philosophical vein. The audience generally accepted the concept that fire needs to play a bigger role in wilderness, park and natural area management, but there was little agreement on implementation. This was only reinforced by the dearth of long term data presented at the symposium. Clearly much more needs to be learned – fire histories, baseline information on vegetation patterns and response to fire, fire behavior, how best to monitor, effects on wildlife habitat (an issue that was barely mentioned), etc.

Steve Pyne ended the talks with a historical perspective on wilderness fire. Wilderness fire, in his view, is a recent creation. Fire, a natural process, identifies us as a species. Wilderness, a distinctly American cultural development, identifies us as a particular civilization. He sees the defining relationship as people to fire, not as people to wilderness. He feels it is only a matter of time before this defining relationship is made more clear and accepted. Then, he suggests, wilderness fire will no longer be an issue.

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