

The Future of Fire in Environmental Management

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ABSTRACT

Fire has been a significant force in the evolution of ecosystems since the beginning of life on earth, and has occupied a powerful role in shaping the physical and natural world as we experience it today. Historically, human societies have both feared fire as a natural, destructive force, and used fire to social and technological ends. Indeed, the harnessing of fire by human societies represents one of the most profound changes in the ability of humans to achieve mastery and dominance over the natural world, increasing their safety and well-being. However, the future of fire is uncertain. The great landscape-scale fires that have shaped the natural environment can no longer be allowed to exist. Once thriving on vast uninhabited tracts of forests and grasslands, their existence is now an anathema to the communities that checkerboard most of our national forests. Like threatened and endangered species in the ecological realm, large-scale fire itself is becoming extinct due to intrusions of human habitation into the very forests that provide the fuel for its existence. Modern fire rarely exhibits the qualities of historical fire with its enormous releases of energy, rapid spread, and long duration. When it does, the results are deemed catastrophic and sociopolitical forces intervene to prevent its reoccurrence. Yet, ecosystems are dependent on fire for their vitality and sustainability, creating a conflict between the needs of nature and the fears of human societies. What is the future of a purposive role for fire in ecosystems? How can fire as a historical force continue to play a similar role in the future? This paper examines the relationship between humans and fire, and explores its meaning for how we will make decisions about fire's future as both a property of nature and as a tool for human development.

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