



Forest fires last summer provided the media with dramatic images of walls of flames and smoke-choked skies, soundbites from terrified and frustrated citizens, and tales of fearless firefighters. The overarching message of such news reports: Forest fires are a terrible disaster, something to be fought at all costs.

These stories, in turn, provided fuel for a campaign by timber industry lobbyists, Republican lawmakers and the Bush administration to persuade citizens that good forest policy requires cutting many more trees—and repealing environmental regulations that allow public input into the management of national forests.

But before we give the timber industry our forests in order to save them, it's important to examine the assumptions about forest fires that pervade much of the media coverage, and thereby influence the way we think about wildfires.

One basic but rarely communicated fact is that fire is a natural—and necessary—part of most forest ecosystems in the Western U.S. “Fires burning in the Western forests in the summertime are just as natural as snow falling in the winter,” says ecologist Peter Morrison, executive director of the Pacific Biodiversity Institute, an environmental research group based in Washington state. “And they are as much a disaster to the forest as a winter snowstorm.”

Not only have Western forests evolved with fire, they need fire to clean out underbrush and maintain biological diversity. Fire helps several conifer species regenerate, and seeds from some, such as giant sequoias, rarely germinate without it. Yet the media routinely characterize fires as unnatural, unwelcome and dangerous to the forest.

The drumbeat on the perils of forest fires started relatively early this year as a result of the serious drought in most of the country. **ABC News** helped set the tone with warnings that “a long, dry fire season has only just begun” (3/24/02) and “conditions are ripe throughout the West for a horrific fire season” (4/26/02). **CBS Evening News** (4/24/02) told viewers that “fear of another disastrous wildfire season is spreading almost as fast as the flames.” **NBC Today Show** co-host Katie Couric (4/26/02) told her early morning audience: “It’s not even summer yet, and the West is burning.”

News reports commonly misrepresent the impact of fire on a forest, using words like “consumed,” “destroyed,” “devastated” and “devoured” to describe freshly burned areas. The **Albuquerque Journal** (6/19/02) quoted a fire information officer at a Colorado fire, “It’s like a nuclear bomb up there.”

Morrison, who has studied the ecological impact of numerous wildfires, says such descriptions could not be further from the truth. “The media would do a much better job of reporting this as so many acres were restored rather than destroyed by the fire,” he says. “That would be much more accurate, because fire is such an important ecosystem process.”

To illustrate the regenerative powers of fire, he points to an intense fire in June 2001 that killed the standing trees in a forest not far from his office in Washington state. Although the local fire commander was at the time quoted in the local paper saying the area looked like it had been “nuked,” Morrison says that just two months later, that forest was full of three-foot aspens that have since doubled their height. “I’ve never seen a fire that’s had profoundly negative long-term effects on the ecosystem,” he adds.

“Not normal . . . not natural”

Print and broadcast reporters frequently described this summer’s wildfires as the “worst ever.” A report on **PBS’s NewsHour With Jim Lehrer** (7/1/02) told viewers the fires we’re now seeing are “not normal . . . not natural, because this is a new breed of unpredictable forest fire that has only recently been documented.”

But government data contradict the claim that the current fires are either abnormally large or bad. According to the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC), the agency responsible for coordinating wildland firefighting activities throughout the country, seven to eight times as many acres burned each year between 1919 and 1949 as currently burn in a typical year. Individual fires of several million acres occurred many times up until 1910, when the U.S. Forest Service adopted a policy of suppressing every fire. “I hate to say it, but there’s a lot of irresponsible reporting, because [reporters] don’t qualify what they mean by ‘the worst,’ and it’s misleading,” NIFC spokesperson Janelle Smith told **Extra!**.

Several reports contained the allegation that the fires we are now seeing are so hot that they “sterilize” or “scar” the soil. **CBS Evening News** (7/24/02) ran footage of a U.S. Forest Service staffer who told viewers the fires “can actually scar the soil enough that it is no longer productive to support those trees.”

Morrison says soil can be sterilized by a fire, but it is very rare—and not necessarily the terrible event it is made out to be. “The media and the timber/fire industrial complex like to describe wildfires as if they destroy everything in their path. But how long is everything ‘destroyed’?” he asks. “Perhaps for a few hours or days.” Further, he says, soil sterilization has some important benefits: knocking out soil-borne tree pests and diseases that foresters often complain about.

The U.S. government’s fire-suppression policy has been challenged in recent years for letting forests fill up with dense new growth, resulting in hotter and larger fires when the forests inevitably do burn. Many print and broadcast news stories have reported on the failure of that approach; the **Los Angeles Times** in particular has run some strong articles on the subject (e.g., 8/4/02). However, the idea of letting wildfires burn themselves out

is easily overshadowed by the riveting pictures and descriptions of burning forests and fleeing homeowners that dominate the coverage.

Nature or nurture?

Most of the coverage conveys the impression that fire victims simply encountered the fickle fate of nature run amok. “The fire is such a massive creature, it pretty much does what it wants,” the **L.A. Times** reported (6/22/02). Several other stories mentioned that Mother Nature was not cooperating with efforts to contain the blazes.

Reports by the **L.A. Times** (5/22/02), **ABC World News Tonight** (6/12/02), the **NewsHour With Jim Lehrer** (7/2/02) and several others did point out that forest fires would not be so dangerous or costly to taxpayers if large numbers of people stopped moving to fire-prone rural areas where they often build highly flammable wooden houses. “It’s like building in a flood plain or on a sand dune,” says William Schlesinger, dean of the Nicholas School of the Environment and Earth Sciences at Duke University.

Increasing numbers of people are moving to the edges of Western forests, into the so-called “red zone.” These areas typically lack zoning restrictions and building codes that could reduce the impact of wildfires, because such regulations are anathema to the Western spirit of independence. A **New York Times** story (6/30/02) noted that last summer, residents in Rocky Mountain communities prevented the Forest Service from burning adjacent forest lands, which would have saved their communities from Colorado’s Hayman fire this summer. But such reports were the exception to the main media storyline that cast fire evacuees as helpless victims aided by heroic firefighters against an unpredictable natural disaster.

One of the reasons this framing is so prevalent is that reporters rarely get access to the front lines to see what is going on for themselves. “I’d argue that the press is as tightly controlled on wildfire incidents as they are in actual military combat missions abroad,” says Timothy Ingalsbee, director of the Western Fire Ecology Center. “They rarely get out of fire camp, where the officials hold court, like it’s a war room or something.”

If reporters were allowed to go to the front lines, Ingalsbee—a former Forest Service firefighter—says they might question the tactics firefighters are ordered to use in their war against the fire. These include dumping large amounts of toxic chemicals into the forest and torching huge numbers of acres (which also significantly boost the number of burned acres in the fire statistics). “Firefighters should be stopping fire,” he says. “Instead they’re starting fires under the worst possible conditions.”

Ingalsbee doesn’t see the situation improving anytime soon, either on the ground or in the information officials give to reporters. He says the Forest Service has started to use more fire information officers, who put more spin on the issue and tend to dramatize the fires.

It's the environmentalists, stupid!

Turning logic on its head, a group of Western Republicans, timber industry supporters and the Bush administration have leveled blame for these “worst ever” fires squarely at environmentalists. They argue that cumbersome regulations have enabled tree huggers to tie up government tree-thinning efforts that prevent fires.

The problem with this allegation is that there are no data to support it. In August 2001, at the request of Republican lawmakers, the General Accounting Office said that of 1,671 Forest Service thinning projects, only 20—about 1 percent—had been appealed, and none had been litigated. Further, environmentalists weren't the only ones contesting these projects; appeals were also lodged by recreation groups, private industry and individuals. Several environmental groups have also been both actively advocating and helping to formulate plans to reduce the wildfire risk to red zone communities.

In July 2002 the U.S. Forest Service issued its own report, which got considerable media attention, stating that environmentalists were responsible for holding up nearly half of its forest fuels reduction efforts. An analysis by the Forest Trust, an organization promoting sustainable forestry, found that the Forest Service skewed its results by including only “mechanical treatments”—i.e., logging. According to the Forest Trust report, this left out some 85 percent of the Forest Service's fuel reduction treatments in 2001. In addition, 46 percent of the projects cited were commercial timber sales, including some that clearly had nothing to do with fire prevention.

Meanwhile, the GAO is now saying the Forest Service information it based its report on is questionable, because most of it came from a database of timber reduction projects that can't legally be challenged, instead of a larger database that includes any proposed use of public forest lands. GAO is revising its report and expects to be able to say by February whether or not environmental appeals have stymied forest fuels reduction projects. “Nobody at this stage of the game—including the Forest Service—can categorically say one way or another,” a GAO staffer said.

While several news outlets have questioned the accusation blaming environmentalists, many others continue to perpetrate it. On **CNN's Market Call** (5/14/02), Sen. Jon Kyl (R.-Ariz.) told viewers: “There are some radical environmental groups that don't want to cut any tree.” The interviewer didn't challenge Kyl's assertion, and no environmentalist was there to refute the charge. **CNBC News** (8/22/02) repeated the assertion in an interview with Sen. Pete Domenici (R.-N.M.) the day that George W. Bush announced the administration's plan to deal with wildfires. Bush's “Healthy Forests Initiative” would increase commercial logging in national forests and eliminate environmental regulations that allow public participation in logging decisions on public lands.

Stories about the forest plan on several news outlets have frequently had a pro-Bush spin. After showing a small patch of thinned forest that escaped flames in the middle of Colorado's Hayman fire, **NBC** (8/22/02) told viewers that 211 million acres in government-controlled forests are “now overgrown and at severe fire risk.” Pointing to inefficient bureaucracy as the culprit delaying necessary thinning, reporter Roger O'Neil said:

“What should take a year to plan never does. Add to that endless challenges from interest groups, and hundreds of projects are on hold.”

Fox News anchor Brit Hume introduced a story (8/22/02) on the Bush plan by saying: “Companies cut away the brush and small trees that fed this summer’s catastrophic fires. Environmentalists scream that [Bush] is just trying to promote logging.” The story that followed cast Bush’s plan as a “balanced” alternative to the “devastation” wrought by the fires. Reporter Brian Wilson ended his story noting: “By the way, the president practices what he preaches on this issue. He spends a great deal of his spare time at the ranch in Crawford clearing underbrush so there won’t be wildfires on his property.”

ABC News (8/22/02) did point out that the Bush plan does allow commercial logging of “some very large, hundred-year-old trees,” and would eliminate appeals and litigation. But the report ended with the comment that though there’s a lot of agreement that trees and brush around people’s homes need to be cleared, that’s expensive and “the timber industry is not interested in that job”—as though the only way to get brush cleared is to give loggers access to old-growth forest. The reporter did not mention that more than \$400 million has already been spent to reduce fuel buildup in forests in the last two years.

Adding fuel to the fire

The Pacific Biodiversity Institute’s Morrison has documented evidence that logging intensifies wildfires. A just-completed study by the Institute compared before-and-after satellite images of this summer’s Biscuit fire in Oregon. The images reveal that about 50 percent more vegetation was killed in previously logged areas than in unlogged areas. The Rodeo-Chediski fire in Arizona, this summer’s largest, burned nearly half a million acres and many homes. “This is land that the timber industry had their way with, not an area that had been protected by environmentalists as has been widely reported,” Morrison said.

Morrison says several factors explain why logging increases rather than decreases fire severity. First, loggers remove the biggest, most fire-resistant trees, opening the forest canopy and encouraging new, densely spaced seedlings to sprout. Logging companies and Forest Service personnel don’t always do the kind of follow-up thinning and prescribed burning necessary to keep forest fuels from building up—a practice known as “cut and run.” And logging roads also give easier access to people who can enter the forest and—inadvertently, or not—start fires.

Another issue well worth exploring in the fire coverage is the impact of global warming on the multi-year drought that has helped create such good conditions for intense wildfires. Media reports about climate change will sometimes mention increasingly severe wildfires as a potential consequence, but you’ll rarely if ever find an article on wildfires that mentions climate change. If that link were made, the public might blame climate-unfriendly policies and behavior (the Bush administration energy plan or the country’s love affair with SUVs, for example) instead of environmentalists for the severity of the fires.

But blaming environmentalists offers reporters a favorite format—the “what you thought turned out to be wrong” storyline, says Robert Jensen, a media critic and journalism professor at the University of Texas. “These are the easiest leads to write,” he says. “You don’t even need to be awake to do them.”

Stories like this serve an important function for interests opposed to environmental accountability. “They plant the idea in people’s minds that environmentalists end up causing trouble. So then, who do you trust?” Jensen asks. “We either trust corporations or the government, neither of whom have the long-term ecological health of the planet in their interest.”

American corporate/commercial media is episodic in nature, driven by “here today, gone tomorrow” news hooks and filled with what Jensen calls “story templates,” conventional narratives that journalists can turn out quickly. While this kind of reporting often emphasizes the dramatic to draw people into a story, it does little to inform them about why something may be happening and how it is connected to other issues. That’s a description that applies to too much of the wildfire coverage.

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