

REFLECTIONS ON TALL TIMBERS 22 AND SEPTEMBER 11— A CONFERENCE SUMMARY

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Back in the 1970s when I was a graduate student at Berkeley, I remember whenever someone would ask questions that either he couldn't or wouldn't want to answer, the late Dr. Harold Biswell (aka Harry the Torch) would lift a knowing finger and reply, "Ya know, you should look that up in the Tall Timbers Fire Ecology Conference Proceedings." By the time I finished my graduate studies in 1977, 15 volumes of the annual proceedings were in print, covering the widest breadth of fire topics (but mostly prescribed fire), primarily from North America, but also covering every other continent except Antarctica. By this time I also had listened to Doc repeat this mantra innumerable times. Essentially this was Doc's way of telling students where to look for the latest information about the art and science of fire, written by the leading practitioners of the time. Indeed when I went to those volumes as a student, I found papers by some real heroes in fire ecology. Classic studies come to mind, including Herbert Stoddard (1963) on fire and bird habitat in the southeastern U.S.; E.V. Komarek (1967) on lightning and human interactions with fire, particularly in native grasslands; Harold Weaver's (1968) treatise on the role of fire on the Colville and Fort Apache native reservations; and Doc's own views (Biswell 1973) on ponderosa pine fire management, just to name a few. Obviously there were many, many other contributors, far too many to list here.

Fast forward to the present, to our world of electronic journals and unlimited access to fire information via the World Wide Web. Our 22nd conference is now history—and I'm struck by the realization that we speakers at this conference (and our manuscripts) will continue the legacy started by those epic pioneers—evangelists in fire science. I'd like to believe that our contributions will be as admirable as those that paved the way. Certainly we have made great strides since the early days of this conference, in terms of our understanding about historic fire regimes, fuels manage-

ment, fire ecology, and the fire environment, and in our abilities to manage fire in the wildland–urban interface—and I believe the papers and posters presented here demonstrate this proficiency.

As an academic, I found particularly gratifying the questioning of traditional assumptions about fire exclusion–restoration, i.e., fire is neither good nor bad in all situations, that one size or remedy doesn't fit all land management dilemmas. Also I appreciated the cultural and gender diversity represented here by speakers and in the audience gathered here. But I further applaud the intellectual diversity in our assemblage. Far beyond the evangelism of the early pioneers, the ideas expressed here over the past several days reflect an intellectual maturity and creativity that says something about where we are in the science and management of wildland fire.

To illustrate my points about intellectual diversity and maturity, I'd like to share a list of ideas that struck me as somehow novel or significant, highlights gleaned from the papers and posters presented here at this conference. With apologies to authors whose thoughts I've reduced to sound-bites (or overlooked), here is my personal list of conference "bullets" that stand out:

- A topography model dictates the need for more burning in a national park (Rogean et al., *this volume*);
- Swamps and hollows provide continuity in burned area during extreme fire years (Holmes et al. and Benscoter et al., *this volume*);
- A preservation agency should consider targets before processes, and make policy distinctions between restoration versus maintenance treatments (Wills, *this volume*);
- Long-term prescriptions for an area should include dead wood in an ecosystem (White et al., *this volume*) and desirability of species previously considered undesirable, such as incense cedar

(*Calocedrus decurrens*) (Paintner and Buhler, *this volume*);

- How we can wire crown fires as never before (International Crown Fire Modelling Experiment) and barely scratch the surface in terms of our understanding of fire spread and intensity in the third dimension;
- Twig-tip diameters can predict crown fire intensity (Despain, *this volume*);
- Native elders would endorse further experimentation with crown fires in the name of further understanding of traditional fire knowledge and firefighter safety (Lanoville, *this volume*);
- Tinker-trees and tinker-saplings serve as tools for active learning (Smith and McMurray, *this volume*);
- Random ignitions may serve the public interest as well as well-planned ignitions—and NOT! (Panel Discussion);
- Ping-pong machines in helicopters might cover up the legacy of First Nations' firing practices (White and Feller, *this volume*);
- Fuels treatment in boreal forests with long return intervals may be counterproductive in terms of reducing crown fire severity (Alexander and Lanoville, *this volume*).

The above compilation is just a sampling of provocative thoughts that come to mind as a result of this conference. Their statement is meaningful because each author forced me to think outside my normal spheres of reference about fire. Further, the collection of high-quality papers and posters presented here show a level of technological and scientific sophistication that Doc Biswell and his contemporaries would never have thought possible. And I have to believe that the fire pioneers, wherever they may be, would have to share some awe (and perhaps some envy) over the International Crown Fire Modelling Experiment or the Yellowstone-to-Yukon corridor. Yes, I believe that we have done our part in stoking the embers of fire knowledge and creativity. But we all know that we can't afford to rest on these laurels.

Although a cliché, it bears repeating that we live in a different world today. Just last November, at the Fire Conference 2000 in San Diego (also co-sponsored by Tall Timbers Research Station) we sat in awe as speakers spoke glowingly of a new era of fire research and management. In the U.S. we were captivated by the boundless euphoria of a national fire plan that promised a new era for firefighters, fuel management, and communities at risk to fire, including for the first time dramatic increases in new hires and in the bud-

gets for the fire research and management infrastructure. This optimism shows what is possible with huge federal budget surpluses. Incredibly, the events of September 11, just 5 weeks ago, seem to have capped a series of events that threaten to topple the vitality from last year's exuberance. That "giant sucking sound" we now hear over Washington, D.C., in the name of anti-terrorism and airline bailouts and other industry welfare programs, could realistically claim valuable fire research and knowledge as casualties—and perhaps rightfully so in terms of global priorities. Those horrendous events have left each of us wondering what really lies ahead not only for our personal lives, but also in terms of the pet fire research project(s) that paid the bill to get us here this week.

Our challenge will be to keep the dialog on fire that we have initiated and perpetuated here this week in appropriate perspective with the new world disorder. We know that fires will continue to burn in wildlands, but one of the casualties of September 11 will likely be the support and funding that allowed some of us to indulge in our professional passion, i.e., the study and application of fire. I am hopeful that the work presented here this week will impress our stakeholders and will open new doors of understanding about the future payoffs and possibilities from improved management of fire in landscapes. But in order for us to rely on this continued support we will need to do a better job of demonstrating the payoffs from our work against the changes in social, economic, and political realities that have occurred in such a short time period. We as a community of fire scholars and managers have a long way to go in terms of our abilities to communicate the importance of our work to our constituencies. But unless we can extend the relevance of our efforts and talk in a language that resonates to the larger society in which we operate, I'm not sure what lies ahead for our profession.

Don't get me wrong—I'm optimistic about the future, and I am glad that Tall Timbers Research Station and our conference sponsors saw fit to go ahead with our meeting in spite of the recent events. Our meeting has been both symbolic and substantive—*symbolic* of our desire to keep learning from and about fire and the environment, in spite of terror that could shut us down; and *substantive* in that we have demonstrated our commitment to advancing the state of knowledge and our growing abilities to manage fire in a variety of ecosystems. We have a long way to go; we will enjoy the learning process.

Over the years I have been impressed by the tenacity and the longevity of the fire community. General-

ly, we don't shy from challenges and we know how to take risks. We owe it to ourselves to ensure that we keep the torches burning for the next generation of fire researchers and managers. I thank the conference sponsors and coordinators for all their hard work in putting this conference together. We also owe a debt to the Doc Biswells, E.V. Komareks, and others who paved the way for us to get here in the first place.

Thank you for the opportunity to share these thoughts. May we all have safe journeys until we meet again.

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