

# Fire in the National Parks Symposium

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## INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

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**I**N this Centennial of the establishment of Yellowstone National Park and the whole system of national parks that followed it, there is a point that should be of interest to us even though its discussion at other times would be argued to be academic.

Early travelers into the Yellowstone region mentioned passing through burned over territory and gave it the name "Burnt Hole." Although they were not in the same place, later travelers assumed that the principal geyser basin with its hot earth and steaming water was the fire-touched land of their predecessors. The translocation of a site and its place name thus occurred (Haines, 1965; Chittenden, 1895). The Firehole Geyser Basin and its associated Firehole River apparently trace their names to this switch. The point for us is that both burned forest and steaming ground are naturally associated with Yellowstone and both logically should be perpetuated as features of the native landscape that this national park preserves.

Fire is intimately woven into events which structure and maintain natural ecosystems everywhere. This recognition is still winning converts, however, and a tolerant view of fire by the National Park Service is a relatively recent thing. Through most of the history of the Service, fires were suppressed whenever it seemed possible to do so. The natural role of fire was generally overlooked. Especially with modern smoke-jumping techniques lightning strikes in remote

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wilderness territory were as vigorously attacked as were abandoned campfires. Nonetheless, large fires occurred when conditions were right and it is reasonable to think that more than one administrator's career suffered because "he let his park burn."

On the other hand, there always seem to have been some people in the National Park Service who questioned the paradox of fighting fires of natural origin while allowing other natural factors to run their course.

The establishment of Everglades National Park in 1947 must have hastened driving home the point. In this semi-tropical ecosystem, biological change is rapid. It is so swift, in fact, that it could be perceived in the tenure of a superintendent and the staff members responsible for the place. In Everglades vegetation seral changes occur so rapidly that the widely established slash pine could be observed in real time to be invaded and over-storied by hardwoods if the latter were not regularly removed by frequent fires. Dr. William B. Robertson (1953) documented the logic of fire in Everglades National Park and the park's first superintendent, Dan Beard, set out to allow its presence. As Richard Klukas will report, we are still working on perfecting our understanding of how fire was expressed in the Everglades ecosystem and, how, in the context of an agricultural and urban southern Florida, it can be retained.

The next big clear case for fire in the national park system was in Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks and three of the following papers report that story.

It is accurate to say that elsewhere in the system, biologists are actively working to document the role of fire in a manner akin to what Walt Kittams reports in this symposium for Carlsbad Caverns National Park.

These include

Death Valley National Monument	P. Sanchez
Glacier National Park	J. R. Habeck
Grand Canyon National Park	P. Bennett
Grand Teton National Park	L. Loope
Mount Rainier National Park	E. Parsegan
Pipestone National Monument	University of Minnesota
Point Reyes National Seashore	R. Murphy

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Redwood National Park	S. Veirs
Rocky Mountain National Park	D. Butts
Saguaro National Monument	L. Gunzel
Wind Cave National Park	A. Lovaas
Yellowstone National Park	D. Houston,
	C. Despain
Yosemite National Park	R. Riegelhuth

To this short introduction and review, four closing observations might be made.

1. We do not today countenance or use fire everywhere in the national park system. What exists is a set of administrative policies that allow the tolerance of fire where it is appropriate (U.S. Department of Interior, 1968). Area by area, the Service is still attempting to define this appropriateness. Thus there are friends of fire who warmly endorse what has been done to reincorporate natural burning regimes in the few natural areas of the system where this has occurred. There are also friendly critics like Dr. Gene Wilhelm in this symposium who urge the National Park Service to more quickly bring fire to a park such as Shenandoah.

2. Fire management must be understood and endorsed by the general population which, through the Congress, really decides how the national parks are to be administered. In this connection the statements on the natural role of fire published in the "Administrative Policies for Natural Areas" (U.S. Department of the Interior 1967; 1968) have, as far as I know, not been challenged. A review of these policies will reveal them to be both permissive of fire and ambivalent towards its suppression. The ambivalence has to be set in the context of the general suppression of all fires that was given strong administrative direction up to and including early 1967. This anti-fire policy had for a long time been promulgated to the public by the governmental agencies and it, in turn, expected a strong no-fire approach. A February 1967 memorandum\* reiterated that stand. The publication in September 1967 of "Administrative Policies" was the first generally announced reversal of it by the National Park Service. That the new attitude has not been challenged is not the same

\*Memorandum to Washington Office and all field offices from Assistant Director Harthon L. Bill, Resources Management--Fire Contact Policy Interpretation, A7631-ORM, February 13, 1967.

as to say that burning has been accepted. The National Park Service has the obligation to continue to seek to inform the American people on the significance of fire.

3. Fire management in the vegetation types of many natural areas involves crown-firing over extensive acreage. Such fires are perceived as being much more traumatic in their effect than those which simply run along the surface of the ground. Those of us who advocate the incorporation of fire must be aware of the extra degree of understanding that must be conveyed to the public to justify crown burning. We may never get further than explaining the normality of a sweeping fire that runs its course through, say, the lodgepole pine on the Yellowstone plateau. We may never get to the point of prescribing such a burn.

4. The last closing note is that interest in fire in parks of the United States appears to derive from a different base than in those of Africa. The difference is that in Africa mammals are viewed as the principal park resource. Fire preserves animal habitat and thus it is the wildlife manager who most actively seeks fire as a means of preserving, perhaps even favoring, habitat (Russell; *Fire in Africa*, 1971). In the United States, on the other hand, the ones who most vigorously seek fire are the persons interested in the retention of vegetation *per se*. The Sierra redwood, in the best example, is the heroic thing endeavored to be preserved. The fauna dependent on it is secondary and, however important we know it to be, almost forgotten.

Now, of course, the preservation of vegetation and habitat preservation are really pretty much the same thing. It is only the discipline of the advocate for fire in the national parks that is different between the two continents. But I think the difference warrants at least this incidental note.

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