

C O N T E N T S

Acknowledgments | ix

A Note on Methods | xi

CHAPTER 1: Introduction | 1

CHAPTER 2: The Social Dimensions of Wildfire | 13

CHAPTER 3: Forester-Kings? Fire Suppression and the State | 41

CHAPTER 4: Managing in the Wake of the Ax | 65

CHAPTER 5: Out of the Frying Pan: Catastrophic Fire as a “Crisis of Crisis Management” | 111

CHAPTER 6: The Weight of Past Weakness: Prospects for Ecological Modernization in Fire Management | 127

CHAPTER 7: Conclusion: The Chronic Parolee | 149

Notes | 159

References | 187

Index | 207



INTRODUCTION

Humans have a tortured relationship with fire. We are, in the terminology of relationship pathologies, “control freaks.” We love fire if we feel we are in charge of it. Appropriately placed within the confines of the hearth, fire provides warmth and a sense of comfort, a shield both material and psychological against the encroachment of darkness. Fire in the right place and of the right scale is considered an indicator of progress, a seed of human civilization. When a small pile of sticks is set ablaze outdoors within the confines of a ring of stones, most of us are drawn to it, and not simply for the warmth it provides. We are, when fire is behaving in a socially appropriate way, deeply pyrophillic. But if fire gets uppity, the love turns to terror. Depending on our proximity, this fear is utterly rational. Having once caught my own hands on fire, I can attest that overly close encounters with uncontrolled flames are not to be encouraged. The many fatalities among wildland firefighters over the years provide much more profound and tragic testimony to the same point. However, over the past 50 to 100 years, humans’ need for control has increased, in part because human populations continue to spread into what used to be considered “wilderness” and as part of a larger attempt at managing nature to suit our historically specific needs and wants. Even if we face no personal risk, we would much prefer to see fire bounded, enclosed, and managed. Fire that does not suit our needs has no place. Fire out of its cage is infernal. It is the tool of the mob, the invader, and the rioting masses. It is to be extinguished.

INTRODUCTION

For those surveying the western landscape at the turn of the twentieth century, the fear of wildfire was primarily something to live with, not to act upon. While people would certainly fight to defend themselves, their families, and their homes from fire, the idea of eliminating fire to the greatest possible extent or controlling it would have seemed like a madman's dream. There was simply too much space and too many ignitions to make such an idea feasible. The mythological lesson of King Canute, who failed to hold back the tide by commanding the advancing waters to stop, would have seemed appropriate as a cautionary tale. Nonetheless, during the second half of the twentieth century, the United States Forest Service (USFS) seemed to be succeeding where Canute had failed. The relative absence of free-burning fire in US forests is an amazing result of that success, although one that westerners tend to take largely for granted.

In sheer scale, the magnitude of the project of fire elimination is astonishing. In the early twentieth century, when public lands were vast and prone to burn, even imagining that fire could be effectively chased out was in some ways courageous. Looming over this massive project in US forestry lore are some larger-than-life figures, most of whom sported the uniform of the USFS: Chief Gifford Pinchot, understood to have stamped the Forest Service with his utilitarian conservationism and to have set the organization's mission; Chief Henry Graves, who established fire protection as the first step toward real forestry; Chief William Greeley, who set the extent of fire suppression as the metric for progress in US forestry and fought tirelessly to gain the legal authority and resources needed to extinguish fire; and Ed Pulaski—symbol of the bravery and heroism of the ranger and frontline firefighter—who, in the face of a fast-approaching wildfire during the “Big Blowup” (a series of massive fires that raged throughout the West) of 1910, dragged his crew of forty-five men into an abandoned mine and positioned himself at the entrance with a pistol. He remained there all night, threatening to shoot any man who fled as the mineshaft timbers caught fire. He is credited with saving the lives of all but five of his men.

However, the lesson of Canute is beginning to appear menacingly relevant once again. Wildland fire is on the rise in the western United States. While successes continue in the US Congress for funding and resources, and heroics continue on the fire lines, westerners are facing a serious reckoning with wildland fire. As catastrophic fires become increasingly commonplace, all indications point to the reality that westerners are going to have to learn to live with fire.

A CATASTROPHIC SITUATION

This resurgence of wildfire in the US West is a catastrophe 100 years in the making. Whereas forest fires have crept and smoldered in the past, with only occasional blowups, conflagration now seems to be the norm. Fire intensity, frequency, and size are all on an upward trend,¹ along with the amount of money spent on wildland fire management.² Catastrophic wildland fire is the charismatic poster child of the larger “forest health crisis” the USFS has declared is afflicting the nation’s woods. Eye-catching photos of flames blaze across the pages of newspapers and in evening news reports. Former president George W. Bush announced his forestry initiatives while standing “in the black”—on the charred remains of burned-over land. Bills are introduced and regulations enacted on the grounds of protecting communities from catastrophic blazes.

When I began writing this book in the summer of 2007, fire resources were stretched thin across the West as bone-dry forests and grasslands were ignited by dry lightning storms. During one week alone, on Friday 1,000 more fires were burning than had been burning the previous Monday. Around 15,000 firefighters were digging lines, lighting backfires, and dropping retardant as fire officials ratcheted up the wildfire alert level to its highest point. Seventy fires, each extending over 100 acres, were burning across twelve states, and ash was still floating down after Utah had suffered the state’s largest fire on record. Evacuees were returning, and media coverage focused on the tragedy of torched homes, possessions lost, dreams gone up in smoke. By the summer of 2008 the costs of fire suppression nationally were approaching \$1.6 billion, not because it was a bad fire season across the country but because of the particularly large and costly fires in California. We have come a long way from the early days of state-financed fire protection, during which flames were chased with considerable futility by a mule, a ranger, and his shovel.³ By the end of June 2008, after a weekend storm had ignited 1,000 fires across the region, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger asked President Bush to declare a state of emergency in California. By year’s end, 1.33 million acres had burned in the state.⁴ How did wildland fire become so fierce?

While many reasons have been suggested for the resurgence of fires—with various fingers pointing at climate change, logging, or real-estate development—policy, popular, journalistic, and academic discussions of fire share a high degree of consensus in one area. Their accounts overlap in claiming that the alarming recent trends in fire behavior are partly, if not largely, attributable to federal land management agencies’ diligent suppression efforts, particularly those of the USFS.⁵ An increasingly common narrative has emerged to explain the rise of

catastrophic fire, featuring a largely autonomous state agency (the USFS) with a misguided missionary-professional ethic and an overconfident, pseudo-religious belief in the pursuit of human control over nature. The Forest Service's mania for fire prevention and suppression, it is argued, has resulted in more fire-prone and combustible forests. The USFS has spent its time and the public's money piling up fuel that now lies waiting for a spark. As a result of this narrative, politicians, environmental activists, and nervous homeowners across the US West have set their sights on reforming (or, in some extreme cases, abolishing) the Forest Service.

Blaming the state exclusively for the emergence of crises of various kinds is nothing new. Such a response has a great deal of cultural traction in the United States. In the 1930s and 1940s, for example, lumbermen blamed the size and structure of taxes for the massive deforestation wrought by industrial logging. The state, in its mythical status as a standalone institution, is held accountable for the low quality of education, the duration of the Great Depression, lapsing morality, environmental despoliation, welfare's failure, poverty, unemployment, the subprime mortgage meltdown, 9/11, unreliable trains, and so on. The trouble is that this tradition of blaming the government for crises is rarely, if ever, accurate. In many cases, blaming any actor exclusively for generating a crisis (e.g., economic, environmental, political) misses the boat. Rather, crises tend to emerge from relations between social actors operating within the constraints of a given context. This holds true for environmental, as well as economic, crises.

This book presents an alternative explanation for the genesis of catastrophic fire in the West. Drawing on correspondence between and within the Forest Service and major timber industry associations, newspaper articles, articles from industry publications, and policy documents from the late 1800s to the present, I argue that the state-focused narrative pushes much of the relevant action out of the picture. While a century of suppression has indeed increased the hazard of wildfire (again, along with human settlement patterns, changing land use, and, perhaps most alarming in recent years, climate change), the project of eliminating fire from the woods and the "blowback" of the increasing fire hazard do not stem from the USFS as an isolated, highly autonomous body. Rather, their roots are found in the Forest Service's relationships with other, more powerful elements of society—the timber industry in particular.

Within the activist ranks of many environmental social movements, the Forest Service is viewed as having a very comfortable, even friendly relationship with the timber industry. The USFS's relations with the timber business, however, have not always been amicable. During the 1930s and 1940s in particular,

bad blood between the two deepened. As the Forest Service's periodic evaluations of the state of US forests generated ever bleaker forecasts, its leaders began to push for greater control over the business of lumbering, not only on public lands but on private lands as well. When the USFS began to publicly decry what it saw as managerial incompetence on the part of timber owners, resulting in forest devastation and the prospect of a deforested United States, business owners rallied in defense of the prerogatives of capital to conduct their affairs and dispose of their property as they saw fit. Commenting on a regulatory proposal floated by the USFS in 1940, for example, timber executive George F. Jewett of the Potlatch Timber Company in Idaho and an active member of the National Lumber Manufacturers Association (NLMA), unleashed a verbal assault on acting USFS chief Earle Clapp:

I feel that managerial incompetence has been much less to blame [for the devastation of forests] than dumb or vicious public leadership. I use this last term advisedly for there are governmental leaders whose avowed purpose is to socialize the country. [Former chief] F. A. Silcox personally endorsed the pamphlet entitled "The Lower One-Third and the Forest Service" in which the proposed cure of our forest evils was to socialize enough of our forest area so that the private forests could be ruined by governmental competition . . . My objection to your general program is that whether intentional or not it plays right into the hands of those who would alter our way of life. This entitles them to the description "vicious." The National Socialist Party which dominates Germany professes just the ideals you propose: strict regulation of private property for the benefit of all the people. Allowing the government so much power destroys individual liberty just as effectively as the communist set-up of Russia. I believe men are more important than trees. If we have free men, they will take care of their trees when the time comes.⁶

Nearly a decade later, NLMA president A. J. Glassow expressed similar dismay at the continuing threats of government encroachment on the freedoms of business. Speaking to the nation's timber executives, Glassow gave a stirring "once more into the breach" address:

My sole purpose in speaking to you today is to add my voice to those who would rouse every businessman in the country to action—action to protect the principle of freedom of enterprise . . . This freedom is hard to visualize—until it is suddenly and painfully restricted by Federal regulation . . . And if we think that the roots of freedom of enterprise are still firmly imbedded in our national economy and in present laws, we are not looking at the facts. The winds of socialization are blowing strong, and the soil of America has already

INTRODUCTION

been sown with the seeds of federal control . . . Each year sees greater and greater extension of the power of the Federal bureaucracy over your economic freedom . . . There is the danger.⁷

The looming threat of a socialist takeover was a favorite theme of the timber industry during this period. When confronted with the fact that the industry's practices had, in fact, devastated US forests, workers, and communities in pursuit of private gain, executives took up a well-practiced refrain. "We are not the problem," they claimed. "Rather, turn your eyes toward the real destroyer of forests. Fire is the problem, and it is a hazard generated by the public, not the private owner. If you want to stop forest devastation, put out the flames." Jewett, testifying in 1940 before the Joint Congressional Committee on Forestry, which had a mandate to recommend forestry legislation, stated the case bluntly: "From your extended travels and the eight hearings held throughout the various forest regions of the United States, it is clear to you that nature will grow trees on over one-third of our continental area, if given the proper encouragement by man. This encouragement included protection against man-made hazards . . . The principal man-made hazard is fire."⁸ Contrary to the dominant narrative's account, the picture that emerges from a close historical investigation is one in which fire is stamped out and rages back not as a result of the insulated policies of an overly muscular state agency run amuck but instead as a result of that agency's weakness relative to a highly organized network of timber capitalists.

The fuels of catastrophic fire are to be found in the tension created by the contradictory roles of state agencies operating within a context of predominantly capitalist social relations. Modern wildfire, in addition to being produced by the usual "fire triangle" of heat, fuels, and oxygen, is the result of a political-economic triangle made up of the commodification of forests, the strict requirements of profitable private forestry, and the very limited room for maneuver afforded the Forest Service in its efforts to implement "practical forestry" in the United States. Practical forestry, as George Gonzalez has pointed out, was an early euphemism in both timber and conservation circles for harvesting and growing trees in a manner that was practical in terms of the accumulation of capital.⁹ Practical forestry was profitable forestry. The history of wildland fire management policy and its effects on the western landscape today, then, are best explained by looking at the context from which this policy emerged and in which land managers struggle to reform it. That context is an epic battle over two questions: for what purposes should US forests be managed, and in whose interest? These questions retain relevance today as environmental groups clash with timber companies and

the state over forest management. Indeed, as Richard Behan has pointed out, the fight over the fate of the nation's forests is still bitterly contested, largely in the courtroom but also within managerial ranks, in the halls of the US Congress, and in the forests themselves when activists directly confront loggers.¹⁰ But between 1930 and 1950, the state was likely to be the party clashing with timber interests in defense of forestry management for the public good, with its leaders angry and despondent about the devastation of the nation's forests.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

This book is intended to answer two questions. First, what are the origins of the current relationship between people and fire in the US West? Since that relationship is heavily conditioned by the actions of the United States Forest Service, a considerable portion of the book is dedicated to unearthing a history of how the USFS arrived at its longstanding policy and practice of trying to exclude fire from the woods. This history focuses on the period between the end of the nineteenth century (with the genesis of the Forest Service) and 1950. This is not to say that the contest over fire policy is contained within that period. Indeed, fire policy has been increasingly contested within the Forest Service since the late 1970s and on into the 2000s. These recent debates and political struggles have had a significant effect on contemporary fire policy, as discussed in chapter 2. However, the policy of fire exclusion that has so profoundly remade much of the western forest landscape has its roots in battles fought in the first half of the twentieth century. Second, now that it is widely acknowledged that this policy is neither ecologically nor economically sustainable (the National Park Service began reforming its fire policy in 1968, the USFS a decade later), why is the USFS having such a difficult time pulling back from suppression as its primary—almost exclusive—response to fire?

I begin by outlining the case for a sociological inquiry into wildland fire. While there is a growing social-scientific literature on the connections between culture, values, perceptions, and attitudes, on the one hand, and wildland fire on the other,¹¹ fire has been treated predominantly as a technical-managerial problem and is widely understood as a force of nature—a “natural disaster.” As such, it may seem unlikely that sociology will offer much insight into why and how the human relationship with fire in the US West was formed. Chapter 2 thus sets out the case that today's wildland fires are just as social in content as they are natural. During this discussion, a broad overview of the social history of fire is recounted, drawing primarily on existing accounts of fire, fire protection,

US forestry, and conservation to address initial questions. How have Americans transformed the landscape through fire use? How has the pattern of forest fire changed since European settlement, as well as over the past century? What accounts for those changes? In chapter 2, I recount the institutional history of fire policy in the United States to provide adequate background so the reader is able to grasp and evaluate the remainder of the argument. This history relies heavily on secondary sources, providing only a surface accounting of actions the Forest Service has taken in its efforts to arrive at and implement a wildfire policy. I owe a great debt to Stephen Pyne, David Carle, and Ashley Schiff for their work in this area. The chapter also includes some assessment of the ecological consequences of the USFS's policy on fire and concludes by looking at the recent (re-)politicization of fire as it has come to dominate debates over land use and logging since about 2002.

In chapter 3, I review existing explanations for the emergence of the forest health crisis and for catastrophic wildland fire and unpack their implicit or explicit sociological content. I argue that existing explanations rest on specific assumptions about the nature and role of the state in capitalist society, its motivations, its tasks, and its relationships with the rest of society. With some oversimplification (to be remedied later in this book, I hope) for the sake of brevity, the dominant account of fire's turn for the worse contends that the Forest Service surveyed the nation's forests, saw them burning, perceived this as waste and injury to the potential human welfare to be derived from standing green timber, resolved to douse the flames, and then proceeded to do so. Catastrophic fire events early in the twentieth century played a role in galvanizing public support for suppression and acted as the crucible within which the Forest Service's views on fire were formed.¹² An addiction to fire fighting, born of the alleged tendency for bureaucratic budget maximizing, developed over time.¹³ All of this, as we shall see, did in fact happen. However, the explanation is incomplete.

Its partial nature is the result of a contrived isolation of the Forest Service and its actions in the realm of fire protection from the larger context of the state's role in ongoing struggles over access to US forests. Through an exclusive focus on the agency's actions in creating a culture, economy, and technical capacity for fire suppression rather than on the dynamics of conflict over the fate of the forests, a causal explanation emerges that is implicitly or explicitly built on a very particular theory of the state. Blame is heaped on Forest Service bureaucrats and their misguided mania for demonizing and extinguishing flame. A picture is drawn of an overly muscular, insulated, highly autonomous, scientifically minded corps of forest managers hell-bent on stamping out every last spark in the woods. The Forest

Service, in this explanation, autonomously generated the will and capacity for the long-held policy of fire suppression in a gambit to maximize the productivity and efficiency of US forests. The Forest Service itself, in its many recent policy reviews and introspective publications, has engaged in a confessional brand of hand-wringing that centers its own actions in the deterioration of national forests. In short, the dominant narrative of fire in the United States is highly and indefensibly state-centric. State-centered explanations are those that emphasize the centrality of the state in shaping history, claiming that the state has its own set of interests—distinct from those of other social actors—and the capacity to realize those interests. A review of relevant sociological debates on the nature of the state, its degree of autonomy, and its role in capitalist societies points to one aspect of the larger social-theoretical significance of the problem of wildland fire. Chapter 3 concludes by identifying important questions that the state-centered explanations advanced to date fail to answer and that thus demand another look at the social dynamics that produced the policy of full suppression. Most pressingly, I ask why the USFS was apparently able to act with such autonomy with regard to fire policy, given the widely recognized fact that it showed a complete lack of autonomy on other forest management issues.

In chapter 4, I argue that we can much better understand the social component of catastrophic wildfire by highlighting the political-economic context of capitalism in which the USFS has operated. Historical evidence is presented that calls into question the high degree of autonomy attributed to the USFS and that highlights the role of class-based actors in determining fire policy. Of key relevance on this front, given that an autonomous agency should be able to realize its wishes, are the assessments by Forest Service leaders and employees concerning the steps necessary to halt the devastation of forests by commercial timbering on private land and the USFS's inability to undertake those steps. In this chapter I examine in particular the fate of efforts to gain federal regulatory power over private timbering and to nationalize a much greater portion of forestlands than those held within the National Forest System. Key members of the USFS viewed these initiatives as vital to address what they saw as the major threat to the nation's forests: overexploitation and the looming specter of timber famine. This struggle took the form of a series of regulatory and legislative initiatives championed by the USFS. While the state's relationship with timber capital fluctuated from cozy collaboration in the period leading up to the New Deal to outright conflict, one thing remained constant: every regulatory or nationalizing initiative was either defeated outright or altered significantly at the behest and in the interests of timber capital. Failing in its efforts to secure the power to regulate private forestry, the

Forest Service fell back time and time again on a quid pro quo arrangement with timber capitalists, in which the state was to provide fire suppression in exchange for conservation-oriented logging reform by private owners.

Given this history, I argue in chapter 5 that a crisis-theoretic approach to understanding the USFS's actions over the course of the twentieth century best explains the emergence of catastrophic wildfire. Based predominantly on Marxist and neo-Marxist theories of crisis (primarily, but not exclusively, those of Karl Marx, James O'Connor, Claus Offe, and John Foster), I argue that the current "forest health crisis" is an exemplar of Offe's "crisis of crisis management."¹⁴ That is, we can best understand the emergence of catastrophic wildfire as a regular feature in the western United States in light of the state's absorption of environmental crisis generated by capitalist industrial forestry and its inability to adequately manage that crisis given the ongoing tension between its role as the political guardian of the conditions of accumulation and its role as a defender and promoter of the public good. I also characterize the removal of fire as an instance of "metabolic rift"—a rupture in the basic ecological processes that reproduce forest ecosystems—and argue that the theory of metabolic rift, in contrast to other Marxist theories of environmental crisis, better positions us to consider the role of the state in mediating the interaction of humans and nature that occurs in the labor process. In short, in chapter 5, I argue that fire as conditioned by human intervention, no less than other elements of forest ecology, is a relational product. It cannot be dumped exclusively on the doorstep of a mischievous or malicious nature, an overly powerful state agency, or rapacious capital.

In chapter 6, I examine the question of ecological modernization as it is hypothesized to be occurring among the state apparatuses of industrialized nations. Ecological modernization theory (EMT) suggests that the tensions alluded to in chapters 4 and 5 can be transcended. In their place, EM theorists see the development of a win-win scenario that combines ripe conditions for accumulation and a successful defense of the public good (in this case defined as the maintenance of ecological systems as "conditions of life").¹⁵ The USFS's recent policy shift away from total fire suppression toward a policy that vows to allow fire to reoccupy, to the greatest extent possible, its old ecological role in the forests presents a promising case study for EMT. It is suggestive of a classic process of ecological modernization, in which negative side effects of resource management strategies become evident over time through scientific inquiry, resulting in the appropriate adjustments to those strategies.

Data from interviews with USFS and Bureau of Land Management fire managers are triangulated with trends in agency spending to evaluate the extent

to which the Forest Service is undergoing a process of ecological modernization with regard to wildfire. Interviews served as a ground-truthing exercise, and my understanding of the practice and policy of fire management was greatly expanded and clarified by those with whom I spoke. In addition, the interviews provide a window into the organizational process of ecological modernization and allow some assessment of the extent to which this process is proceeding, the obstacles to its progress, and fire managers' attitudes and opinions about both the policy directions and practical operations of the nation's primary forestland management agency. The chapter concludes that, while policy is changing and has in fact been shifting since the late 1970s, the tensions inherent in the state's contradictory roles within capitalism have not been transcended, and practice remains largely unchanged. Factors both internal (planning processes, managerial risk calculations, and incentive structures) and external to the organization (real-estate development, budgeting shortfalls, a "fire-industrial complex," and public perceptions of fire) have prevented change on the ground, despite altered guidelines for practitioners and formal policies. In terms of the ecological consequences—the bottom line of any test of ecological modernization—USFS fire management remains highly problematic, as practitioners in the field are well aware. I argue—against an assumption implicit in EMT—that the state's managerial practices are highly constrained not only by social forces in the present but also by its own past management. Because of this, past ecological blunders, such as the removal of fire, are not easily undone.

I conclude by connecting questions of ecological modernization and theories of the state. While an emergent literature is hypothesizing the development of "environmental states" as part of the broader process of ecological modernization, the question of how such an emergence might either contradict or complement the state's role in capitalist society has not been well addressed. I argue that the state in a capitalist context is incapable of becoming environmental in any meaningful sense. As long as the state is restricted to the management of environmental and economic crises created by capitalist social relations and by the labor processes those relations demand, it is likely to continue to produce new forms of crisis. That is, the lack of state autonomy relative to capital even as the state attempts to manage economic and ecological crises generated by the latter precludes the emergence of a genuinely environmental state.