Coyote Brings Fire to the City, Again

Over the past decade easterners have shaken their heads over the seasonal spectacle of western settlements smashed by free-burning flames. But now that flames have scorched Staten Island and routinely gnaw at Long Island exurbs, it is clear that America's urban fire problem is not restricted to Montana trophy homes and Arizona trailer parks. It's also present in its metropoli. In truth, it never really left.

Combustion does not see the world as we do. It sees only spark, fuels, oxygen, and opportunities for them to collude. A shrubby park, an abandoned warehouse, a weedy vacant lot, bed sheets - it's all, potentially, so much hydrocarbon primed for a spark. Where we control those settings, we control fire. That explains why our national fire problems are on the uninhabited public lands of the west, not our eastern megalopoli.

Over the past century, the occasions for fire in industrial cities have steadily shrunk. A change in construction materials, fire and building codes, hydrants, a preference for internal combustion over open flame, and efficient firefighting apparatus have all worked to compress fire into ever smaller boxes. Most fire departments respond increasingly to emergencies other than fire, typically medical or toxic hazards. Instead, modern cities burn during wars, riots, and earthquakes, when the social order shatters and the built environment is overturned.

Urban and wildland fire protection are two distinct cultures. Urban firefighters are life-savers first and foremost. They occupy a densely moral world in which, amid an environment built by people, fire results from human failure. Wildland firefighters more resemble an army engaged in a moral equivalent of war against nature, a setting over which they have little control except along the flaming front. In almost every way, from tactics to self-conception, the two groups differ, and share fire rather as fly fishermen and irrigation farmers share water. Only in a few patches do they overlap, notably in California. They have been the two solitudes of American fire.

Yet urban sprawl and a desire for at least pockets of quasi-natural milieus within metropolitan areas are forcing the city and the woods into volatile compounds. The most vivid expressions occur along the fractal urban fringe, particularly where the landscape is naturally fire-prone and where it involves reserved lands that will not be fully converted into flame-free cityscapes. The city, in the form of exurban enclaves, moves into the wilds, a frontier that is recolonizing rural scenes and kindling sparks where house and woods meet, a kind of environmental matter and anti-matter, and no one should be surprised that they explode from time to time.

But the formula can work the other way, too: quasi-wildlands can interbreed with cities to spark conflagrations. To date, the most spectacular instance has been the Oakland fire of 1991. Others may well follow, however, as cities absorb combustibles in forms that urban fire services often don't recognize, and that are not amenable to traditional ladder-and-engine tactics. One might be better equipped with a burlap bag and a box of matches than with hydrants and 2-1/2" gated wyes.

The result is that the two cultures of firefighting are learning from one another. Curiously, the wildland community has been the more innovative, perhaps because they cannot truly control their setting even in principle, and are even eager to introduce fire to fight fire and to prompt ecological benefits. (Prescribed burning is what they have in place of urban renewal by explosives and wrecking cranes.) What they need to learn from urban fire is how to handle people when fires burst from the backcountry to threaten densely inhabited places.

What urban fire has to learn from its wildland colleagues is how to handle brush fires and complex fires that go beyond bigger versions of buildings and demand more than massing appliances and pulling multiple alarms. It has been observed, for example, that the burning of the Twin Towers might have been fought better as a peculiar wildland fire than as a larger-than-normal building fire. The incident command system, developed by wildland agencies to coordinate across many agencies and jurisdictions, is seeping into the urban fire services as an administrative tool for all emergencies. And of course where exurbs crowd against thickening woods or where conurbations sweep around quasi-natural parklands, they create scenes that become a habitat for wildland fire. Fire will find them; it was, after all, there

before the city.

A number of North American legends tell how in ancient times coyote stole fire. Now, it would seem, fires and coyotes are returning. As the coyotes may require more than the traditional dogcatcher, the fires may demand more than the traditional engine company.