

Wallowing

§ It's never too early to second-guess, but as the Wallow fire continues to rake through the White Mountains like a giant grizzly paw, it's worth reviewing how such a burn could happen.

For more than a century Americans have faced fire on their public wildlands. For the first 50 years we tried to abolish it, and failed. For the past 50 years we have tried, with patchy success, to restore it. What we have learned is that all strategies for wildland fire work brilliantly until they fail, and they can fail under conditions that wipe out all the good they had done.

Letting fires burn freely in the backcountry is cheap, safe, and ecologically benign until, inevitably, one bolts free, rips through towns, smokes in valleys, and overruns protected places outside its designated domain.

Setting prescribed fires replaces nature's fires with tamer surrogates until they fail to do the ecological work required or one also slips its leash and runs amok.

Large-scale landscaping – clearing, thinning, roading, converting – can change the behavior of fires but does not eliminate them. Big fires can still ramble, and the meddling can fundamentally mar the character of the land under protection.

Firefighting, or fire suppression, loses 2-3% of fires under extreme conditions. The resulting firefight is like a declaration of martial law, a means to put down a temporary insurrection; it is not a means to govern. Trying to exclude fire in naturally fire-prone places only stirs up an ecological insurgency.

Each approach fails on its own. What has a chance to work is a mixture of strategies, adjusted to particular places. Restoration takes time, patience, and support from a sustaining society. Its prescriptions are political as much as ecological. Like a culture's architecture or legal system, its fire regimes reflect the choices it makes and the values on which it bases them.

§ It is not that fire has been ignored. The flames have drawn partisans like a leaping bonfire. But they stand with their back to the fire, speaking out to some group, using those flames to animate their message. The fire matters because it affects something else that they value. They don't see fire as a common cause, a universal catalyst for the biota, and something with its own logic and demands. Intellectuals have been no less remiss. Arizona's universities have disciplines devoted to earth, water, and air, but the only fire department is the one that sends emergency vehicles when an alarm sounds.

What is striking about the American style of fire is how technically robust it is, and how politically dysfunctional and inept in practice so much of it has become. There are exceptions. Florida has mastered prescribed fire, and created a legal framework to make it work. Southern California knows how to battle fires in the I-zone, where wildland and city slam together. The Gila Wilderness has, over 40 painstaking years, evolved a natural fire program. All rely on local cultures that have reached consensus about what needs to be done and how to do it. In most of the country, instead, we have the fire equivalent of a public health system with unlimited monies for emergency response but little for insurance, vaccines, or wellness visits.

Wildland fire doesn't work for the same reasons that many other vital issues don't work. America, in brief, has the fires it chooses: its fires look like the society that oversees them. What is missing in fire management is what seems to have been squeezed out everywhere, the middle – in this case a middle landscape between the wild and the urban. It's not just that we can't achieve consensus, it's that we can't agree on a process by which consensus might come. Fire, however, isn't listening. It can't be voted out, gerrymandered, petitioned, denounced, slandered, mocked, bought off, or ignored.

In places like the White Mountains fire is inevitable, and essential. But the Wallow fire is neither. It's too early to track the tributaries that have fed into this ruinous burn. But a fire at this time, at this place, under these circumstances was not foreordained. Now there is not even a barn door to close because the barn has burned down.

§ It's not clear what has burned and how intensely. What will regrow depends on how the flames actually combusted the mixed woods and how lushly rains fall over the next few years. It's worth noting that

unlike lodgepole pine the ponderosa forest is not adapted to high-intensity crown fire. It's not a given that the old forest will return. Like mythological fires the Wallow may force a new world into being.

It's worth noting too that the fire threatened old communities, perhaps refreshed with newcomers, but rooted places, not subprime exurbs like those along San Gabriels or the Front Range. Most were established in the 1870s, 40 years before statehood. They took steps to protect themselves. Alpine created a fire district; the Forest Service installed rudimentary fuelbreaks around the valley perimeter; fringe communities eliminated combustible roofing, cleaned up around houses, and even put in hydrants. They didn't deserve this.

We aren't going to stomp fire out, and we can't afford to outsource it to lightning, arsonists, and sloppy campers. We know better. We've known better for years. We just can't muster the social consensus to fix it.

It's finally worth noting that only a scratchline in the duff separates tragedy from travesty.

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June 2011

This op/ed piece was written, upon request, for the *Arizona Republic* and appeared on 12 June 2011. It can be reproduced freely with acknowledgement to its prior publication.