

The Yellowstone Fires

Burn, Baby, Burn!

Randall Restless

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Outside my window a dusting of snow frosts the ground and an October moon illuminates a wintry night. It is hard to believe that, little more than a month ago, the air was acrid with woodsmoke, hot, dry winds raked the baked earth, and the town hummed with hysteria like an over-stoked furnace. Yellowstone was afire.

“Disaster” was the theme for the summer. The hot topic of conversation was Park Service-kicking. “Barbecue Barbee”, became a popular phrase with locals incensed at Yellowstone Park Superintendent Bob Barbee for “letting the fires get out of control” and for “ruining the tourist season.”

Across the nation, media and politicians spewed the predictable reactionary hype, branding the huge fires a catastrophe and bemoaning the loss of the “crown jewel of the National Park system.”

But what the hell has really happened to Yellowstone? As I was employed in neither tourism nor firefighting work, I was able to observe the entire debacle from a passive viewpoint, from my home in Bozeman, Montana on the northern fringe of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE). Natural history and ecology are my passion, so I followed the progress of the fires and the human reactions with fascination and a certain horror.

Around the end of June, lightning and human-caused fires began flaring up in the Yellowstone backcountry. The “let-burn” policy of the National Park Service (NPS) and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) allowed the blazes to take off. There was little talk of containment until mid-July, when things started getting real hot.

Soon the fires were beyond control, raging with an intensity unequalled in modern forest fire history.

Developments were threatened in Yellowstone and outlying towns like Cooke City, and West Yellowstone got distinctly nervous. By late July the fires were immense and the weather extremely hot and dry. This situation continued right through August and well into September resulting in over 1.3 million acres of the GYE being affected by fire.

At first I bought into the media hype, to my shame. The fires were indeed frightening and the immediate effects extremely unpleasant, even in Bozeman, 40 miles from the nearest fire. Each day I’d watch the weather follow the same grim pattern. Smoke would drift into the Gallatin Valley by mid-morning, nearly obscuring the nearby mountains.

Thirty-mile-per-hour winds would blow incessantly as the temperature rose over 90 degrees. At night I’d go to bed picturing the flames ravaging the wilderness I knew and loved. If only it would rain! But the heat went on and on.

In late August I got a closer look at the fires when I drove through West Yellowstone on the day branded “Black Saturday” due to the incredible fire activity which took place, fanned by south winds blowing at a steady 60 mph. One fire advanced fourteen miles that day. From a hill above West Yellowstone the entire Park seemed to be ablaze.

Giant billows of black smoke, pouring off the Madison plateau, blew rapidly north across Yellowstone. The clouds were lit red from below. Hell on Earth. It was easy to understand local residents’ fright and anger. Eventually the drought became so severe that fires were burning all over Montana and, for over a week in September, all Montana public lands were closed; an unprecedented move.

At last, in late September, a series of storms cooled the air and calmed the fires. A trip to visit radical friends in Missoula changed my attitude immensely. I found these people applauding the fires! Snow on the mountains gave us a chance to breathe and begin to see an end to the burning. Only then did the truth about the fires begin to leak out in the media.

An editorial in the *Bozeman Daily Chronicle* on September 18 stated “Despite the widespread nature of the fires, Yellowstone is hardly destroyed. Half the park did not burn at all, one third of the land within the one million acres burned was also untouched and half the burned area was only lightly charred by fires that moved across the forest floor without torching the treetops. The Park’s wildlife was largely unaffected. Less than a tenth of the park resembles the “moonscape” scenes we’ve seen, and most of those are in stands of doghair lodgepole pine and blown-down deadfalls that no one thought heartbreakingly beautiful before. So let’s cut out the foolishness about devastation...”

Life Will Explode

It soon became apparent to anyone listening that, not only were the fires unavoidable and overdue, but they are a blessing! As Jasper Carlton put it, “Yellowstone will bloom biodiversity!” Next spring Yellowstone will experience a greening and rebirth the likes of which has never been witnessed by humankind.

The “lodgepole deserts,” vast ranks of lodgepole pine trees choked with fallen debris and nearly devoid of wildlife, have been opened up to the sunlight and the nutrients bound up in the trees will return to the soil via the rich fertilizer known as ash. Life will explode! Some areas may experience an immediate tripling in the number of wildlife species present.

In our shortsighted human impatience we often forget the long ecological processes which created the land we inhabit and which will continue long after we are gone. We cannot preserve forests and wildlands like so many museum specimens. Change is the rule in the natural world, and change often comes fast and furious.

The incredible landscape of Yellowstone is the result of a long history of volcanoes, floods, earthquakes and fires. Yet look at the wonderland these processes produced! If it is to remain a wonderland we must allow the natural world to go about its business, even if it means occasional discomfort and “disaster.”

So, to the ecologically aware and to the GYE, the Yellowstone fires were a good thing. However, let us examine the root causes of these fires and consider some points which seem to have been overlooked in the hysteria.

Fires are an essential part of forest ecology. Some tree species depend on periodic fire to aid reproduction. Yellowstone has burned many, many times before, though most of the fires occurred before Western man “discovered” Yellowstone. This summer’s fires were indeed of an unusual intensity and extent, and may have not been equalled in the natural history of the area. We have no way of knowing. But we can deduce the reasons for the severity of this year’s fires.

One reason which has gained considerable recognition is fire suppression. The “Smokey Bear” mentality of the U.S. Departments of Interior and Agriculture has resulted in several decades of active fire suppression on all public lands. Thus the forests, instead of undergoing periodic “housecleaning” via low-intensity fires, became strewn with fallen dead timber.

The let-burn policy was finally adopted in the early ‘70s for designated Wilderness areas and the remote back-country of National Parks as fire became recognized as a component of forest ecology. Thus we have large areas of forest laden with “fuel” and now allowed to burn. Enter drought.

Three years of increasingly serious drought across the country brought the fire potential to a critical level. A few bolts of lightning, an untended campfire and bingo! Inferno. Who could realistically hope to contain fires in such circumstances? Fire crews were extremely lucky to save most of the structures in Yellowstone Park and to avoid the destruction of nearby towns.

It seems that the Greenhouse Effect is taking hold and weather patterns are shifting, bringing drought and warming to the temperate regions. This should be the lesson we learn from the burning of Yellowstone: human civilization’s deleterious effects on Earth’s natural systems are becoming manifest in climatological chaos.

Unless we change our nasty industrial habits now, what we will see in a few years will make Yellowstone's fires look like a backyard barbecue. Indeed, the damage may already be done. We have only one planet to live on and she is telling us to cool it or lose it.

I applaud the Yellowstone fires. They are a reminder, like hurricane Gilbert, that people are not omnipotent. We have been humbled. But the fires also tell us, if we'll only listen, that all is not well with Gaia. Learn or Burn!

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Randall welcomes support for Earth First! projects in the Yellowstone Park area; contact him at the above address.

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