

Burn Now or Burn Now *and* Later

With the ashes still metaphorically hot from a recent California wildfire, it's long past time for the public to learn that some blazes are beneficial for the Golden State.

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As a freelance conservation writer and a graduate of NC State's fisheries and wildlife biology program, I have had a lot of experience with covering positive — yes, *positive* — forest fires. When properly conducted, a state-managed “controlled burn” can reduce leaf litter, spur new vegetation growth, provide new habitat for various wildlife species, and protect the area from suffering a catastrophic, runaway blaze.

However, there is a public enemy who is standing in the way of these scientific exercises. And he probably isn't someone you would expect.

Often referred to as Smokey “the” Bear, Smokey Bear is widely considered to be the most effective ad campaign ever implemented. More than any Budweiser Super Bowl commercial. More than any Sarah McLaughlin tear-jerker. Since he was introduced in 1944, Smokey has taught children across the U.S. — and, ultimately, around the world, thanks to his prevalence online — that “only they can prevent forest fires.”

The damage of that message has been nothing short of catastrophic, leading to the deaths of countless millions (people, animals, and plants) and the destruction of countless acres of wildlife habitat.

True, the initial messaging saw an incredible reduction in the number of improperly discarded cigarettes along roadsides, untended campfires in state and national parks, and out-of-control brush fires in backyards. However, too many children heard “forest fires” and didn't understand that some burning, even of our most cherished wild places, is actually a good thing.

The misunderstanding stems from the fact that several generations of people have grown up with Smokey's initial messaging — complete with a lovable, trustworthy, and even somewhat father-figurely cartoon to reinforce it — and think it is truly their personal responsibility to stop the flames of any and all fires. That has in turn led them to, in later life, hold governmental positions that can approve or ban the use of controlled burns by trained forestry officials. And if these well-meaning but misguided individuals do not personally hold the offices, they certainly tend to cast their votes for candidates who will follow that same line of thinking.

The result has been the build-up of leaf litter, dead tree trunks, and other forms of biological fuel over several decades that then burns out of control even when a natural source of fire, such as a random lightning strike, sets it all up in flames. The state of California, in particular, has

instituted a popular public policy over the years that claims to promote healthy environmental conditions.

But there is good news. Correcting this situation requires virtually nothing from the average resident of California. Hundreds of state and federal forestry personnel are eagerly standing by to implement scientifically sound and appropriate controlled burns, complete with all of the benefits the fires will bring about for people, animals, and plants that I mentioned earlier. All they require is permission to do their invaluable jobs. Let them, and see the positive results for yourself.