

**CREATING AN ECOLOGICAL OMELETTE:
How We Got Out of an Agrarian Frying Pan and Into an Exurban Fire**

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American fire is both exceptional and exemplary. Most fire on Earth lodges today where it has for millennia, within agriculture. The most robust fire continents like Africa sparkle with the flames of farmers and herders. And that is where most American fire was in 1880 when Charles Sargent produced a map of forest fires for the census. America in the 1880s was much like Brazil or Indonesia in the 1980s. That of course is no longer the case. There is far less open flame than in the past, and it resides, for the most part, in dedicated wildlands.

Historical fire triangle. The story of how this happened braids together three narratives: an industrial narrative, an imperial narrative, and a national narrative. The industrial narrative relates how, over the last 150 years, the Earth has vigorously divided into two master combustion regimes. One burns biomass, as the planet has for 400 million years. The other burns fossil biomass from coal, natural gas, oil, lignite, and the like. The curious fact is that the two species of combustion compete. Industrial combustion tends to substitute for, or actively suppress, its predecessors. Evening satellite images of Earth show broad, incommensurable swathes of light from one source or the other, with few sites exhibiting much of both.

Yet a handful of industrial nations routinely show patches of lusty burning, sometimes large in scope, and still others experience a volatile mix of houses and flames. Why? The creation of such lands is the upshot of two processes. One is the abandonment of traditional agriculture, and the recolonization of formerly farmed and grazed landscapes by exurban clusters. In fire-prone lands, this means an increase in fuel and a reduction (at least transitionally) in the means to control wildfire. The northern Mediterranean littoral is a type case. In fire-indifferent regions like northeastern North America, this process means little: fire exists only to the extent that people put it there. This contrasts with fire-prone areas like the southeast and West where fire will occur with or without human assistance.

The second process derives from the fact that industrial societies, which favor urban populations, also favor the reservation of natural, preferably wild scenes. Typically, these are modest since they must be fashioned out of existing landscapes, which surrender their turf grudgingly. But a cadre of countries boasts very extensive bush. These include America, Australia, Canada, and Russia.

The explanation is that they share an imperial narrative, separate from though parallel to the industrial narrative. Those nations with extensive bush fires are those that experienced colonization from Europe in which the indigenous peoples more or less disappeared from the scene from disease, war, or forced relocation. The upshot was a rare geography: lands relatively - temporarily - vacant of people.

Those lands fell under the authority of the state. They have remained as public entities overseen in the name of the common good. By an accident of history, they became the responsibility of foresters, an event that has profoundly shaped how fire would be perceived and administered.

Where such lands were fire-prone - subject to a wet-dry cycle and dry lightning - fire would prove inextinguishable. Where exurban clusters cram against such reserved lands, they are vulnerable to burning. This is a different circumstance from fire-sodden lands reclaimed from an agricultural economy in recession. And it is why I prefer the common term "intermix" to describe the two complexes, and others.

Parsing American fire history. There exists also a national narrative. Each country has fire policies, fire practices, and fire regimes that betray a cultural logic, a compound of its history and its sense of national identity. One can analyze a country's fires as one can its architecture, paintings, literature, or political institutions. For the United States, there are several prisms by which to interpret this experience. One can, for example, consider the creation of informing "stories" that attempt to explain the problem and propose a solution. Beginning with the Transfer Act that brought the national forests to the Forest Service in 1905, the cycle of these ruling stories runs in roughly 30-year rhythms. Or one can consider what fire problems have, at different times, dominated national discourse. These beat to a 20-year rhythm, beginning with the first reserves in 1891. The intermix fire is the latest installment of this serial. By my reckoning we are half-way through the era.

Today four issues embrace perhaps 95% of the national fire problem. First, there is the matter of the intermix fire. This is a dumb problem to have because technical solutions exist. Second, there is the lingering conundrum of fire in nature reserves and wilderness. This has no technical resolution; it ends in cultural - which is to say, political - choice. Third, the question of rehabilitating lands from their fire-mangled pasts. Fire has proved as ecologically powerful withdrawn as applied; there is no neutral position for a creature, like ourselves, who holds a species monopoly over fire's manipulation. While the "restoration" of "unhealthy" biotas is problematic, both practically and philosophically, the need for some kind of reformation is clear, both on private estates and the public domain. What regimen of fire is suitable (perhaps mandatory) is unclear, and will not be resolved by the naive mantra that "fire is natural." Fourth, the larger issues of global change. In particular, the combustion regime of the planet will likely provide a new index against which to measure fire practices.

Biodiversity, the carbon cycle, greenhouse gases and climate change, all will mean that globalization will apply to nature's economy as it does to the nation's. Fire's industrial narrative, in brief, cannot be segregated from fire's other presences. Solutions will clash. The proposal of the national fire plan to strip away most of the woody biomass over 39 million acres of national forest and reintroduce open burning, for example, can only complicate negotiations over the Kyoto protocol. Why burning a million acres of old-growth forest in Yellowstone is ecologically marvelous but burning a million acres in Amazonia threatens the stability of the Earth's climate requires explanation.

Intermixing fire. This caution applies to the intermix scene as well. A broad historical analogy does suggest itself, because the intermix scene in contemporary America eerily echoes the countryside a century ago. In fact, it inverts the circumstances, as though rural America has passed through a pyric looking glass. Then the problem was an excess of fuel caused by cracking open and firing feral lands. Now the fuel excess results from people *not* cutting, weeding, grazing, planting, pruning, and burning. The old crisis was, even at the time, considered transitional. The wild fires would vanish with the domestication of the wild lands and wild animals. Eventually they would become disciplined into fields and towns, the preferred landscapes for an agricultural society.

Today, the colonization stems from urbanites, people with urban ambitions, urban esthetics, and urban understanding. The rural landscape is being reoccupied but not by a rural economy. The result is a chronic instability: full-gauge land conversion will not automatically follow because it is not desired. The wild and the urban - the twin obsessions of American environmentalism - quiver next to each other like matter and anti-matter, needing only a spark to set them off. The problem is eminently solvable, but only if people so choose, and that requires an understanding of their relationship to nature that a half century of national identification with the wild complicates. It requires not just that we do but that we admit that nature will do if we don't, that doing nothing is a choice as potentially explosive as any other.