

## A Fire that Consumes All Before It

Gaston Bachelard opens his examination into fire by remarking that “We have only to speak of an object to think that we are being objective. But, because we chose it in the first place, the object reveals more about us than we do about it.”<sup>1</sup> It is this insight of Bachelard’s which will serve as the core around which I will weave my thinking of fire and in particular my thoughts regarding fire as a management tool. Of course to begin here at the end is to jump the gun by more than a little.

It is not an easy feat, when thinking of fire, to limit our mind to a particular manifestation. The prevalence and importance of fire in not only our everyday lives but also our development as a people and species makes such a compartmentalization very difficult and somewhat dishonest. In part, it is this presence of fire that will serve as a lead in to the core of my research into our understanding of fire as utilized in environmental management. In particular, I want to examine how our perceptions of fire, and more specifically wildfire, affect our attitudes toward the use of fire as a management tool and begin to come to grasps with how such an understanding influences our willingness, or unwillingness, to utilize fire under controlled situations. In so doing, it is my hope that I will begin to tell the story of prescribed fire in a manner worthy of its importance and perhaps in the process uncover the beginnings of an ethos regarding the use of fire.

However, in order to approach an understanding fire as it pertains to environmental management requires an openness and willingness to broaden our vision to include areas of inquiry that may upon first appearances seem tangential at best. And in all likelihood they are, however, this should not discourage us, nor impart a sense of uselessness to such an investigation for it is only with further reflection that the contributions and relevancy of the inquiries become increasingly apparent and important in the telling of our story. This is simply to say that in order to approach a thorough understanding of fire as a management tool it is necessary to think about fire as we encounter it in our lives on both a theoretical and practical level, both presently and in the past of long ago and not so long ago. It is from here that it becomes possible to give life to Bachelard’s statement that “[f]or one thing, perhaps it has not been sufficiently noted that fire is more a *social reality* than a *natural reality*.”<sup>2</sup>

Of course, no one, including Bachelard nor myself, is intent upon arguing for the existence of fire absence its presence in light, heat, smoke or flames. All have felt the heat of fire while sitting before the fireplace, or around the campfire, all have felt the warmth of a fire in the food they eat, all have smelt the burnt aroma riding the air currents and some of us have even had the good fortune of to stand before a fire burning out of control and come to appreciate the true magnitude of a “wild”fire. However, to assert that fire is and *is only* a natural phenomenon reducible to fuel, oxygen, heat and a chemical reaction is to too narrowly constrain the debate for our purposes and thereby bound to fail in allowing answers to the questions about fire facing us to manifest themselves. The preparation of a suitable site will require that we examine fire via at least three avenues.

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<sup>1</sup> Gaston Bachelard, The Psychoanalysis of Fire (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964) 1.

<sup>2</sup> Bachelard 10.

Initially, it will be necessary to clearly situate fire within the social sphere. This will require an analysis of fire as a cultural phenomenon composed of both a social reality and a natural component. The success of such a task will require a thorough analysis of fire as it has been dealt with by the institutions of society and the role those institutions have played in the formation of our opinions of fire. Since the focus of this paper is directed toward an understanding of fire as utilized in environmental management, the primary example of fire will stem from the wildfire tradition. No other institution has an history as deep with wildfire as does the United States Forest Service. Housed within the Department of Agriculture and saddled with the task of protecting the nation's lumber resources, the USFS and its influence will comprise the majority of such an investigation.

While wildfire will serve as the initial avenue of approach to fire, and will never be far from sight, the scope of this paper requires a broader examination into the many faces of fire. It is by looking into these other faces that the uniqueness of wildfire and its grip on our psyche become all that much more apparent. And in addition, the many faces of fire provide a richer context from which it is possible to come to a clearer understanding and greater appreciation of the effects of fire on our lives, i.e., the dramatic ways in which the world has been modified by anthropogenic fire and on the other side, the modifications that we have undergone as a species as a result of our picking up fire all those years ago. In order to truly appreciate the extent to which the history of fire and the history of humanity run together, I will explore the natural history of fire in the shortgrass prairies and crosstimbers of the United States and the role played by humans in the development of that landscape. It is this "natural" history told from the vantage point of different perspectives which will hopefully make it possible to appreciate the scope to which the story of human evolution runs in concert with the story of fire and its effects on the landscape and vice versa.

Finally, the discussion will move to an examination of the theoretical underpinnings which animate the above. So, while these theoretical foundations will have played a role throughout the paper, it is only in this latter section that the dialectic between domesticated fire and wild fire will be made explicit. In particular, the discussion will explore the controlled fire versus the uncontrolled fire, which I believe will reveal itself to be one of, if not the central theme at the root of our fire problematic. I will again focus an historical lens on fire to reveal its manifestation in these broader categories in our present everyday understanding, as well as the role that each has played in our development, and ultimately how the history of these roles serve to inform our present approach to and understanding of each. Furthermore, it is my hope that it is this context which will make it possible to begin discussing a fire ethos as it relates to our use of fire in environmental management and that such an ethos will go some lengths toward guiding our future understanding of fire and fire use in particular. As Stephen J. Pyne has pointed out, once we picked up fire, we could no longer choose to put it down. So, the question can no longer be to burn or not to burn, but how, when, where and to what extent to burn. Hopefully, not only will my thoughts go some lengths toward cementing this notion, but likewise provide a general arena in which it becomes possible to begin providing some practical solutions to the everyday dilemmas faced by those shouldered with the task of managing our wildlands.