PERSPECTIVES FROM THE
ALDO LEOPOLD WILDERNESS RESEARCH INSTITUTE

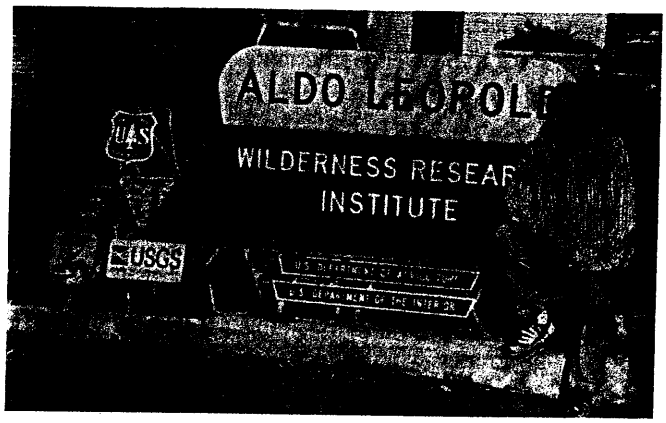
Wilderness Fire

BY DAVID J. PARSONS

The restoration of fire as a natural ecological process poses immense challenges to wilderness managers. Twentieth-century fire suppression has altered species compositions, vegetation patterns, and fuel accumulations, resulting in conflicts with goals of preserving natural conditions in wilderness affected primarily by the forces of nature. Unnaturally heavy fuel loads now threaten not only wilderness ecosystems, but adjacent human life and property. Despite policies advocating the restoration of fire to wilderness, nearly 85% of all U.S. wilderness remains under a complete fire-suppression policy. Even the most progressive wilderness fire management programs suppress many ecologically significant fires occurring during extreme fire conditions.

The National Park Service has been unable to reestablish the average number of fires, annual area burned, and average fire size achieved by natural ignitions prior to restrictions imposed following the 1988 Yellowstone fires. The Bureau of Land Management and Fish and Wildlife Service have yet to allow lightning ignitions to be managed as natural fires. Although the Department of Interior agencies make extensive use of prescribed fire to replace or simulate the effects of natural fire, the Forest Service generally permits the use of prescribed fire in wilderness only for fuel-hazard reduction. Recent analyses of fire programs in the Selway-Bitterroot (Montana) and Sequoia and Kings Canyon (California) wildernesses conclude that even those model programs have been unable to restore presettlement fire regimes.

The 2000 fire season directed attention to the problems of managing fire and fuels in wildland ecosystems. Very few natural ignitions in wilderness were managed for their resource benefits, as priorities were placed on protecting human life and property. Dialogue, funding, and policy directions in the months following focused primarily on increasing fire-fighting resources, fuels treatment, and restoring damaged landscapes. The role of fire in maintaining healthy ecosystems recognized in Federal Wildland Fire Policy received little attention.



Article author David Parsons. Photo courtesy of the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute.

If fire is to be restored to even a semblance of its presettlement role in wilderness, we need to make a concerted effort to more fully evaluate the benefits and risks associated with allowing natural fires to burn and options for the use of prescribed fire to replace those natural fires that can't be permitted. Proposals for limited mechanical manipulation of unnatural fuels—the anathema to many wilderness purists—may have to be considered in some cases where fire cannot be permitted. A full spectrum of tools exists to manage fire and fuels in wilderness. The challenge comes in evaluating the effects of alternative fire and fuels management strategies on wilderness ecosystems and values. We need to overcome the social and bureaucratic obstacles necessary to provide incentives for fire and wilderness managers to work together to maximize benefits while minimizing risks. If we are unsuccessful, some of our most valued wildlands may change in ways never anticipated.

DAVID J. PARSONS is director of the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute, P. O. Box 8089, Missoula, Montana 59807, USA. Telephone: (406) 542-4190. E-mail: djparsons@fs.fed.us.

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