



Every Fire is a Teachable Moment

By Barb Stewart
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Do you think the practice of fire information and education has been changing dramatically in the past few years? How?

For me, evolving is a better term. I've been a fire education specialist since July, 2001. In the preceding 20+ years, I developed an understanding of fire. It was based on limited firefighting in the late 70's, giving public programs that sometimes touched on fire ecology and serving occasionally as a fire information officer in the late 90's.

Barb Stewart in the field.



A measure of the evolution is publication of the NWCG (National Wildfire Coordination Group) Education Working Team's, "Wildland Fire in the United States" brochure. I think it came out in 2002. All the major wildland fire agencies publicly agreed as a group to a more balanced view of wildland fires. That meant enough people in enough organizations had to have similar thoughts. That usually takes a while.

Another indicator: Smokey Bear modified his message on his 60th birthday in 2004. He recognized the value of prescribed fires in a Sunday, "Mark Trail," comic. Smokey's still the fire prevention bear, but the message has shifted, from "prevent forest fires," to "prevent wildfires." The Smokey Bear website presents the concepts of good and bad fires.

Anecdotally, a co-worker with a State department of forestry noted a big change. He's worked in fire prevention and prevention education for over 20 years. In 2005, he confessed to me, "For the first time ever I mentioned to a reporter the possibility of ecological benefits of a fire." This was after a few years of friendly discussions with these ideas to me, his Park Service buddy.

I have also seen some changes in how we present the message to media. During a fire here in Virginia in 2006, a newspaper ran a story about possible ecological benefits of the fire next to an article that included a homeowner who was worried about the fire. While I certainly pay far more attention to these things than I did years ago, I don't remember seeing such a thing before.

I can't prove it scientifically, but it seems there's been a shift, from many people having the sense that all fire was bad to almost as many people now seeing good fire and bad fire. With the caveat, so long as it's

not in their backyards. That's evolution and the process continues. Even within agencies with large fire programs, however, there are people who still view fire only to be prevented or suppressed quickly.

What is driving the change?

I don't know, but I've seen a few things. I'm 50 years old, a homeowner, a student of history and a long-term government employee. Perhaps we have a better understanding of fire than we did, though we have a ways to go. Also, the fires themselves and peoples' perceptions of them are changing. Fires are simply more visible to more people through modern media. Politics, legislation, the huge increase of people living where they didn't used to live, etc. There are real and perceived values at risk.

The National Fire Plan, years in development, put attention and money on wildland firefighting and related issues, including a little into fire education. That includes creating most of the jobs dedicated full time to fire education in the National Park Service. Rangers and resource managers around the country had been and continue to talk about it, particularly at parks that have truly fire dependent ecosystems, but now there are a handful of us focused on fire issues almost every day.

And, sadly, deaths of wildland firefighters drive change, though how good or effective those actions are can be debated. Reactions to the South Canyon Fire deaths helped to produce various legislative and organizational initiatives, including, I believe, the National Fire Plan. And, the fire community still wrestles with the lessons.

How are FIOs and others in similar positions moving the "fire message" beyond prevention?

Every chance we get or create, and collaboratively as much as possible. Preventing unwanted ignitions is only one part of the job. Helping people to become partners in fire protection is a more complete answer. And, we'd like people to have a more holistic view of fire. To quote from the current NPS Wildland Fire in National Parks brochure: Fire is a force of nature. Started naturally by lightning and lava flows, it shapes the planet on a daily basis. It is also a tool. For better and for worse, humans have used fire to survive, destroy and flourish.

Context: My primary sphere of influence are National Park Service lands from Virginia to Maine. The one other fire education specialist in the region is assigned to Acadia National Park in Maine. In the NPS Northeast and National Capital regions the fire seasons, frequency and regimes are different from the rest of the country. Interface issues are growing by the minute. And, though our fires are usually smaller and less intense than points west and south, they are extremely visible. The media, neighbors and politicians tend to notice them.



For me, every fire is a teachable moment, be it with a single homeowner, neighborhood, community, television viewing area or anyone with web access. This ranges from rural Virginia to New York City. Yes, New York City.

Barb Stewart at briefing.

As a one-person operation and a newcomer to this kind of work, I quickly reached out to my fire educators in other agencies. We established an interagency prevention and education team. The emphasis on "and" is deliberate. Staff from the Virginia Department of Forestry and at least one of the two national forests in the state had worked together on prevention projects before. In 2001, when I was hired for this job, the NPS for the first time contributed a person whose primary focus was fire prevention and education. While the three agencies had a long tradition of firefighting collaboratively, this was the first three-agency prevention and education team. We found common ground, developed shared

messages and took advantage of each person's skills and agency's advantages.

Our primary message: You Can Help Protect Your Home from Wildfire. It's positive and empowering, an excellent long term message. Preventing unwanted ignitions is only one part of protecting what we value from fire. Preparedness is another. We used the message in an exhibit – see attachment to e-mail. It is also part of an attempt to change the dynamic between firefighters and homeowners from rescuer/victim to partner/partner.

More long term, we addressed debris burning; a major source of unwanted fire starts, in a less common fashion. Rather than just say, "don't do that," we try to offer environmentally sound alternatives. The most visible example of this was working with Virginia Tech to create a new unit for the Advanced Master Gardener Program called Land Care Stewards.

In terms of public understanding of fire, what are the biggest gaps? How can fire information and education help to fill them?

Many people have the wrong idea of when fires are most likely to occur around here. This is in part due to media coverage of large western fires. Spring, not summer, is our primary season. Fall is our secondary season.

Many people think that all wildland fires are running crown fires, again thanks in part to media coverage. Most, but not all, of our fires are surface fires. Even those burn down houses, though. In part thanks to the media, especially the nature channels, a growing number of people have some understanding of the role of nature in fire. Still, plenty left for me to address, though.

Homeowners can do a lot to help themselves and their neighbors to protect what they value from fire. A couple of afternoons with a rake every year are a great investment, for themselves and their fire service.

In the fire community, are FIOs and others receiving increased recognition for the important role played by communication?

It depends on whom you ask, but overall, yes. First, though, I have to look myself in the mirror and be able to say I've earned my paycheck. I'm happy to report the answer is yes, most days. So far, my boss thinks so, too.

Are FIOs and others playing a larger role – 'getting a place at the table' - in fire management?

Step by step. Establishing and maintaining credibility is always a process. In U.S. culture, education is publicly praised, but not necessarily valued. Preventing a problem, or catching it early is hard to measure because people can't see the dollars they haven't spent. Not just in fire matters, of course. So much of what we do can't be measured in acres or isn't very visible. If I didn't believe it was valid, however, I'd quit.

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The Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center actively promotes a learning culture for the purpose of enhancing safe and effective work practices in the entire U.S. wildland Fire community. It is located at the National Advanced Fire & Resource Institute in Tucson, Arizona.

