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# “KEEPER OF THE FLAME”: A JOURNEY TO THE HEART OF FIRE

Stephen Vittoria

The vast majority of Americans view fire as a hostile, destructive, and dangerous force—an entity that at times is even viewed as evil. In fact, Americans have at times attempted to remove fire from nature altogether. The practice of fire exclusion has been the accepted rule in much of America’s history, fortified throughout the 20th century by policy, procedure, and public relations campaigns.

## Fire Is the Central Character

“Keeper of the Flame”—a full-length feature documentary film produced by Deep Image (a Los Angeles-based film production company) in conjunction with the National Wildfire Coordinating Group’s Wildland Urban Interface Working Team—attempts to reposition fire as an integral part of ecosystems, leaving little doubt in the viewer’s mind that fire is not only needed but also instrumental in maintaining the planet’s delicate balance of biodiversity. The film contends that the future of global ecology greatly depends on the role fire plays in preserving its equilibrium. Most documentary films on wildland fire have focused on firefighting and the heroic men and women who battle the blazes. By contrast, “Keeper of the Flame” features fire as the central character.

The film opens with a question posed by the writer Jack Kerouac,

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There is nothing even remotely equivalent in the media that argues that fire might have a legitimate role in global ecosystems ... until now.

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who served in 1965 as a fire lookout on Desolation Peak in the State of Washington: “As for lightning and fires, who loses when a forest burns ... and what did nature do about [it] for a million years up to now?” It is an intriguing question, one that resonates throughout “Keeper of the Flame.”

The film fosters a reeducation process now underway across America by exploring forest and land management practices that will allow humanity to use fire, live with fire, and ultimately regard fire as an essential and fundamental part of nature. Ultimately, “Keeper of the Flame” points the audience toward the ongoing and simmering conflict between humanity and nature, a scuffle played out each fire season in wildland/urban interfaces across the Nation.

## Fire History

The study of anything depends on a study of history, and history takes center stage in “Keeper of the Flame.” The story unfolds with the history of fire—from the emergence of flame on the planet, through humanity’s conflicting and dual relationship with it, to a glimpse of the human involvement with fire on the North American continent, including misconceptions and mismanagement in the 20th century.

Historical recreations by noted film actor Wilford Brimley drive the story along in dramatic fashion as the filmmakers take a look at three “infamous” fires in America’s history, fires that illustrate human heartbreak while examining Government policy: the 1871 Peshtigo Fire, in which an estimated 1,500 people died in a single hellish night; the 1910 Big Blowup in Idaho and Montana, which spewed ash as far away as the snow-covered landscape of Greenland; and the 1949 Mann Gulch Fire, where 13 smoke-jumpers died, prompting a widespread reexamination of Federal firefighting policy. In addition, the history of Federal fire management, from the U.S. cavalry in Yellowstone to the USDA Forest Service today, is examined and documented.

## Asking Tough Questions

Writer/Director Stephen Vittoria and Producer Frank Fischer offer interviews with fire experts and ecologists with various backgrounds and areas of study and experience. The settings stretch from Yellowstone National Park, to the Black Hills of South Dakota, to a land reserve overlooking Manhattan Island. As one might expect with an issue so complex, the film is chock-full of varying opinions, thoughts, solutions, and historical perspectives. The filmmakers don’t

shy away from asking tough questions like, “What’s been the economic and ecological cost associated with a century of fire suppression?”

The most intriguing of all the interviews is with fire guru, author, and Arizona State University Professor Stephen J. Pyne (see the sidebar). Noted for his study of fire and seminal written works over the past 25 years, Pyne peppers the film’s journey through the flames with a unique passion and perspective—candid observations on the loss of burning by American Indians, the Federal Government’s “Cold War mentality” with regard to eliminating fire from various ecosystems during the 19th and 20th centuries, why fire must be reintroduced into the landscape as a vital and necessary force, and the tremendous impact that development and urban sprawl are having nationally and globally.

The film is hosted by Emmy-Award-winning journalist Linda Ellerbee. Many other interviews also capture the drama:

- Roy Renkin, a vegetation specialist for Yellowstone National Park, relives his experiences during the historic fires that engulfed the park in 1988;
- The filmmakers follow Doc Smith, a forest restoration expert, and his college class through heavily wooded areas and burned-out forests just south of the Grand Canyon; and
- Edward Albert, an American Indian heritage expert, recalls the historic and symbiotic relationship between the American Indian and nature, especially with fire.

## PYNE ON FIRE

*“Keeper of the Flame” features insights by the prominent fire historian Stephen J. Pyne. For example:*

Everything in Yellowstone [during the 1988 fires] was exaggerated: Trees exploded into flame like toothpicks in front of a blowtorch; towering convective clouds rained down a hailstorm of ash; crown fires propagated at rates of up to 2 miles per hour [0.9 m/s], velocities unheard of for forest fuels. ... But the idea that fire is war, that we see firefight as battlefield and fire crew as paramilitary unit ... [t]here is a great failure in using this metaphor because we demonize fire and go to great lengths to suppress it at all costs.

### Entertainment Value

Visually, the film is a patchwork of new and pristine nature photography; historic footage and still photography from the Forest Service’s library; and action footage that paints a giant canvas of fire, flame, ash, and stunning regrowth in the blackness of destruction.

“Keeper of the Flame” also offers a good deal of entertainment. Historic Smokey Bear ad campaigns are highlighted; and fire prevention television commercials starring Rod Serling, Rock Hudson, and Jonathan Winters are woven into the film, as are various scenes from the hit NBC series “The West Wing.” The environmental paintings of Monte Dolack are an integral part of the film’s imagery.

Music in the film is scarce; but when it shows up, it’s obvious that the filmmakers are giving the flames a voice (for example, through Neil Young’s powerful guitar thumps) and the fire history some texture (for example, through Bob Dylan’s “All Along the Watchtower”). Johnny Cash’s “Ring of

Fire” and Woody Guthrie’s “This Land Is Your Land” are also highlights.

### Fire Education Campaign

In the final act, “Keeper of the Flame” delves into current fire education campaigns such as Firewise (spearheaded by the National Fire Protection Association and the Forest Service). Their stated mission is to define the personal responsibility associated with living with nature, often smack-dab in the middle of the wildland/urban interface. The filmmakers interview spokespeople for fire education programs, who encourage action to prevent catastrophic fires and who explain what Americans can do right now (in a real and practical way) to protect their lives and property. Their words dramatically illustrate the need for national awareness of fire’s role in the American wilderness.

For more information on “Keeper of the Flame,” see the Website at <http://www.keeperoftheflame.org>. ■