



Fire Education with One Foot in the Black

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The remarkably original approach to fire education at Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks illustrates the value of innovative approaches to communicating with the public: using different communication styles, using windows of opportunity, and providing information in terms people can understand.

The parks try to take advantage of every opportunity to educate visitors about the fire program. During prescribed burns, the parks keep roads and trails open when possible to give visitors the chance to observe the projects. Sometimes this involves giving tours or doing informal interpretation on the fireline. "That is one of the most successful things we do in terms of getting a really positive visitor response," says Jody Lyle, a fire education and information specialist at the parks. "They are fascinated. They have never seen anything like that before. It is something that is completely outside of their experience."

The parks also work to inform and involve local communities with the fire program. Information is posted around town, mailings are sent to local residents, and the fire information specialists work with reporters to develop stories for the local newspaper regarding fire management efforts in the park. Lyle says, "We all like to get information in different ways, and as an fire information officer I have to be aware of that, and try to put my message in a whole lot of different places and in a lot of different formats."



To demonstrate the use of different communication styles, the following scenarios describe fire communication and education successes at Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks.

SCENARIO #1: Taking Fire Education on the Road

"Thanks, that was cool!" said a young boy. "The longer you look, the more you see," said a mother. "Wow, I didn't know that," said a long-time local resident.

Employees at Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks are getting lots of praise this year since the unveiling of a new mobile learning center called "**The Fire Place**." The center is a small cargo trailer that houses exhibits and activities about fire history, ecology, and management.

Learning fire tactics on the sand table. Photo courtesy of NPS.

“We wanted to provide on-site learning opportunities for visitors and local residents,” said Jody Lyle, Fire Education Specialist for Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks. “Now, for example, if we are doing a prescribed burn, the mobile learning center will be parked nearby to enrich visitor experiences in the field.”

The learning center is beautifully decorated with three hand-painted murals by artist Ali Pearson. The murals depict different fire strategies (suppression, prescribed fire, and wildland fire use) within some of the parks spectacular ecosystems (the foothills, sequoia groves, and the High Sierra).

In addition to personal contacts, “**The Fire Place**” offers several independent activities for individuals or families to enjoy. People can do the Mural Hunt (a scavenger hunt game), color their own murals, dress-up in fire clothing, use fire equipment, or practice fire tactics in a table-top sand box.

“**The Fire Place**” has been used to enhance an innovative program in fire interpretation within the parks, exemplified by the efforts to use actual fires, both prescribed and naturally-ignited, to educate park visitors about the role of fire. The following two stories describe the success of that program.

SCENARIO #2: Campers Experience the Comb Fire

During the summer of 2005, campers in Kings Canyon National Park got more than they were expecting from their visit. On the ridge just above three busy campgrounds in Cedar Grove, the lightning-caused Comb Fire burned 9,775 acres between July and October – all while thousands of visitors hiked, rested, cooked, rode bikes, and roasted marshmallows below.

“One of the best things about the Comb Fire was the positive feedback we got from park visitors,” said David Bartlett, District Fire Management Officer for Kings Canyon National Park.

When the fire was active, information officers, firefighters, and park rangers roved the campgrounds and day-use areas to answer questions and provide updates on the fire’s size and progress. These staff members talked to thousands of people about why managers were allowing the fire to spread naturally, how they were reducing smoke impacts, and how the fire was improving forest conditions for plants and animals.

In the evenings, the glow of the Comb Fire provided a backdrop for these conversations and inspired a sense of wonder. Instead of feeling nervous, campers were reassured that crews were actively preventing the fire from spreading near visitor facilities.

“Because they felt safe and understood why the Comb Fire was important, the campers tolerated smoky skies and a few trail closures,” said Jody Lyle, Fire Education Specialist for the parks. “Rather than hearing complaints, we heard about how the Comb Fire was one of the most interesting things they’d ever seen.”

SCENARIO #3: The Experience of a Lifetime

In early September 2002, backcountry hikers in Kings Canyon National Park had the experience of a lifetime. While walking the high elevation trails north of Dusy Basin, they observed a lightning-caused fire burning naturally in the wilderness, eventually spreading over 1,300 acres

Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Park - Fire crew talking to park visitors on a prescribed burn fire line.



It all began a few days before the Labor Day weekend when a park trail crew discovered the Palisade Fire burning on both sides of the popular John Muir/Pacific Crest Trail. Committed to improving forest health and maintaining natural processes, park managers chose not to suppress the fire but rather to manage it as a fire use project. But a question remained about how to manage the busy trail over the holiday weekend.

In the past, fire managers always closed trails near fire operations, often for extended periods of time until it was safe to pass. In these cases, hikers would be rerouted or denied access into certain areas. But the Palisade Fire was different.

Park staff and volunteers were stationed as “sentries” at both sides of the fire to restrict trail access. When firefighters on scene felt it was safe, hikers were escorted daily through the 4-mile fire area. This not only prevented a lengthy detour but it also gave those visitors a first-hand experience with a fascinating natural process. It was an ideal example of how to balance visitor needs and safety with ecosystem restoration.

Opportunities to see and learn about fire operations this summer were not limited to remote backcountry areas. Visitors driving and/or hiking in the front-country, like Giant Forest, had the chance to watch fire crews ignite a handful of prescribed fires. Park educators were available on scene to ensure safety, answer questions, and explain the larger goals and context for what people were seeing. This season, rangers personally talked with nearly 3,000 visitors in active fire areas.

Taking it to the Next Level

Of course, Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks educate visitors and neighbors about fire in a variety of traditional ways, too. Interpretive programs, press releases, documentary films, and community newsletters are combined with roving interpretation to take fire education to the next level.

The programs have proven that experience is the best teacher, and giving the public a safe, first-hand encounter with fire in the parks provides lessons that cannot be gained in any other way. The parks are continuing to look for innovative ways to get their fire message to the widest possible audience.

Advances in Fire Practice is a sub-site of [wildfirelessons.net](http://www.wildfirelessons.net) and is focused on bringing efforts and ideas to the forefront that leaders in the fire management, practice, and research communities have identified as innovative and widely applicable. It provides access to critical and proven fire information and resources. Advances in Fire Practice section can be reached directly by going to <http://www.wildfirelessons.net/AFP.aspx> or through the main Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center website at www.wildfirelessons.net.

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.

