

14 Fire Conservancy: The Origins of Wildland Fire Protection in British India, America, and Australia

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“Of the many problems which have to be dealt with by the forester, there is none which is so constantly with him as that of fire. Its shadow is always over him: the dread possibilities are ever present in his mind.”

— C.E. Lane-Poole (1920)

“He [the Forester] is a soldier of the State and something more.”

— Sir D.E. Hutchins (1916)

14.1 Introduction

The advent of modern wildland fire protection was almost everywhere associated with the advent of modern forestry. Professional forestry itself evolved beyond folk practices when the Enlightenment applied its rationalizing impulses to the peculiar environmental and social circumstances of central Europe. It became a vital export to overseas colonies as the industrial revolution and imperialism established a global economy and a global ecology, and as Western science promulgated a global scholarship. Foresters joined other transnational cadres of European engineers and administrators. But everywhere that European foresters ventured they encountered fire practices vastly different from those of central Europe in the 19th century. Everywhere their precepts conflicted with local lore, their practices with local custom. Everywhere they found themselves immersed in a conflict over fire practices that was virtually instantaneous, often violent, and unavoidable.

The story is complex, yet there are remarkable parallels among different places and peoples. In particular, the controversy over fire practices — what became known as “fire conservancy” — often took on the character of a formal debate not only between foresters and locals but within the forestry community itself. To most foresters with academic training, the value of fire exclusion seemed self-evident, and the primary vehicle was system — organized, aggressive fire prevention and suppression. To others, and to many intellectuals outside forestry, some compromise with local burning practices seemed advisable. Regardless, foresters absorbed the question of fire as their own, they laid out the infrastructure for industrial fire management, and they brought to the subject both the conceptual rigor of science and the evangelical fervor of a moral mission. The shock encounter between European and non-European and between traditional and industrial practices defined the heroic age of wildland fire protection.

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What grants the story added urgency is the promise of a certain parallelism between the kind of landclearing and unconstrained burning that occurred in the 19th century and what is occurring today in the tropics and subtropics. Historical analogies are inherently treacherous, but there are enough similarities to tease out some fundamental insights, if only to emphasize the ease with which prior experience may be misapplied in new social and geographical environments. As a historical cameo, consider the experiences of Great Britain and three English-speaking former colonies – British India, the United States, and Australia. Many of the problems experienced during the heroic age stemmed from trying to translate European experiences onto other lands. Accommodations resulted that became the basis for distinctive national styles of fire protection. To translate the experiences of those nations onto the tropics may be less likely to recreate their eventual successes than to repeat their old errors.

14.2 Home Fires: A Synoptic Fire History of Britain

While the British Isles merit scant mention when considered relative to the notorious fire climates of the world, nearly every fire practice that British explorers, settlers, or foresters encountered had its cognate in British history. There were natural fires, including a kind of spontaneous swidden in which windstorms and lightning burned out patches of conifer forest. Pleistocene hunters contributed anthropogenic fires of hearth and field. Waves of new migrants from the continent introduced livestock and crops, and fire practices were adjusted accordingly. It was easy to adapt burning for hunting to burning for herding, somewhat more complex to adapt foraging fires to the cultivation of alien crops, for the problem was not simply to extract resources from the indigenous flora but to replace it with an alien flora. Fire was essential for both: there was no slashing without burning. Sites once felled might be maintained in grass or browse through broadcast fire. “Even though Mesolithic societies were technologically simple,” a group of British archeologists has concluded, “their usage of fire seems to have conferred on them the ability to alter their surroundings in a purposeful way” (Simmons et al. 1981). Some of those environmental changes became more or less permanent.

The full revolution came with Neolithic agriculture. The appearance of landnam and livestock multiplied human fire practices and enlarged the geography of anthropogenic fire. Fire made possible the clearance of a felled deciduous forest; it expanded the domain of forage, within the woods and beyond them; it cleared birch-pine uplands; it extended heathlands, and probably set into motion the lengthy process by which upland sites degenerated into moor and peat. Once established, the mossy mats, during drought, became vast fuses to carry fire through the wastelands. Fire prepared ground for cereal crops of wheat, flax, and barley, and for pulse crops like the bean, lentil, and domestic pea. It assisted in the gathering of wild foodstuffs and in the hunting of wildlife. On many marginal sites, anthropogenic fire helped tip the biotic scale from forest to moor, and moor to mire.