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Embers

by [Char Miller](#) on Jul 13, 2016 (9:26 am)

After living in Southern California for nine years, I should be used to fire season—and the fact that there is something called fire season—but I'm not.

My wife and I moved to the Southland in late summer 2007, and within the month we saw some of the region's most horrific firestorms consume vast stretches of chaparral-cloaked foothills, deep canyons filled with alder and oak and, at higher elevations, thick stands of pine and cedar.

From the Mexican border to the Santa Ynez Mountains east of Santa Barbara, wildlands—and more vividly, the many homes and trailers that had crowded into these spectacular terrains—went up in smoke. Journalists were not wrong to proclaim this a fire siege.

Dumbfounded, I began to write a series of essays about the tragic loss of life, the acrid air, and the bewildering sense that the world, and a lot of the neighborhoods my students came from, were on fire.

Many of these pieces appeared in *On the Edge: Water, Immigration, and Politics in the Southwest*, and when the book entered its final stages of production, I was relieved. It almost seemed as if its publication would put an end to my having to confront such a disturbing subject, on the ground or in print.

And then the next fire season rolled around, and the one after that, and the one after that. With each wave of fire, nature burned through my wishful thinking and my writerly conceit that somehow I might have the last word.

The natural world's capacity to dislodge us from our imagined safe havens—places material or intellectual—is one of the central themes of my new book, *Not So Golden State: Sustainability vs. the California*

Dream. It's no surprise that fire is one of its key subjects, but how we approach it as a biochemical fact, a political reality and a policymakers' conundrum, matters a great deal.

"The West does not always flame out every summer; it just seems as if it does," I write in the book's introduction. "And not every fire is a smoke signal of distress, though many of them are. Picking through the region's fiery terrain is a tricky business, then, as tricky as trying to extinguish a roaring blaze in the baked heat of August."

Trying to capture fire's complexity, its erratic movements as it chews through a forest and the public imagination, led me to write about some of the West's most fearsome conflagrations.

The 2009 Station Fire roared through 250 square miles of the San Gabriel Mountains, filling the Los Angeles basin with a thick shroud of smoke. Water-dumping helicopters and fire retardant-laden jets made sortie after sortie. Every day a massive pyrocumulus cloud absorbed the sky, an eerie sight; and every evening I was transfixed as politicians, pundits, and the public laid waste to the firefighting agencies' strategies and tactics.

Bigger still was the 2011 Wallow Fire, which burned an astonishing 841 square miles in Arizona but nary a structure—a result of many people's newfound appreciation for how to build defensible space in their homes and communities.

These large stories dovetailed with a much smaller one, the thirteen-acre Foothill Fire that in 2013 swept through the Bernard Field Station on the northern edge of the Claremont Colleges where I teach. The once-charred landscape is now a living lab for faculty and students to analyze how a coastal sagebrush ecosystem recovers.

These blazes, regardless of their size, had their origin in human action: an inattentive hiker let his campfire blow up into the Wallow, an arsonist ignited the Station, and chop-saw wielding water company workers sent a shower of sparks into the field station's tinder-dry brush. Fire, in short, is mostly a people problem.

Yet each of these, and their many analogs over the past decade or so, has also been fueled by a climate-changed environment. Collectively they serve as a signal flare: the landscape is in distress, and our addiction to carbon has intensified its vulnerability.

Multiple reminders of our complicity erupted this June. The Fish and Reservoir fires in the San Gabriel Mountains sent a massive plume of smoke over eastern Los Angeles County and beyond; ashes swirled in the air like tiny snowflakes and covered our car. In the southern Sierra the Erskine Fire—pushed by howling winds—raced across 36,000 acres in thirty hours, killing several people. Even the small Marina Fire in the eastern Sierra has much to tell us about fire's regenerative processes.

Framing these fires is the news that more than 66 million trees are dead in California, a result of drought and wood-boring beetles. The significance of this data is hotly debated. Some believe the die-off will be responsible for catastrophic conflagrations; others, myself included, suggest that dead trees alone do not a catastrophe make. What is undeniable is that the story of fire in California and across the rest of the flammable West is unending.

Lesson learned.

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