
SECTION ONE

Introduction: Getting Beyond Incendiary Rhetoric

Every year thousands of wildland fires, large and small, ignite and burn across the U.S. The largest, most severe wildfires provide reporters with all the elements needed for exciting news stories: Crisis and conflict, drama and suspense, death and destruction. Wildfire stories also carry a ready-made template for framing the story, identifying the main characters and describing the unfolding events.

However, wildfire stories often tend to follow a standard script that sometimes verges on sensationalist hype and hysteria. This tendency is rooted in the dominant cultural attitude toward fire, and can be exacerbated by the intense commercial pressures of the news business. The net result may produce riveting stories, but misses valuable opportunities to more accurately and fully inform the public with the *whole* story.

News coverage of wildfire events has improved since the original publication of *A Reporter's Guide to Wildland Fire* in January 2005, but there is still a lot of new ground waiting for journalists to cover. The 2006 and 2007 wildfire seasons initiated some significant changes in fire management policies and on-the-ground suppression practices that provide evidence of a nascent paradigm shift underway within federal fire management agencies, and reporters have yet to break this story. Getting the whole story about wildland fire means uncovering this emerging shift in policies and practices, as well as including the social, political, economic and ecological context of wildfire events and our responses to them. It means capturing the diversity of the wildland fire community, and those communities affected by wildland fires. Indeed, the whole story of wildland fire includes so much more than fighting wildfires!

This *Reporter's Guide to Wildland Fire* is intended to help journalists improve the accuracy, quality and value of their stories on wildfire events and fire management. Using tips and tools in this *Reporter's Guide* will help journalists produce more powerful, informative and even inspiring news stories that reflect the best ideals of journalism. It is also hoped that this *Guide* will inspire more alternative and investigative reporting on wildfire events including a broader array of fire management issues beyond the stereotypical focus on emergency firefighting only.

War Metaphor

One of the biggest challenges for journalists is getting beyond the “war” metaphor that frames so many news stories about wildfire events. Part of the challenge is that military models and metaphors are pervasive in the discourse of fire management, beginning with the concept of fire *fighting* and extending to the array of suppression strategies and tactics all defined as various kinds of *attack*. Yet, when journalists use language like “fighting fires” or “battling blazes,” they are not necessarily reporting the facts, but are actually utilizing terms loaded with ideological content. Indeed, overheated “incendiary” rhetoric about the “*war on wildfire*” is both inaccurate and irresponsible. By essentially *militarizing fire management issues*, conventional news stories inhibit informed public debate over alternative policies and practices, new policies that might help our society resolve its continual crises and conflicts with wildland fire.

Journalists are not solely to blame for using hackneyed war metaphors, for they represent dominant cultural attitudes about forest fires that are often perpetuated by official government sources. But what exactly are the implications of a society that is perpetually making “war” on wildland fire, essentially a war on America’s wildlands? What are the environmental effects of “fighting” fires in backcountry forests that depend on fire as a natural ecological process? And what are the political and economic interests of the firefighting establishment—the agency officials and private contractors—who have vested stakes in perpetuating the so-called “war”? These are the tougher questions hard-hitting journalists need to ask.

In fact, the federal government’s antagonistic stance toward wildfire is barely a century old, and stands in stark contrast to humankind’s vital relationship living with and using the benefits of wildland fires that spans millennia. This cultural and ecological legacy, as well as a broad range of contemporary fire management activities aimed at restoring historic fire regimes, are obscured by the continued use of the “war on wildfire” metaphor. Please refer to Section VI of this *Guide* for suggested alternative terminology that more accurately portrays the nature of wildland fires and their social and ecological effects.

Catastrophe Mentality

After the war metaphor, the next most popular way to portray wildfire events is that they are universally “destructive” and “catastrophic.” Language describing fires as “consuming” acres and enumerating acres “lost” to wildfire bolsters that image of catastrophe. There is the widespread assumption conveyed in most news accounts that every acre within a wildfire perimeter was burned, and burned with high severity (e.g. killed most or all of the trees on that site).

In actuality, most large-scale wildfires that are mistakenly labeled as “catastrophic” instead exhibit a broad range of effects from low to high severity. There can be large areas within wildfire perimeters that are completely untouched by the fire. For example, Forest Service analysis of the largest wildfires of the 2002 season (the Biscuit, Hayman, McNalley and Rodeo-Chediski fires) reveals that, on average, only 23% of these areas burned with high severity; 24% had moderate severity; and **52% of these areas experienced low severity or were unburned!**

The diverse effects of fire across landscapes have been called the “fire mosaic,” and it facilitates rich biological diversity. In most cases, new vegetation starts to grow even on the most severely burned sites within a few weeks after the smoke is cleared. If journalists were to follow up with stories written a year or two or especially a decade later, what was formerly viewed as a “catastrophe” would more accurately be described as *change*. The concept of *phoenix forests* arising out of the ashes would become more readily understood.

Forest and fire ecologists now recognize the natural diversity of fire behavior and effects, and take a longer-term view of forest dynamics. It is time for journalists to take a longer view, too, and maintain a critical and skeptical stance toward official “crises-mongers” that promote the catastrophe mentality when speaking about wildland fires. Otherwise, reporters play into the hands of powerful interests who seek to profit from public perceptions of wildland fires as “catastrophes” and “crises.” For example: Government agencies who gain enormous powers to fight fires without any fiscal constraint or public accountability, and private logging companies who gain windfall profits from “salvage” logging burned trees with little or no regulatory restraint, both under self-proclaimed “states of emergency.”

Usual Suspects: Villainous Wildfire, Victimized Homeowners, Valorized Firefighters

Along with news stories using the war metaphor and catastrophe mentality comes a common cast of characters: Wildfire is the villain, homeowners are its victims and firefighters are heroes. But these characterizations are overused and inaccurate. The one-dimensional view of wildland fire as a purely destructive agent—notorious “demon fire”—ignores the essential fact that fire can also be a creative biological force that provides many beneficial ecological and economic services.

The routine depiction of homeowners as helpless, hapless victims threatened by wildfire denies them personal responsibility for actions they took or failed to take in order to protect their homes and properties. Finally, though on an individual level many firefighters are dedicated public servants who do exhibit bravery and perform heroic acts, this typical portrayal can obscure the power and profit incentives that on an institutional or organizational level motivate some public agencies, private companies and individual workers to engage in firefighting.

For example, federal agencies can engage in deficit spending for firefighting, and use fire funds to supplement declining budgets and limited salaries. Private companies can reap lucrative “no bid” government contracts for supplying firefighting labor, equipment and supplies; yet they face minimal public scrutiny or agency oversight to assess the quality of the goods or services provided. See Section III of this *Guide* for more leads on the taxpayer costs and private economic incentives of firefighting.

Thus, characterizations of wildfire events as wars or catastrophes creating helpless victims and heroic victors make for predictable stories full of drama and conflict, but do very little to advance public understanding of reality. Characterizations from the past do little to spark imagination for developing alternatives to the agencies’ dominant paradigm of fire management. For all of the above reasons and more, FUSEE believes it is time for journalists to break out of trite story molds that frame so many wildfire articles, and start using alternative angles, critical analyses and more accurate descriptions of wildland fire events and issues. Using the tips and tools in this *Reporter’s Guide to Wildland Fire*, news stories will likely become less incendiary but more *enlightening* in communicating the hard facts, real issues and the whole story to the public.

