

AN ENDANGERED PROCESS ACT

Prescribed fire and managed wildfire need political leverage. The Endangered Species Act shows the power of legislation that mandates prescriptive, not just proscriptive, action in some places. Fire needs something equivalent if it is to return to more than a pittance of its former splendor.

FREE-BURNING FIRE HAS BEEN on Earth for 420 million years. Hominins have used it since *Homo erectus*, at least for cooking and most probably for cooking landscapes as well. With the advent of *Homo sapiens*, fire found a keystone species to help maintain its role as a keystone process.

So when, a couple of centuries ago, that creature began to derive its firepower by burning fossil landscapes, which meant the substitution of closed combustion for open kinds, the switch became a swerve that has rippled widely through the Earth system. The additional combustion, or more precisely its effluents, has destabilized the climate. The removed combustion has helped unravel many biotas that had evolved to accommodate particular fire regimes. Fire has retreated into reserves, not unlike so many endangered species.

But fire is not a species, and there is no legislation to mandate practices that assist it where it is threatened or endangered. In fact, the Endangered Species Act helps to account for the regional distinctions and ambivalent outcomes in controlled burning. The firebirds of the eastern United States (think red-cockaded woodpecker, Florida scrub jay, Bachman's sparrow)

all work to boost burning. The threatened and endangered species of the western United States (sage grouse, spotted owls, marbled murrelet) all push toward suppression. There is no legislative counterforce to argue for prescribed burning.

America's great cultural revolution on fire, which boiled over during the 1960s and became encoded into agency manuals during the 1970s, allowed for the reintroduction of fire. It left the choice to burn or not with local park superintendents, forest rangers, or refuge managers. Some seized on the opportunities; most ignored them. The record clearly favors those who avoided mistakes rather than those who boldly tried and failed. The choice to burn or extinguish yet remains with agencies and administrators. Suppression persists as the default position. What the revolution lacked was an explicit mandate to restore fire. It was as though the parallel civil-rights revolution had encouraged racial integration, but did not require it, in which case the bad old ways would find new means to continue.

If fire truly matters, if fire's presence is integral to ecological integrity of many biotas, if open flame is a more benign medium for humanity's firepower than internal combustion, if, as formal research and long familiarity argue, fire is a keystone process, then we need legislation or policy that stipulates that it must be maintained or reinstated—not that fire's restoration to historic levels would be nice, but that it is necessary, and the failure to restore is illegal. Such legislation lies behind Parks Canada's successful fire project. Its absence helps explain why America's national parks continue to stumble and fall behind.

We need, in brief, an endangered process act. Until fire restoration—or its successor project, fire resilience—has the force of law behind it, we will continue to choose the path of least resistance, which is also the path of least resilience. The only fire allowed will be wildfire. Sometimes individual will is not enough. Sometimes we need to voluntarily subject ourselves to a collective compulsion to do what we need to do.