



Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks

Studying the Past to Plan for the Future Reflecting on 40 Years of Fire Management

In 1968, Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks policy shifted fire management strategies from full suppression to include prescribed fire and managed lightning fires to achieve vegetation and wildlife management objectives. The parks completed the 800-acre Rattlesnake Creek Prescribed Fire and managed the first lightning fire in National Park Service history on Kennedy Ridge in July of that year.



Howard Shellhammer shares observations about his 1960s research plots in Redwood Mountain Grove with Pacific West Regional Fire Management Officer Sue Husari and National Park Service Chief of Fire and Aviation Tom Nichols.

NPS photo by Alex Olow.

Experiments by researchers in 1964-1967 paved the way for this new direction after they demonstrated that sequoia seedlings flourished after a fire and that fire had many other desirable ecosystem effects.

The parks held a meeting in June that invited many of the original research scientists and fire managers, along with contemporary park, regional, and national leaders within the National Park Service, and USGS and Forest Service partners.

The intent was to honor and to learn from those who implemented these changes as well as those who developed the fire

program in the succeeding years.

Discussion centered on what they did and did not accomplish and why. The parks' current fire managers sought their advice for the current and future fire program. A few of the noted names in attendance

were Howard Shellhammer and Bruce Kilgore. Both were integral to the first sequoia fire studies. Also in attendance was Bob Mutch who shared how visit to Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks in 1970 was pivotal in helping the US Forest Service's Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness implement their managed fire policy in 1972.

Park managers recognize that the foundation to a good science-based program is to constantly re-evaluate assumptions and test their soundness. This meeting also challenged these invitees as well as today's scientists and managers to discuss issues including global climate change, the



results of fire exclusion on fire behavior, increasing wildland –urban interface, and air quality to consider what it means for the future of fire management.

Among the lessons taken from this meeting are:

- Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks truly hold a historic role in federal fire management history. This history should not be lost.
- The long tradition of a science-based fire management program in the parks has improved the program and should be continued
- Many of the decisions of the last 40 years were controversial, politically opposed, and contrary to years of conventional wisdom. Leaders of today must also back innovative programs that can advance the health of park ecosystems even in the face of resistance.
- Public perceptions of fire management have a direct effect on the activity of a prescribed fire and wildland fire use program. Continued education and outreach for the fire management program must continue.
- Managing fire into the future brings a great deal of uncertainty, especially related to global climate change. However, it is clear that the parks must continue with their fire management program which will encourage ecosystem resiliency. Science holds the key to knowing how to adapt to these changes.

Perhaps, most importantly, this meeting brought together some of the greatest minds in fire management, both past and present, and challenged them all to consider how fire management proceeds for the next 40 years. National Park Service Chief of Fire and Aviation, Tom Nichols, noted that the Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks fire program has many of the essential elements of a successful fire program. “If anyone can rise to the current and future challenges of fire management, it’s the staff of these parks.”

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