



Research Brief for Resource Managers

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Contact:

Jon E. Keeley
Marti Witter
Liz van Mantgem

Phone:

(559) 565-3170
(805) 370-2333

Email:

jon_keeley@usgs.gov
marti_witter@nps.gov
evanmantgem@usgs.gov

Central and Southern California Team, USGS Sequoia and Kings Canyon Field Station, Three Rivers, CA 93271

The Vanishing Redneck As Ecosystem Hero

Putz, Francis E. 2003. Are rednecks the unsung heroes of ecosystem management? Wild Earth 13:10-14.

As environmental stewards, rednecks should be credited for conserving forests with landscape-scale burning in the interest of improved hunting, tick control and fun. Because lighting fires is both enjoyable and functional, there is a long tradition of incendiarism among rednecks that persisted through the fire suppression century to today. By burning forests in spite of the popular culture's formal rules, rednecks succeeded in extending the forest management practices of Native Americans and keeping our hinterland forests and wildlife healthy. However, the redneck culture is vanishing as this socioeconomic group becomes integrated into mainstream American culture.

Just as fire suppression was once considered the civilized forest management plan of educated and enlightened thinkers, "light burners" were generally considered to be wild pioneering folks guided by family and local tradition. These supposedly ignorant "light burners" were once denigrated as "rednecks" and "poor whites", synonymous with the "country bumpkin, briaer, hick, yokel, cracker, and hillbilly". Now, fire ecologists understand the need for prescription burning for some ecosystems, but our culture is still at odds with groundfire regime ecology and forest management plans inadvertently favor fire suppression for safety reasons. The result is that fire suppression is still a problem, but it is not a problem where rednecks live and disregard the law for fun. Unfortunately, fun conflicts with the perceived serious and objective identity of fire science.

Management Implications

- "As incendiaries and hunters, the oft-disparaged rednecks play vital but seldom recognized roles as environmental stewards, roles that are currently being only partially filled by officialdom."
- Francis Putz

Through the pleasurable experience of hunting, fishing, and eating the animals that frequent these forests, rednecks have likewise been good wildlife managers. Deer, wild hogs, turkeys, racoons, bears, beavers, opossums, Canada geese, and other meso-predators flourish in fragmented human habitats with hunting restrictions. Rabies epidemics are replacing redneck recreational hunting in culling these dense animal populations for urban and suburban centers, where hunting is socially shunned due to "crowding and gentrification", "fence laws, house prices, and zoning regulations."

So this is the sad trend, humorously outlined by Francis Putz: as rednecks become gainfully employed NPR-fans and latte drinkers in a fenced and fragmented world, deer proliferate, meso-predators increase, insect born illnesses increase, and fire becomes more catastrophic. As rednecks are assimilated into the homogeneously television-informed world of suburbanites their culture, good and bad, is lost. Animal control and prescription burning is then left entirely to inhibited professional land managers who naturally never let loose without a seriously written management plan.