



Fire with a Purpose

Fire is being used in this park as a managed treatment to restore plant and animal habitats and to reduce the likelihood of large, destructive wildfires. These treatments are called prescribed burns, and they are managed under close supervision within a predetermined area.

During the mid-1900s, fire and land management agencies believed that all wildland fires, both those caused by lightning and by humans, should be extinguished as quickly as possible. More recently, however, the important role of fire in maintaining the health of natural ecosystems and reducing the frequency of large, damaging fires is better understood.

As a result of years of fire suppression, many areas of California that had experienced wildfires regularly for thousands of years have not burned for decades. These wildlands now have unnaturally high levels of trees, shrubs and dead material. Under these conditions, a lightning bolt or a careless person's match, cigarette or campfire is all that is needed to create a large, destructive wildfire.



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In addition to creating higher fuel loads in some areas, fire suppression activities over the last 50 years have altered many native plant and animal communities. Most of California's native plants and animals have "lived" with fire for thousands of years and are actually nurtured and sustained by periodic fires. It is now widely recognized that the health of many natural communities has actually declined over the last several decades due to fire suppression and reduction in the frequency of wildland fires.

Prescribed burning restores the role of natural fires. Although recently burned areas may look barren or damaged, many native plants quickly recover in response to the effects of the fire, especially after the first rains. Burning helps release nutrients in the soil and stimulates seed germination and plant growth. It can also be a method for controlling exotic (non-native) plants that compete with and displace native species.

When planning prescribed burns, many factors are considered. Key elements are the natural fire cycle in the area and the existing and desired condition of native plant and animal communities. In establishing how and when burns are conducted, factors such as air temperature, humidity, wind patterns, plant moisture and topography of the land are carefully evaluated.

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