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Department of the Interior

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## Glacier National Park Fire Management: Interpreting Fire on the Landscape



Glacier National Park experienced its largest fire season in recorded history with almost 140,000 acres burned in the 2003 fire season. Despite the large acreages and high-profile evacuations of developed areas, there were no major injuries on the part of firefighters or the public. Even before the smoke fully cleared, Glacier National Park and the Flathead National Forest seized the opportunity to work together and explain the fire season to the public by giving an overview of suppression actions taken and placing the fires within both a historical and ecological context.

Continuing and expanding on a tradition established during 2001 Moose Fire, Glacier National Park and the Flathead National Forest offered public bus tours of the fire area. Fire Management staff from the USFS and Glacier National Park worked side by side with NPS Interpretive Rangers to discuss fire ecology, fire management, fire fighting and agency mandates. A total of 400 visitors (from school groups to the general public) participated in the 17 bus tours and all tours were fully booked within a few days of the press release. The travel route through recent and historic burned areas allowed for an up-close learning experience, and several stops were made along the way. Staff narrated portions of the bus trip, explaining fire effects, ecology, history and other topics of interest. Highlights of the tours included short walks through burned areas that had been snagged, stops near the ignition point of the Robert Fire, views of Glacier Park fire lookout buildings, where the fires were reported from, and stops that demonstrated fire's impacts and ecological benefits.

Staff explained what happened and why, both from a local resident, fire fighter, and ecological perspective, discussing management decisions, fire fighting strategies, and an overview of evacuations and community impacts. Aided by large format maps and laminated photos, the staff discussed fire return intervals and fire history. Hands-on materials such as fire fighting line gear, tools and fire shelters allowed interpreters to demonstrate firefighting safety equipment and tactics, and match-stick forest demonstrations illustrated the wildland fire triangle of weather, fuel and topography. The adjacent Moose Fire from 2001 allowed for discussions of post-fire regeneration. Green willows and grasses were already sprouting in areas affected by this summer's fire season reinforced those messages. Using examples at various stops along the fire route, information was shared about tree identification and how plant, animal and bird species in northwest Montana have adapted to and live with fire.

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The local fire situation this summer included threats to homes and necessitated many evacuations. Using this teachable moment, staff discussed wildland-urban interface issues and urged tour participants to create defensible space and use fire wise building practices around their homes. Each participant returned home with a folder of fire information, a chronology, map, defensible space handout and other information.

Fire is an emotional topic, and after a full afternoon of hands-on education, the comment forms after the tours reflected a wide range of opinions from 'it's awful what fire does' to '(I received) a better appreciation of the positive aspects of fire.' Other comments commended the interagency relationship with statements such as, 'the National Parks and the Flathead National Forest really care! Sometimes the news (media) doesn't portray that' and, 'two Federal Agencies can really work well together!' Regardless of whether the reaction to the burned areas was positive or negative, the tours were well received and enhanced the image of both agencies.