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Department of the Interior
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Bridger-Teton National Forest

Teton Interagency Fire Management


Fire Management History Archive Project Preserves Records



The flora and fauna within the boundaries of Grand Teton National Park have been altered for thousands of years. Whether changed by naturally occurring fires, subsistence activities, seasonal migrations or coordinated land management activities, this ecosystem in its present state serves to document the interaction between human intervention and natural processes. Fire has been an integral part of this ecological history, evidenced by a fire management program that predates even the establishment of the park. Until recently, however, the historical records of the fire management activities in Grand Teton National Park (GRTE) were largely inaccessible to park management and in urgent need of preservation.

In 2002, an academic researcher interested in the history of fire management at Grand Teton National Park (GRTE) accessed the fire records. The researcher noted there were significant documents of historic value in need of preservation and maintenance. Within the context of National Park Service (NPS) fire management, the documentation of Grand Teton's unique history is particularly important. Between 1910 and the present day, Grand Teton has been a leader in the dialogue regarding NPS policy for fire management. Without proper care, preservation and improved storage conditions, the records that comprise this irreplaceable collection were in jeopardy of being lost forever. The park staff, lacking a collections storage facility, had been forced to store documents in whatever limited space they could find.

In response to the recommendations made by the fire history researcher in 2002 and in support of the overall fire management program at the park, Lisa Elenz, the Fire Management Officer (FMO) and Christine Landrum, former Museum Curator at GRTE, launched the "Grand Teton Fire Management Archives Project" in 2003. With funding



provided by the Intermountain Region Fire Management Program for supplies and a student stipend, the park worked through the Rocky Mountain Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit (RM-CESU) to identify a qualified graduate student for the project under the supervision of University of Colorado - Denver history professor Dr. Tom Noel. The project was designed to have an interdisciplinary focus, combining historical and environmental research with archival processing and records management. The overall goal of the project was “to develop a sustainable records management and archives system for the Fire Management Office of Grand Teton National Park addressing proper storage, fire and theft protection, accessibility and sustainability.”¹

In fulfillment of the project requirements and CESU Task Agreement, the graduate student was asked to:

- attend fire records management training provided by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)
- read a selection of professional publications and NPS guidance regarding records management
- conduct a survey of all GRTE fire management records in the park
- dispose of items per NPS 19 Appendix B
- rehouse all official records/reports
- remove all paperclips, staples, etc. from the documents
- label all folders with a file code, folder title, inclusive dates and disposition information
- place official records/permanent disposition items, including maps and photographs in archival folders, sleeves, etc. and in storage containers (fire resistant cabinets, archival boxes, etc.) ordered in fiscal year 2002
- develop a folders list with label information and a Finding Aid in Excel format for use by Grand Teton National Park Fire Management Office

Ph.D. candidate Donna Tucker from the University of Colorado was selected for her academic background in public policy, environmental studies, previous research accomplishments and publications. Tucker attended the NARA training in the spring of 2004 and conducted her on - site work during the months of August and September of 2004. Although the original estimate of record boxes was only thirteen, Tucker’s intensive park -wide survey uncovered nearly twice that amount. Many of the reports were riddled with staples, and one of the park’s earliest fire atlases was found to be water damaged and in need of treatment. As an on - site researcher, the information she was processing was simultaneously preserved for use by the NPS and future researchers. The physical and intellectual difficulties of archival work, coupled with the many fascinating facets of NPS fire management, made for a challenging project and one that could only be met with the maturity and skill set brought by Tucker.

After several weeks of intensive on - site work, Tucker returned to Colorado to complete the writing component of the project. In addition to providing the park with a box- by-box list detailing the contents of each folder, the inclusive dates, and the disposition schedule, she wrote a concise Finding Aid complete with a history of the Fire Management Program in the park and detailed recommendations for future research. She went far beyond the original scope of the project by providing a thorough description of her methodology and even provided the park with a quick reference guide to help the park maintain and continue the system she developed. In doing so, Tucker’s work helped to establish one of the first division level archival programs at the park. Park staff will be better able to maintain the system over the long term because the overall approach was developed collaboratively with the Fire Management Program and in response to the specific needs of the division.

Although the preservation and protection efforts of the archival portion of the project was of the utmost importance, perhaps the most interesting component of the project was the overview of historical fire periods included in the Finding Aid. The archival collection includes both temporary and permanent records dating from 1910 to 2002 and is a compilation of numerous materials including maps, photographs, reports, transparencies and correspondence. The data contained within the various records and reports, coupled with Tucker’s historical

overview, further articulate the importance of Grand Teton's Fire Management Program in the large context of NPS fire management. Tucker highlights several key periods in the park's fire history including the 'year of the fires'ⁱⁱ in 1910 for western park holdings, the long-standing policy of fire suppression, and the 1973 decision by Superintendent Gary E. Everhardt to allow a natural fire in the park burn under supervision. Grand Teton National Park was the first National Park in the nation to do so.

The success of the overall project is a testament to Tucker's hard work as well as the collaboration between the staff of Grand Teton National Park, the Intermountain Regional Office, academic researchers and the Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit (CESU). In Tucker's own words, the benefit of such a project is, "There are policy lessons to be learned, fire ecology lessons to be learned and trends to be discerned. Armed with this knowledge, the future fire manager is empowered to make better decisions by avoiding costly mistakes of the past."

Grand Teton National Park staff hopes that the project and its products will serve as a model for collaboration to other parks. Park and regional staff also hope that the project has highlighted the significance and potential wealth of information contained in park archives. Parks and researchers interested in learning more about the Grand Teton National Park Fire Management Archives Project should contact Grand Teton's Fire Management Office at (307) 739-3311.



Grand Teton National Park's former Museum Curator Christine Landrum and Fire Management Officer Lisa Elenz celebrate the completion of Tucker's project.

ⁱ Project Cover Sheet for the Grand Teton National Park Fire Management Archives Project page 2, Project Justification Problem Statement.

ⁱⁱ Righter, Robert (1982) *Crucible for Conservation*, Colorado Associated University Press: Denver. Chapter 1, p. 43.