Yosemite News

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

The Wolf Fire – A WUI Success

Managing a lightning-ignited fire for resource benefits will help protect the White Wolf community from future fires

Communities which could be threatened by wildland fire are commonly referred to as the "Wildland/Urban Interface," or WUI. Successfully crafting a cooperative relationship between the needs of the forest and the needs of the surrounding WUI communities requires careful planning and good communication. But contrary to common perceptions - it can be done.

On July 11, 2002, lightning struck a tree and started a fire near the White Wolf area of Yosemite National Park. The ecology of the red fir and lodgepole pine that dominate the area requires periodic fire, and with that understanding, managers carefully assessed the situation. A complex picture emerged which included: concession issues from the White Wolf Lodge, air quality concerns of Tuolumne County, park visitor interests, and the strained national fire suppression resources with one of the most volitale wildfire seasons in recorded history.

The general character of the Wolf Fire was rather unremarkable. As planned, it calmly consumed surface fuels under the watchful eyes of fire managers.

At issue was whether to manage the fire for resources benefits, rather than suppress it immediately. Managing such a fire is called "*wildland fire use*," and requires extensive planning and coordination before it can be approved. Current and expected fire behavior are analyzed, values at risk and potential mitigation opportunities are evaluated, and a comprehensive management plan is developed. Each day, park management must reaffirm the decision to maintain the fire as "*wildland fire use*," in order to continue.

Despite the potential workload, park managers knew that in addition to benefitting natural resources, managing the fire as it burned around the White Wolf Lodge area was actually a form of long-term fire protection for the concession structures - nature's insurance. Fires burning under optimal weather and moisture conditions can reduce burnable material on the ground (*fuel*), helping to restore Yosemite forests to more natural, fire-resistant conditions. This in turn reduces the severity of future fires. The Wolf Fire would restore balance in the forest, **and** create a fuels buffer around the White Wolf community.

Communication with the park's partners was critical to the decision-making process. The park formed the White Wolf Fire Advisory Group, which consisted of the White Wolf Lodge concessionaire, the Tuolumne County Air Pollution Control District, and representatives from all park division. This open communication laid the foundation for proactive fire management with air quality, business concerns, and visitor recreation in mind, as well as the resources. In addition to the consultation process, the park hosted daily interpretive walks for park visitors. These walks answered questions about fire use and the ecology of the Sierra Nevada forests, and the response from the public was overwhelming. In the first month, more than 500 people attended the walks, which were booked solid. Due to the unexpected popularity of the walks, they continue today.

The result? The plan worked! Approximately 950 acres of fuels were consumed in the Wolf Fire - protecting the White Wolf structures from more severe fires in the future, while allowing fire to play its natural role in rejuvinating the forest.

Why should a fire burn?

There was a time when we tried to keep predators out of beloved national parks like Yosemite and Yellowstone. We did not think it was wrong to eliminate wolves and bears from the park landscape. Only with years of scientific study did we begin to understand that predators are essential to the health of the natural world.

The same can be said about fire. Initially, we saw all fire as "bad," and promised ourselves we would put every fire out as soon as possible. But fire has an important role in forest ecology, and without it, most of our nation's forests have begun to suffer. Fire can be seen as a natural "housekeeper," with its tendency to eat up accumulated debris on the forest floor. Some trees – such as the giant sequoia - even depend on fire to reproduce. Using a variety of scientific tools, fire ecologists are learning about "fire return intervals," – the natural cycle fire followed before we began suppressing all flames, approximately 100 years ago.

America's giant sequoias must have fire to reproduce and remain healthy

Again, we have had lessons to learn. We now understand that by breaking the cycle with unnatural fire suppression, we have allowed fuels to build up so that when fires do occur they are more intense and damaging to both natural resources and human communities. We have also significantly altered the look and make-up of the forests themselves. In addition, forests deprived of fire are more vulnerable to disease and insect infestation.

So today, some fires are managed. No one in the National Park Service just "lets a fire burn." Each decision not to suppress a fire is made with careful deliberation, intense planning, and regular communication with those affected by the decision. The management guidelines for the fire include very specific conditions that must be met, in order to continue with the task of restoring fire to the landscape. Only with this restoration will our forests regain their vitality.

A hot topic for White Wolf Lodge

The concept of a fire that did not need to be put out seemed strange to the managers of the White Wolf Lodge. They'd seen fires on television. Many questions and concerns presented tough issues to resolve. How would the fire affect the lodge visitors? Would the smoke be unbearable? Would the flames overrun the small compound that housed the lodge, cabins, and campground?

Fire managers with the National Park Service were well aware of these concerns, and worked quickly to address them. A team of fire fighters helped prepare the area as a precautionary measure. They thinned the smaller trees that could act as ladders, helping a fire rise into the crowns of large trees. They wrapped wood-shingled roofs in fire-resistant material. Engines were stationed at key points, and hose was placed around the entire compound. A Structure Protection Plan was developed for the lodge and cabins, and protection of the structures was to be the highest priority next to human safety if the fire advanced.

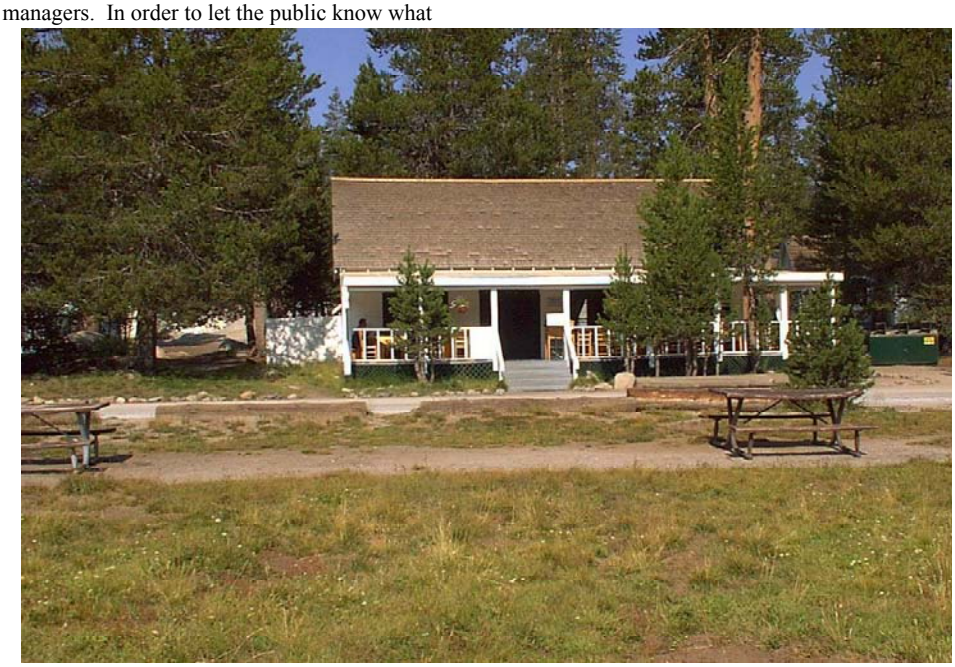
In addition, smoke and air quality were carefully monitored each day by fire managers, and compared with EPA recommendations. Information about the fire was posted at visible locations around the area.

Each day, the park communicated with concession managers. In order to let the public know what

Vegetation around the lodge was thinned, to allow for better structure protection

was happening, daily fire ecology walks were arranged, to afford the visitors a rare opportunity to see a wildland fire in a natural setting. The response to the walks was overwhelming, and with the limit set on how many could safely be monitored by accompanying firefighters, many were turned away until the next scheduled outing. Over 500 people ventured into the exciting world of fire ecology with Park Service naturalists.

Lodge managers were surprised at the reaction from their customers. Visitors were often intrigued with the science of natural resource management, and supportive of fire's role in healthy ecosystem. The National Park Service is grateful to the White Wolf Lodge managers for their cooperation.



The White Wolf Lodge continued with business as usual, as the Wolf Fire burned harmlessly, a short distance away.