

PERSPECTIVES FROM THE
ALDO LEOPOLD WILDERNESS RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Managing Fire in Wilderness

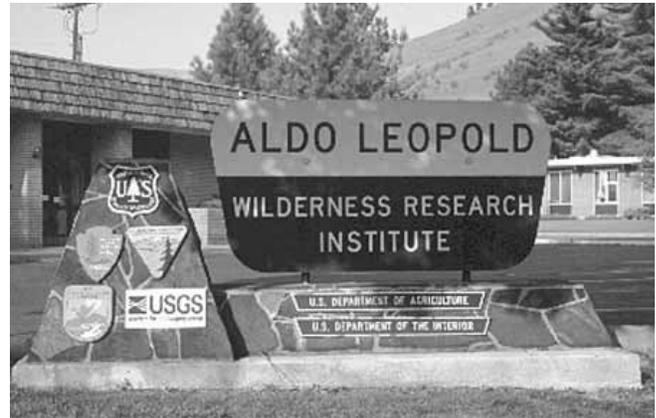
Reflections from WILD9

DAVID J. PARSONS

My experiences in coordinating several sessions around the theme of Wildland Fire and Protected Areas at the 9th World Wilderness Congress (WILD9) provided a sharp reminder of just how different some of the principle challenges to wilderness stewardship are across the globe. Unlike the largely common approaches to issues such as biodiversity and habitat connectivity, the management of fire differs greatly among countries and cultures. These differences present unique challenges in communicating about and learning from experiences in other areas.

Held November 6 to 13, 2009, in Mérida, Mexico, WILD9 provided a variety of forums for scientists, managers, educators, and conservationists from around the world to address the myriad challenges to the protection and preservation of wilderness. Given the importance of the restoration and management of fire as a natural process in parks and wilderness areas of the United States and Canada, the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute organized two sessions of invited presentations within the Science and Stewardship Symposium at WILD9. In addition, a session of contributed papers and a workshop organized by the National Park Service provided a robust theme of wilderness fire that stretched over three days. It soon became evident that the diverse perspectives brought by the different cultures represented at the Congress presented some unique challenges. The bias of the session organizers (i.e., that fire is a natural process that should be perpetuated wherever possible) did not effectively translate to those parts of the world where fire is considered bad, something to be avoided.

In the introductory session, invited presentations provided brief historical overviews of the use and management



of fire in protected areas in Canada, the United States, Mexico, and the Caribbean and Central America, respectively. The emphasis in Canada and the United States on using fire as a tool to restore natural processes contrasted sharply with the focus on suppression of virtually all fires in Mexico and the rest of Latin America. In the larger protected areas of Canada and the United States, the principal aim of fire management is, wherever possible, to restore the roles of both lightning fires and ignitions by Native peoples. In these two countries, the primary challenges are (1) how to allow lightning fires to burn without threatening communities and other values that may exist within or adjacent to protected areas, and (2) whether and how to use management-ignited prescribed fires within such areas. In contrast, in Mexico, and most of the rest of Latin America, fire is considered almost universally to be harmful and is something to be avoided. Alfredo Nolasco, the national fire manager for the Mexican National Forest Commission emphasized the difficulty in changing the almost universal perception that all fire is bad. He noted that only recently has some progress been made in recognizing that some

ecosystems are actually dependent on fire. Most of the rest of Latin America continues to lack understanding of the beneficial aspects of fire, and thus views all fire as harmful. In many countries it is expressly against the law to set a fire, even within areas such as parks and wilderness, that have been designated to protect natural ecosystems.

The following WILD9 sessions included discussion of evidence that changing climates may already be extending the fire season and resulting in larger and hotter fires in many areas, the importance of understanding public perceptions of fire, the future challenges for the management of natural fire presented by increasing housing development near wilderness areas, and the complexity of understanding the effects of carbon emissions from fire and trade-offs with other protected wilderness objectives. In fact, an important area of agreement among countries and cultures was the need for expanded understanding and dialogue regarding the trade-offs associated with the effects of fire management decisions on carbon emissions, including how to weigh the costs and benefits of such consequences on local, regional, and global scales.

For those interested in the management of wilderness were the dramatic differences among countries and cultures in how fire is perceived, and thus managed.

Contributed papers at WILD9 addressed such various issues as visitor experiences following fire (Boundary Waters Canoe Area in Minnesota, USA), restoration of conifer forests using fire (Northern Rocky Mountains, USA), institutional collaboration in managing fire (Baja California, Mexico), effects of climate change on wildfires (Australia), and changing perceptions about wildfire (USA.). The National Park Service–led discussions provided background on the history and evolution of that agency’s fire policy and programs as well as important dialogue on future challenges and opportunities related to the management of wildland fire in parks and wilderness.

In summary, perhaps the most important take-home message for those interested in the management of wilderness were the dramatic differences among countries and cultures in how fire is perceived, and thus managed. This was particularly clearly

reflected in the translation of the description of the Congress’s fire theme that appeared in the official WILD9 program. What the organizers proposed and described as a track of sessions on “Wildland Fire and Protected Areas” (English version of the program), was translated into the Spanish version of the program as “*control de incendios*” (control of wildfire), rather than “*manejo de fuego*” (management of fire). This difference in perception about the role and management of fire in wilderness reflects legal as well as cultural differences. It presents a challenge that must be considered in planning future international forums to discuss the topic of fire in protected areas.

DAVID J. PARSONS is the retired, past director of the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute, Rocky Mountain Research Station, USDA Forest Service; email: djparson02@fs.fed.us.