Fire is “A Kind of Animal”

by Carol Henning

So said the captain of a handcrew working on the Eaton Fire (in its seventh day) as a team of wildland firefighters who dig lines around fires to contain and control them.

“Nearly everyone in the crew carried hand tools, and two people, designated sawyers, carried chainsaws.” Hiking along the edge of the charred area that a fire leaves behind (its burn scar), their job was “to scour the boundary where the fire had stopped, looking for hot spots that could reignite.” On their walk, they “marched into drainage ditches, scaled chain-link fences…and passed through backyards that sloped steeply upward toward the mountains. Each of us was responsible for scanning the ground for anything that might hold heat… When we saw ashes, we touched them gently with the backs of our bare hands to detect warmth. If we felt any, we shouted ‘Hold for heat!’ and the line stopped long enough for us to dig the hot spot out of the earth and cool it in the open air… The perimeter of a wildfire is typically walked over three or four times, and sometimes more.

By California standards, the Eaton Fire… wasn’t even close to being a megafire, which is usually defined as one that burns at least a hundred thousand acres. But it was already the fifth deadliest fire in the state’s history, with a confirmed death toll of seventeen…”

Asked what he had learned about fire, the handcrew’s captain replied: “I view it as a kind of animal. If you take away the air, it dies. You can feed it by giving it more fuel. It can sleep… It’s an entity that you have to respect, not just some dumb element that, if you put water on it, it stops.” The captain added that, if we humans are going to live in places where fires like to burn, we “need to become comfortable with small or controlled fires that consume accumulating fuel.” Fire is “good for the earth. Everything grows back better. It keeps the tree density down.”

M.R. O’Connor, the author of this article, admitted that it “seemed impossible to reconcile the potentially possible ecological benefits of fire up here with the wreckage at the base of these mountains. Such a reconciliation would require a profound realignment in our society—a shared understanding that our lives and our infrastructure must coexist with fire.” (M.R. O’Connor, “Line of Fire,” *The New Yorker*, Feb. 3, 2025).

The ideas expressed in *The New Yorker* article are echoed and enhanced by Lazo Gitchos, writing about the Palisades fire in *The Nation*, March, 2025. He argues that, “our firefighting playbook was written for a world that no longer exists.” He insists that, “we have to change the way we think about fires—and not just about fighting them. That starts with changing the way we think about our relationship to nature and to fire itself.” Gitchos points out that “government spending on fire suppression breaks records nearly every year… Firestorms raze communities and take lives… We have entered the acute phase of a fire crisis long in the making, and reactive adaptation will continue to leave agencies struggling—and failing—to keep up with the chaos.” Gitchos explains that “as a wildland firefighter who has studied and worked in land management policy, I know that fire is not a disaster, but a condition and a basic chemical reaction that responds to immediate environmental factors. It is the loss of life and the destruction of livelihoods that are disasters…” Lori Moore-Morrell, the U.S. fire administrator for the Federal Emergency Management Agency, told *The New York Times* last week, ‘There isn’t a fire department in the world that could have gotten in front of this.’ No amount of money spent on fire crews, equipment and response could have stopped the Palisades fire once it had

reached just a few acres. We cannot buy back more than a century of mistreatment of the land and changes to the atmosphere… We have to change the way we think about fires—and not just about fighting them. That starts with changing the way we think about our relationship to nature and to fire itself. Wildland firefighters… are trained to fight fire in a range of environments, from grass and brush to dense forests, to the wildland-urban interface (WUI), the official term for the places where nature and humanity meet… In fact, inhabited [by humans] and uninhabited areas form separate but closely linked components of the same ecosystems… fire does not respect town limits or the edges of parks and preserves…"

"When firefighting resources and tactics are overwhelmed, as they have been in L.A., it is a result of many factors combined: budgets, management failures, development practices and climate change."

Gitchos reminds us that "Southern California's ecosystems evolved in concert with human-stewarded fire. The removal of indigenous people, who used fire to manage biomass and regulate biological processes, and the suppression of incidental fire since the late 19th century have led to the buildup of unburned fuel. Shifting weather patterns as a result of climate change increase drought conditions and make the weather less predictable… The building of homes, and subsequent suppression of fire in environments that have traditionally depended on periodic fires, have made communities vulnerable to less predictable, more destructive conflagrations."

Each of these components—overabundant fuel, climate change, and vulnerable flammable development —"depends on our insistence that our physical environment can and should be controlled rather than inhabited and cared for."

One way of caring for our Southern California environment is described in a *Los Angeles Times* article by Noah Haggerty, "To end wildfire cycle, look to nature." (Dec. 15, 2024). "Native species of oak could be a solution to dangerous feedback loop in the Malibu area, experts say," announces the article's subhead. "Fires have always been part of life in the Santa Monica Mountains, but in recent decades, they've exploded in frequency and ferocity." When humans built roads and homes in areas where urban areas meet wildlands, they introduced fire-loving species that helped create pretty landscaping. More frequent fires choke out native vegetation and welcome invasive tinder-like grasses that provide fuel (food) for fires. "California State Parks and the National Park Service believe they have a potential solution. It is the coast live oak, "a native keystone species known for its ability to impede fire and quash embers." These oaks "have waxy, cup-shaped leaves—not only do they rarely go up in flame, but they can catch embers out of the sky and extinguish them." They act as a kind of shield.

"The trees can also communicate with one another through networks of fungi, and share resources, while outcompeting invasive species for sunlight, water and nutrients." The oaks have been monitored for decades by "a community nonprofit dedicated to stewarding the land and creating harmony between the ecosystem and the people living in it." The nonprofit—the Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains—is now working with the state parks agency to "identify strategic areas that are both prone to fire and able to sustain the oaks in a warming and increasingly drought-stricken climate, and to plant hundreds of new trees."

Alexandra Syphard, Senior Research Scientist at the Conservation Biology Institute, said she applauded the efforts, but "chaparral is extraordinarily species rich. It provides many ecosystem services, such as carbon storage, reduction of soil erosion, and water quality. But, once it's gone, it's really hard to get back." Nonetheless, Issac Yelchin and Luke Benson, from the Resource Conservation District, drove up a Topanga State Park fire road with some coast live oak seeds. Benson admitted, "You're working against a pretty

massive force, but I think that's why it is really important in this line of work, or even just as a human being existing now, to try not to let the pessimism take over."

What might fuel the pessimism is the flurry of accusations that accompanied the fires. *Los Angeles Times* columnist, Steve Lopez, cautioned readers and others: "Don't Use fires as a Political Pinata." Lopez observed that L.A. Mayor, Karen Bass, had been "ripped by some critics for being out of the country when the killer fires began." Recently, the *Times* contained an article tracing the mayor's attempts to deal with the fires while she was in Ghana, and her rush to get back to Los Angeles. (One wonders if the mayor was expected to patrol the city's borders, fire-hose at the ready , instead of attending the inauguration of the Ghanian President.) Lopez remarks that "President-elect (at the time of the article) Trump has blamed California Governor Gavin "Newscum" and his "Los Angeles crew" for the deadly infernos. And various TV commentators have blasted an L.A. Fire Department cut and "diversity hiring." Another *Los Angeles Times* columnist, George Skelton, expressed disgust with opportunistic politicians "shooting off their mouths without regard for facts and blaming "a governor and his Los Angeles crew for fire hydrants running dry." Skelton argued that Governor Newsom's California water policies had "no more to do with Pacific Palisades' hydrants drying up during a firestorm than did Donald Trump's turning on sprinklers at his golf course."

John Monsen, Co-Chair of the Sierra Club Angeles Chapter's Forest Committee, noted that, when talking about the Los Angeles County wildfires, "President Trump and his ally, Elon Musk, are heavy on the exaggeration, light on the truth." On January 8. Musk said: "These fires are easily avoidable, but nonsense regulations in California prevent action from being taken so year after year homes burn down and more people die." Monsen notes that "Virtually no firefighter or fire scientist supports any of this." Monsen explains: "There is strong evidence that Southern California has experienced massive, typically wind-driven, wildfires for hundreds of years, if not millennia. Powerful Santa Ana winds can push embers miles ahead, rapidly expanding fires, and the wind direction can suddenly change. Drought, low humidity, and increased fire frequency—mainly due to climate change—have exacerbated this situation. Additionally, Southern California's complex topography channels winds through canyons and mountain passes, intensifying their speed. Chaparral and coastal sage scrub vegetation… ecosystems, especially chaparral, are adapted to infrequent, intense fires that historically occurred every 30 to 100 years, allowing ample time to recover. However, the increasing frequency of fires disrupts these natural cycles and harms the ecosystems. When chaparral burns too often, it transforms into highly flammable grasslands. Over the years, L.A. County has upgraded construction standards to reduce wildfire risks."

Of course there is more to do. Monsen's list includes rethinking development in fire-prone areas; promoting denser housing away from fire-prone areas, reducing human-caused ignitions (including those from infrastructure such as power-lines); creating local water storage for emergency use in high-risk areas; avoiding construction in topography that accelerates winds, such as at the top of a canyon; adjusting zoning to create buffers between homes and chapparal-heavy areas, such as the Angeles National Forest; and, the elephant in the room—the burning of fossil fuels.

Leah Stokes, Associate Professor of Environmental Politics at the University of California, Santa Barbara, explains that "the ultimate driver here is climate change… the fact is that the number one thing we have to do to really get at the root cause of this disease is to stop burning fossil fuels. And people have been saying that for decades, including Octavia Butler, who wrote that extremely prescient book that didn't just talk about climate change, but also had a fascist president come to power in her story… [Octavia Butler lived in Altadena]. Professor Stokes continues: "But what we really need to do is reduce our dependence of fossil fuel. We need to electrify all the buildings that we can, and include our infrastructure, our transportation." (Stokes was interviewed by Amy Goodman on "Democracy Now!" broadcast on public radio and TV in January 2025.

U.N. Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, said “Look no further than the hills of Los Angeles. It has gone from the home of disaster movies to a scene of disaster. Who pays the price for climate destruction around the world? Not the fossil fuel industry, pocketing profits and taxpayer subsidies as their products wreak havoc.”

Elizabeth Kolbert, winner of the 2025 Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction, writes in the *New Yorker* (March 31, 2025) that the new Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, Lee Zeldon, has trained the agency’s heaviest ammunition on efforts to limit climate change. He “announced his intention to roll back dozens of environmental rules and to shrink his agency’s spending by two-thirds… With the help of this new EPA, the Trump Administration is doing everything it can to make emissions grow again.”

Will “Drill, Baby, Drill” result in “Burn, baby, burn”? Do we want to wait quietly and see?