
Guest Column: Our new age of fire

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Fire in the West is expected, and not so long ago, it seemed something the West experienced more than anywhere else. Nationally, big fires were treated as another freak of Western violence, like a grizzly bear attack or another California quirk like Esalen and avocados.

Now the wildland fires flare up everywhere. There are fires in Algeria and Turkey, Amazonia and Indonesia, and France, Canada and Australia. Last year even Greenland burned.

Fire seasons have lengthened, fires have gotten meaner and bigger; fires have begun not just gorging on logging slash and prowling the mountainous backcountry, but also burning right into and across towns. Three years ago in northern California, the Camp fire broke out along the Feather River and, burning southwest, incinerated the town of Paradise. Now, the Dixie fire, starting 20 miles north in the same drainage, is burning in the opposite direction, taking out the historic town of Greenville. The fires have us coming and going.

The causes have been analyzed and reanalyzed, like placer miners washing and rewashing tailings. Likewise, the solutions have been reworked and polished until they have become clichés, ready to spill into the culture

wars.

The news media have fire season branded into their almanac of annual events. Scientific disciplines are publishing reports and data sets at an exponential rate. So far as understanding the fire scene, we've hit field capacity. What more can we say?

One trend is to go small and find meaning in the personal. But there is also an argument to go big and frame the story at a planetary scale that can shuffle all the survival memoirs, smoke palls that travel across the continent, melting ice packs, lost and disappearing species and sprawling frontiers of flame, in much the way we organize the swarm of starlight in a night sky into constellations.

I'm a fire guy. I take fire not just as a random happening, but as an emergent property that's intrinsic to life on Earth.

So I expect fires. All those savanna fires in Africa, the land-clearing fires in Brazil and Sumatra, the boreal blowouts in Siberia and British Columbia, the megafires in the Pacific Northwest — all the flames we see.

But then there are fires that should be present and aren't — the fires that once renewed and stabilized most of the land all over our planet. These are the fires that humanity, with its species monopoly on combustion, deliberately set to make living landscapes into what the ancients termed "a second nature."

But it was not enough. We wanted yet more power without the constraints of living landscapes that restricted what and when we could burn. We turned to fossil fuels to burn through day and night, winter and summer, drought and deluge. With our unbounded firepower we remade second nature into "a third nature," one organized around industrial combustion.

Our fires in living landscapes and those made with fossil fuels have been reshaping the Earth. The result is too much bad fire and too little good, and way too much combustion overall.

Add up all those varieties of burning, and we seem to be creating the fire equivalent of an Ice Age, with continental shifts in geography, radical changes in climate, rising sea level, a mass extinction and a planet whose air, water, soil and life are being refashioned at a breakneck pace.

It's said that every model fails but some are useful. The same holds true for metaphors. What the concept of a planetary Fire Age — a Pyrocene — gives us, is a sense of the scale of our fire-powered impact. It suggests how the parts might interact and who is responsible. It allows us to reimagine the issues and perhaps stand outside our entrenched perspectives.

What we have made - if with unintended consequences - we can unmake, though we should expect more unknown consequences.

We have a lot of fire in our future, and a lot to learn about living with it.

Steve Pyne is a contributor to Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org, a nonprofit dedicated to spurring lively conversation about the West. He is the author of *The Pyrocene. How We Created an Age of Fire*, and

What Happens Next.