

A. Case for conservation

Some forest fires help preserve the ecosystem

By ALENE N. CASE

When I was growing up in the mountains of North Carolina, I was always amazed that my father knew when there was a forest fire. His keen nose could distinguish a forest fire from other things that might be burning like garbage, brush, or houses. We lived next door to the fire warden for our county and sometimes he would come to get my father to help fight fires on the steep slopes near Mt. Mitchell.

We were taught that fires were harmful. Most fires in that area were caused by people. Some were intentionally set. Most were accidental. Many began near roads where careless smokers threw cigarettes or matches out of car windows. Fire fighting was dangerous, difficult work, especially at night. Usually the crews would cut a "fire break" on each side of the blaze and pray that the fire would stop at the top of the mountain. The scars left by fire were obvious for decades afterward. Often, plants did not return quickly enough to prevent the soil from washing down the steep slopes.

Perhaps all of this remains true for the forests of western North Carolina. But, I have come to realize that fire is not the enemy of

many ecosystems. It is sometimes necessary for the maintenance of a system. And, sometimes smaller, cooler fires are necessary to prevent destructive wildfires. Let's consider a few examples.

The coastal plain of North Carolina is covered by pine forest. Periodic fire is an absolutely necessary component of this ecosystem. Fires are often started by lightning and spread along the ground, burning the needles under the trees. The mature trees are not easily burned. But, seedlings of oak and other hardwood trees are killed by the heat. If allowed to grow, oaks would shade out the pines and an entirely different type of forest would develop. Plants that depend on the existence of the pine forest - such as the rare Venus's flytrap - would disappear.

The pine barrens of New Jersey are perhaps more familiar to you. Fire is even more important here because Jack pine (the dominant species) will not reproduce unless it is subjected to fire. The cones do not open to release seeds unless they are heated to at least 116°F. Often the cones remain tightly closed on the tree branches for twenty years or more. Frequent fires also release nutrients which can then be recycled by the

plants and other plants growing in sandy nutrient-poor soils.

Perhaps you have visited a large swamp such as the Okefenokee on the border of Georgia and Florida. It seems strange that fire would be a natural component of such a wet system, but it is. Small fires set by lightning burn the grass and shrubs periodically so that this fuel does not accumulate and cause more destructive "crown" fires. Sometimes fires are very hot in a local area and a depression is burned into the organic layer of the swamp. These depressions soon fill with water and become home to alligators, fish, and other animals and plants that we associate with a swamp.

The Yellowstone fires of the summer of 1988 created a great deal of debate among park managers, foresters, and professional ecologists. The forests of the West have been primed for such firestorms because of the rigorous fire suppression of the past 100 years. Most fires have been extinguished as soon as possible after they were discovered. This policy has allowed an unnatural collection of dry material in the forests. Some forest managers were changing this policy as early as the 1970s. They were instead intentionally allowing small fires to burn themselves out and often

using "prescribed" burns to reduce excess fuel in the forests. Prescribed burns are ones that are intentionally set and controlled by forest managers.

Yellowstone is an excellent example of good intentions creating big problems for ecosystems. Suppression of fires not only contributed to the possibility of a more destructive fire, but it also changed the very landscape which we were trying to preserve. Aspen and willows colonize areas which have burned. These trees provide habitat for elk and beaver. Beavers build dams which create habitat for birds, trout, and aquatic plants. Evergreen were displacing many of these habitats before the big fire came.

We need to be aware of the natural interactions between fire and our surroundings. Certainly, we should never be careless with fire. But, just as certainly, we should respect fire as a necessary component of our environment. Consider the words of George Wuerthner in Yellowstone and the Fires of Change: "because of the dynamic nature of a living landscape, we cannot preserve it in the same manner as we might preserve a building, rather, preservation requires change...Wildfires cannot destroy Yellowstone; misguided attempts to suppress all fires can."

J.W.J.

Looting the national treasury leads to no good

By J.W. JOHNSON

With continued trade and budget deficits, the economic emergence of Pacific Rim countries (in addition to Japan), emergence of the European Economic Community and a declining trust in our financial institutions from politicians lining their own political and personal coffers, the United States is facing the real prospect of becoming a second rate, perhaps third world economic entity in the next century.

Agreed...U.S. per capita income is the highest in the world, exceeding \$18,000 per year. But that measurement is deceiving upon also learning that more than 50 percent of our citizens get some form of government assistance; in short, with government establishing policies that filter economic activity through least common denominator sieves, i.e. quota systems for employment, government, not private industry, is the prime economic force in our nation today.

We call ours a representative democracy. Some 200 years ago, British historian, Prof. Alexander Tyler commented:

"A democracy cannot exist as a permanent form of government. It can only exist until the voters discover that they can vote themselves largesse from the public treasury. From that moment on, the majority always votes for the

candidates promising the most benefits from the public treasury with the result that a democracy always collapses over loose fiscal policy, always followed by a dictatorship."

Frightening, yes. But are we not, in fact, headed down that path?

Many reasons stand as harbinger's of our likely 21st Century economic fate, including:

—The loss of ethics in business.

—The growth of a legal system which encourages circumvention of, rather than respect for the law.

—A morally and otherwise bankrupt labor union movement.

But perhaps the single most important ingredient now missing from this economic soup is that we have forgotten one simple rule: Acquire new customers, and then treat each of them as if they were the only customer we had.

Instead we get various jobs programs (like the Job Training and Partnership Act, whose progenitor was the CETA program). As such, now no longer do we have just individuals in communities living off the public treasury. Through the collective reasoning of the liberals, we have entire communities in this nation inexorably immersed in this quasi-welfare mess.

Those same liberals argue that government has a responsibility to step in when the private sector

cannot provide necessary employment.

Rubbish! Beyond the reasons already cited above, another major reason why the private sector now has difficulty in creating and providing employment, rests in the very foundation of liberal persuasion... the liberal obsession with protecting us from ourselves through regulation.

What's ironic is that the liberals, in establishing support for more government spending and more regulation, will point to the strangling economy and use the result of the very concoction they created, as grass to mow and sow in campaign rhetoric.

But what is wrong with spending no more than you earn, the law of supply and demand, and an honest dollar for an honest day's work...all ideas now tortured by the notion of "entitlements" for citizens. Those who subscribe to the entitlements notion must be reading a different constitution. Mine reads that we have a promise of the pursuit of happiness; nowhere does it suggest the guarantee of happiness.

And perhaps more to the point...if we were to simply stop the rate of growth of all current entitlement programs at their present levels, the entire federal deficit would be eliminated by the year 1997.

Fat chance, though. And that

because the liberals lump those who advocate sound fiscal policy with those who advocate social repression...which is another way of saying that any criticism of a taxpayer funded program which gives money to blacks, for example, will automatically insure that you will be called a racist. Therefore this society, where now everyone is a 'victim', with his or her own personal lobby to make that point clear, continues to nurture the erroneous belief that money, especially money coming from someone else's pocket, will cure anything. This intellectual lumping serves a single purpose: To elicit an emotional reaction from the so-called socially repressed, thus insuring liberal reelection.

"...loose fiscal policy, always followed by a dictatorship," observed Prof. Tyler.

And of course, the dictatorships that we've had over the past 15 years have been dictatorships of the extremes...the extreme right from Nixon and leading up to Bush, and now the extreme left beginning with Clinton.

And if those in the middle who are left confused about their role in governing themselves, wondering where it is they're going to get the money to continue funding those extremes, and as they struggle just to survive, wondering just what the hell went wrong with the American economic dream.

ance, poise, and personality.

Adrienne attends Lake-Noxen Elementary School, where she is in the second grade.

Harveys Lake girl crowned Little Princess '93

Adrienne Dragon, the seven year old daughter of Matthew and Deborah Dragon of Harveys Lake, was crowned the 1993 Luzerne County Little Princess.

Adrienne competed in the 6 to 9 year old division on September 12th, 1993, "Family Day at the Luzerne County Fair." The contestants were judged on appear-



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