

# Is SMOKEY WRONG?

Jimmye L. Turner



A lot of people seem to enjoy coming up to me and asking, “How does it feel, now that we know Smokey was wrong all these years?”

I usually try to look surprised and ask them in return, “Wrong in what way?”

They then carefully explain to me that we “now know” that not all fire is bad and that fire is a tool in managing the forest—especially in removing logging slash, preparing a seedbed, and promoting grazing by wildland animals. They explain, furthermore, that not all fires should be suppressed and our “heavy-handed” management of fire is a source of damage and major changes in the forest.

I usually nod and agree with them. “Yes, fire is a tool and also a natural part of the forest ecosystem, and yes, we use fire to remove logging slash and promote grazing.” Then, in return, I ask them:

“How is Smokey Bear wrong?”  
“Which Smokey poster declares ‘All fire is bad?’”  
“When did Smokey say ‘Fire is not a part of the ecosystem?’”  
“Did Smokey instruct someone to ‘Suppress all fires?’”  
“Does Smokey forbid us from using fire as a tool?”

I think these questions are easy to answer, but some people have a

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“Do civilian visitors to your forest search for areas needing fire to regenerate growth or to improve the habitat for wildland animals?”

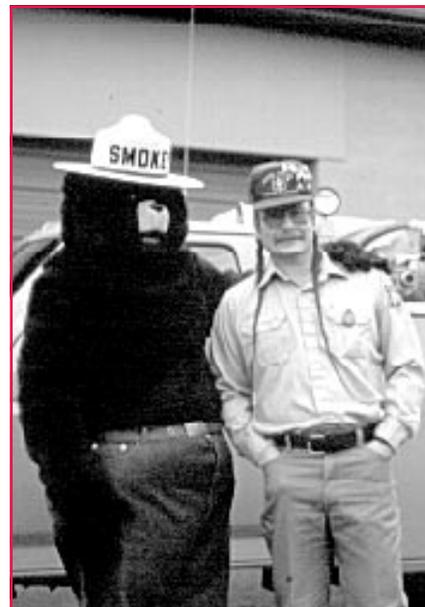
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hard time with them. Of course, there is no Smokey poster or commercial that says “All fire is bad.” I know, I looked. There is no record of Smokey asserting “Fire is not a part of the ecosystem.”

Smokey has never been utilized to train firefighters or fire managers to suppress all fires indiscriminately. Smokey does not now—nor has he ever—forbidden or condemned the USDA Forest Service from using fire as an ecosystem management tool.

Smokey is not a symbol to transmit messages from forestry professional to forestry professional. Smokey is a symbol to civilians, forest visitors, and especially to children; he warns them of the dangers of carelessly caused wildfires. Simply that—Smokey is aimed at civilians!

Do the civilian visitors to your forest say to each other: “Look, Dear, acres and acres of deep logging slash! Let’s camp here! If our campfire gets away, it’s good for the ecosystem and will create a fine seed bed to encourage reforestation!”? The visitors to our forest in Washington State don’t.



*Jimmye Turner with the bear who has never forbidden the use of fire as an ecosystem management tool. Photo: Dan O’Brien, USDA Forest Service, Umatilla National Forest, Walla Walla, WA, 1996.*

Do civilian visitors to your forest search for areas needing fire to regenerate growth or to improve the habitat for wildland animals? Of course not! When civilians start forest fires, they tend to burn up picnic tables, shade trees, boat docks, tents, outhouses, and occasionally, other campers!

There are many people who would claim that burning down a picnic table or an outhouse is good for the ecosystem, but I’m not arguing that point. My argument is simply this: **Smokey’s message is not wrong.** Children should not play with fire (or matches, or lighters). People should be careful with fire, both in the forest and at home. Only people can prevent human-caused fires. It seems so simple. ■