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By Matt Skroch and Tom Swetnam

SPECIAL TO THE ARIZONA DAILY STAR

It is fire season, and our forests will burn this summer. There are choices to be made about our communities' relationships with fire. Old habits must be broken and we will benefit from increasing our tolerance for more fire and smoke — not less. We would like to propose why.

A common dilemma

In 1979, atop the pine-clad Rincon Mountains of Saguaro National Park, the first chapter of an important story began. At that time, the National Park Service first declared that some forest fires caused by natural lightning strikes would be allowed to burn without human intervention.

This policy was expanded in 1983, and soon the ponderosa pine forest in the Rincons began to look and behave differently than its Sky Island mountain neighbors.

Meanwhile in the nearby Santa Catalina Mountains, the Coronado National Forest understandably suppressed wildfires, while undertaking some small prescribed burns.

The divergence in management between the two mountains derives from a common dilemma in fire-prone landscapes populated by people. The inherent risks of large prescribed fires and the inconvenience of smoke discourages the very fire management prescriptions necessary to protect people, their homes and businesses.

Did You Know

The Sky Islands is a 70,000-square-mile region of southeastern Arizona, southwestern New Mexico and northwestern Mexico. It is a series of mountain ranges, including our own Santa Catalinas, that are separated by valleys of grassland or desert. According to the Sky Island Alliance, the "mountain 'islands,' forested ranges separated by vast expanses of desert and grassland plains, are among the most diverse ecosystems in the world because of their great topographic complexity and unique location at the meeting point of several major desert and forest biological provinces."

Source: Sky Island Alliance

Concurrently in more remote areas, such as the Rincons, ecologists and fire managers have successfully reduced fire risk and restored the forest with frequent and deliberate fires.

When a fire starts in the Rincons, chances are good that the same area has burned during the past two decades. With less fuel available, a new fire consumes mostly surface fuels through the understory of forests, leaving mature trees alive and well. This type of fire poses less risk to people and is better for the ecosystem.

This contrasts with the recent, high intensity crown fires in the Catalinas, which killed almost all overstory trees over more than 30 percent of the forest area, destroyed hundreds of homes and cost millions to put out.

To avoid these effects in the future, we need to work together to move all of our Sky Islands into the condition of the Rincon Mountains.

Choosing how to burn

The take-home message — our Sky Island forests will burn. However, we have the opportunity to choose how they burn. The risks of large-scale prescribed fires can be minimized with careful planning and implementation, especially in places like the Catalinas, where recent wildfires have reduced the fuel levels in many places.

Time is of the essence — fuels are accumulating again and this window of opportunity is closing. We can delay the inevitable and face the dire consequences exemplified by the Aspen or Rodeo-Chedeski fires, or we can begin to live with fire and smoke on a more frequent — but more tolerable — basis. Over time, the latter option will be better for our forests, safer for our communities and easier on the taxpayer.

Recently, the Coronado National Forest took a major step in the right direction and conducted the Agua Caliente

Prescribed Burn in Redington Pass. This proactive management decision burned about 11,000 acres of oak woodland and scrub choked with brush.

The intentional burn lasted four days, of which one day brought some smoke into the Tucson valley, raising concern among a number of East Side residents.

The burn was conducted during the pre-monsoon season, which generally mimics the natural timing of wildfires in the Sky Islands that our ecosystems have evolved with over millennia.

The Agua Caliente prescribed fire is a positive step in a long-term process needed to restore more frequent, less severe fires to the Sky Island region. As such, we will be challenged with tolerating more frequent smoke.

Large-scale collabortion

In exchange, a more natural fire regime will reduce the risk to public property and safety, improve wildlife habitat, and restore our forests' health.

We believe the trade-off is not one of convenient choice, but one of necessity.

Across southeastern Arizona, the Coronado National Forest and partners beyond its boundaries are collaborating to manage fire more safely, efficiently and on a larger scale. Under one such plan, called the Huachuca FireScape project, the Coronado National Forest, National Park Service, Fort Huachuca, The Nature Conservancy and other partners have the goal of restoring fire-dependent ecosystems while reducing the costs, resource damage, and threats to public and firefighter safety from future wildfires.

The FireScape project that includes University of Arizona scientists has been launched for the Santa Catalina Mountains and other places, such as the Nogales Ranger District and Galiuro Mountains.

We believe this large-scale, collaborative approach offers the best hope for sustainable co-existence of human communities and ecosystems on our Sky Islands.

Climate change and the regional drying trend occurring today will further emphasize the importance of our message. More fire is coming to our forests. If we are proactive in planning and implementing science-based restoration plans that recognize the utility of fighting fire with fire, we will be doing ourselves — and the ecosystem that sustains us — a great service.

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Source: Sky Island Alliance

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