

The Quest for Common Ground

Reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfires in Minnesota Forests... Opportunities and Challenges



Mark Jacobs
Retired Aitkin
County Land
Commissioner

Perspective from Ben Benoit, Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe - Division of Resource Management

When we talk about wildfire in northern Minnesota, the conversation often begins with what we are trying to prevent: a large, destructive fire that threatens homes, communities, forests and public safety. Those concerns are real. But there is another part of the conversation that deserves greater attention, the idea, fire belongs and has a place in this landscape.

For Indigenous people, fire is not simply a destructive force. It is one of the tools that has shaped our relationship with the land for generations. Traditional Ecological Knowledge teaches us to observe the landscape, understand its cycles and recognize that healthy forests are not necessarily forests untouched by disturbance. Fire can be part of a healthy forest.

That understanding is different from simply saying that we should let forests burn. Wildfire can be dangerous, and there are times when protecting people, homes and communities must be the priority, but there is a difference between recognizing the role of fire in a healthy ecosystem and viewing every fire as something that must be eliminated. Our responsibility should be to understand the landscape well enough to know when, where and how fire can be beneficial.

My name is Ben Benoit, I have worked for the majority of my career in Natural Resource management both for the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe and for the US Forest Service. I am a scientist by training and a citizen of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe residing just outside of my Reservation. I have learned from my elders and through my career that Traditional Ecological Knowledge is more than a collection of practices. It is a way of understanding relationships between people, plants, animals, water, weather, seasons and the land itself. This kind of knowledge is place-based and comes from watching the same landscape over generations and paying attention to what changes and what remains consistent. Indigenous people have long relied on seasonal indicators to know when to hunt, gather, plant and harvest. We watch the plants, the animals, the weather and other changes around us and pass that knowledge along so our communities and youth understand when to harvest Manoomin or pass along the best practices that we have learned to care for the land that in turn will care for us.

That same observation can be applied to wildland fire. We can see how a forest responds to fire, what grows afterward, where regeneration occurs, how wildlife uses the landscape and which plants return. We can observe what happens when fire is absent for long periods of time and compare that with areas where fire has played a role. The land is constantly giving us information but are we paying attention? Removing fire from the forest for the last 100+ years has changed the nature of our forests. Routine fire opens up stands to the sun and favors plants that are fire adapted. Removing fire from the forest, mesophication, is a cycle that closes the canopy, retains more moisture and favors fire-sensitive plant species.

One of the most important lessons from Traditional Ecological Knowledge is that the goal is not necessarily to preserve the forest exactly as it is today or go back to what it was. Rather, the goal is to maintain a healthy relationship between the forest, the plants, the animals and the people who depend upon it. Fire can help create the conditions necessary for forest regeneration. It can create or improve habitat for medicinal plants and food sources. It can open areas of the forest and create different ages and structures within the landscape. It can push back mesophication cycles that are coming to dominate the pine forest that is dependent on routine fire to persist. Differences within the forest matter and it does not have to look the same everywhere to be healthy. A landscape made up of different forest conditions provides greater ecological diversity and resilience. In fact, modern logging techniques are shifting towards mimicking blow-down or wildland fire events that create variable structure within the forest.

Additionally, fire can also help address one of the concerns we increasingly face today: the risk of catastrophic wildfire. When fire is excluded from a landscape for generations, vegetation and fuels can accumulate. Eventually, when fire does occur under the wrong conditions, it can burn with an intensity that is difficult to control.

— see **BEHOIT PERSPECTIVE** page 7

Perspective from Teresa Floberg, Project Director - Fire Adapted Communities/Firewise Dovetail Partners, Inc.

There are many topics around "risk" when talking about wildfires. We can reduce the risk to our homes by engaging in Firewise best practices. We can educate our visitors and residents on fire danger to reduce the risk of human-caused fires. We can plan and prepare as communities to manage risk during emergencies and evacuations.

This reflection focuses on the opportunities and challenges of reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfire. The key word here is "catastrophic." Minnesota's boreal forest is fire dependent; it has been shaped by fire for millennia and will continue to be for as long as it's a boreal forest. Fire is a critical part of this ecosystem. What is changing is that fires in Minnesota are increasing in both intensity and severity, destroying homes, damaging timber, and sometimes leaving behind a blacked moonscape in areas that will take years to regenerate.

So why have fires in Minnesota increased in intensity and severity? The simple answer is - there is too much fuel in the forest. Past forest management, fire suppression, insect infestations, wind events, and a changing climate have all contributed to this increase of flammable materials (hazardous fuel). Coupled with this increase of hazardous fuel is the growing development of homes and infrastructure in the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI). More and more communities have been, and will continue to be, impacted by catastrophic wildfires. The challenge of confronting this issue is that there are over 2-million acres of boreal forest in northern Minnesota. The flipside of that is that there are a lot of opportunities to collaborate over that landscape.

A complex problem like "catastrophic wildfire" is going to need several solutions, and there is wide consensus that solutions are needed. There just isn't consensus on what those solutions are. The key is collaboration. Consensus is not a critical component to collaboration, and there is consensus on the only thing that really matters - we have to do something. Many things in fact.

Expand forest product markets in our state through innovation and investment to utilize low-value timber and mill residuals (biomass, wood fiber products, sustainable aviation fuel, etc.).

Reintroduce fire to restore natural ecosystem cycles in our fire dependent forest.

Provide incentives for home hardening and creating defensible space around homes.

Increase funding for fuels reduction projects - removing dead and dying trees.

Establish fuel breaks along critical corridors and high value infrastructure.

Treat the forest as a landscape, not as a network of property boundaries.

This is not an exhaustive list. It's just the first things that come to mind while staying within a 500-word limit.

Instead of saying "no" to solutions you don't agree with, try "yes, and" instead. "Yes" can be said even while recognizing the constraints and conflicts of an idea, and the "and" paves the way to brainstorm next steps. There is common ground. We just have to find it...before it burns.

Perspective from Ray Higgins, Executive Vice President - Minnesota Timber Producers Assoc.

Earlier this year, Minnesotans saw our state's most active fire season in our lifetimes, with more than 62,000 acres burned, and another 9,000 acres burned across the border in Ontario. As a result, more than 8,000 people were evacuated, structures were lost, and it's safe to say, millions of dollars were spent fighting the fires. Tragically, one firefighter lost his life.

It's no coincidence that these fires burned in remote areas of the state—including the BWCAW—where forest management, including timber harvest, is limited.

I'm not advocating for timber harvest in the BWCAW or other protected areas of our state. As Minnesotans, we cherish the recreational opportunities provided by these beloved forests.

But it is also true that overgrown forests are more susceptible to wildfires than ones that are carefully managed and harvested.

Just as humans have life spans, so do trees. Over-mature trees are more susceptible to insects, disease, blowdown, and yes, wildfire, than trees in forests that are carefully managed and harvested.

When a wildfire does occur, the top layers of soil are frequently burned, reducing organic matter and removing nutrients. Natural regeneration will occur within five-to-10 years, but tree spacing will not allow for adequate sunlight to reach the forest floor once mature. This tight spacing makes the forest more susceptible to other threats such as blowdown, wildfire, insects, and disease.

Conversely, a harvested forest site will often have greater diversity and species richness in a shorter period of time than a site affected by fire, particularly in areas where fire was intense.

When a site is harvested, it is naturally regenerated, seeded or planted. This allows shrubs, grasses and other plant species to re-grow more quickly than where fire has occurred. Plus, trees that are removed from the site are turned into forest products we use every day, boosting our rural economy.

In Minnesota, we're blessed with healthy forests. Our state is a national leader in acres of forestland certified as sustainable by third party groups like the Forest Stewardship Council and the Sustainable Forestry Initiative. Federal data shows we have more trees than fifty years ago, more big trees—nineteen inches or greater in diameter—and more acres of forest than fifty years ago. This means Minnesotans will be able to enjoy the forest activities we all love—like hiking, camping, fishing, hunting, berry-picking, bird-watching, cross-country skiing, and many more—for generations to come.

Our forests do face challenges. Reduced harvest and management in our state makes wildfires more common. This could be mitigated by more markets—like a paper-mill, sawmill, or biorefinery—for harvested timber and biomass.

Our state's loggers who do this important forest management work are also faced with rising costs, including exorbitant prices for diesel.

The forest products industry is the backbone of a strong rural economy in our state. More than 300 Minnesota communities rely on logging and forest management, not only for jobs and the products we make, but also for the healthy forests we all enjoy.

The Whole Story

I'm not sure how your conversations go, but when I'm chatting with friends and family, the topic can change several times in the course of a few minutes. A discussion about the housing market can turn into landscaping preferences, then this year's tomato yields, and somehow end with a restaurant recommendation. Many trains of thought never fully reach their destination because we keep jumping from one topic to the next.

Recently, during one of those conversations, someone made a passing reference to the movie "Monster," starring Charlize Theron. I've never seen the movie, but I knew the general premise. A woman in Florida became a serial killer, killing men she met while working as a prostitute. A joke was made, a few comments were exchanged, and we moved on to the next topic.

Later that week, I had a rare opportunity to be home alone and decided to watch a television show. As I was flipping through the options, I came across a documentary about Aileen Wuornos, the woman the movie was based on. Having just heard her name a few days earlier, I thought, why not?

I was in elementary school when her story was in the news, so I knew nothing about it at the time. I didn't really know anything about her until years later, when "Monster" came out. She had gone on a killing spree and killed men who were seeking prostitutes. I didn't know much about the circumstances surrounding the killings. I just knew that she was a scary, violent person who had done terrible things.

It never occurred to me that she had friends. Or people who cared about her. Or that there were pieces of her life that might make her more complicated than the version I had created in my head.

The documentary didn't turn me into a fan of Aileen. It wasn't one of those documentaries that completely flips the story on its head and makes you question everything you thought you knew. It simply gave me more information. And with more information, I realized how much of my original opinion had been based on very little information at all.

The media wanted a villain, and a complicated human being doesn't always make a good villain. Details that made her human or relatable weren't necessarily the details that made the biggest headlines.

And this was the 1990s. We didn't have social media or the ability to immediately search for ten different versions of a story. Most of us got our information from newspapers and

shows like Dateline. If something wasn't included in the story being told, we probably didn't know it was missing.

That got me thinking about how often I do this with people who aren't strangers on television. How often have I heard something about someone and quietly filled in the rest of the story myself?

I've met people who speak with incredible confidence about something, as if they were standing in the room when it happened. Later, I find out their information was second-hand. Some of it was speculation. Yet by the time the story reaches me, it has become fact.

Maybe there is some comfort in having people neatly categorized. Mean. Selfish. Lazy. Difficult. Unreliable. It's much easier to decide that someone is a certain kind of person than it is to leave room for the possibility that they are a complicated human being who sometimes does things we don't understand.

Someone doesn't smile at us, and we decide they're unfriendly. Someone doesn't respond the way we expected, and we decide they don't care. Someone makes a mistake, and suddenly that mistake becomes part of their identity. How often am I looking at one paragraph of someone's story and acting like I've read the whole book?

I know I'm getting better at this. I'm more likely now to pause and wonder what else might be going on before deciding I know the whole story. But watching this documentary also made me think about the people from my past. There are people I haven't seen in years whose stories I think I've already figured out. Maybe I'm still carrying around a version of them that was based on someone else's story, or on one interaction I had with them years ago.

Maybe it's time to go back through the archives a little. That doesn't mean everyone gets a second chance, or that every person I've had a bad experience with was secretly misunderstood. Sometimes people really are difficult. But maybe that teacher in high school wasn't quite as terrible as everyone made them out to be. Maybe I just never had the whole story.

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That may mean using prescribed fire where it is appropriate as well as managing vegetation and fuels. Or both of these in conjunction as we plan the future of the forest.

To understand how to use fire we need to consider an important distinction between fire as an ecological process and catastrophic wildfire. We should be looking for ways to reduce the conditions that allow a wildfire to become catastrophic while also recognizing that periodic disturbance is part of a functioning forest ecosystem. When we developed the Winnie Sand project, a Forest Service led project that manages a large portion of land on the eastern side of the Leech Lake Reservation, the plans called for a considerable amount of prescribed fire. However, the introduction of fire onto a landscape that hasn't seen fires often in several generations, is not something you do overnight, it was 5th or 6th on the list of items we needed to consider. In most stands prior to the reintroduction of fire as an ecological tool, we were examining the forest and understanding the ecological benefit of introducing fire. Plans involved thinning the forest through one or two logging entries to open the canopy and let the heat escape to not kill the trees during the burn, removing fuels from the site to keep the flame length lower and prevent fire from reaching the tree canopy and ensuring control lines were identified and in place to hold the fire line to prevent it from spreading outside of the areas it was intended. Because fire has been excluded for so long as a management tool the conditions need to be examined before lighting a match so it is not done haphazardly.

At the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, we are paying attention. Our staff work with partners at the Chippewa National Forest to ask questions about the landscape, understand fire history on the forest and the ecological

benefits it provides and are taking steps to ensure we have a say in how the forest within our Reservation will be managed. What will this forest look like in 20 years? What will it provide for the next generation? Will medicinal plants still be available? Will wildlife have the habitat it needs? Will young trees be able to regenerate? Will the forest be resilient when drought, insects, disease or wildfire arrive? Are we acting in alignment with our values and creating balance? Is the risk of prescribed fire worth it?

For too long, the public conversation about wildfire has often been framed as a choice between letting forests burn and putting every fire out. I believe we can expand that conversation.

We can recognize that wildfire can be dangerous and destructive while also recognizing that fire has an ecological role. We can, at the same time, protect communities while working to restore healthier forest conditions. We can use modern science while respecting knowledge that has been carried by Indigenous people for generations and we can make decisions based not only on what the forest looks like today, but on what we want the landscape to provide for the generations that come after us.

Fire has been part of northern Minnesota's forests for a very long time. The question before us is not whether fire belongs on the landscape.

It does.

The question is whether we are willing to learn how to live with it, understand it and use that knowledge to create healthier forests and safer communities. That requires us to listen to the land. And sometimes, the land has been telling us the answer for a very long time

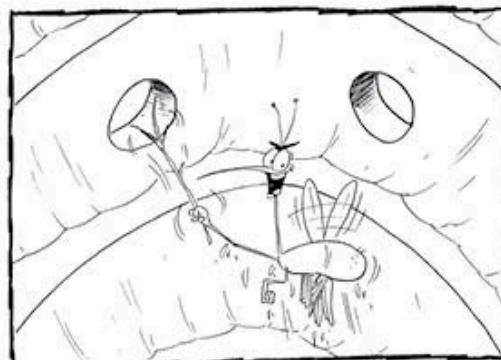
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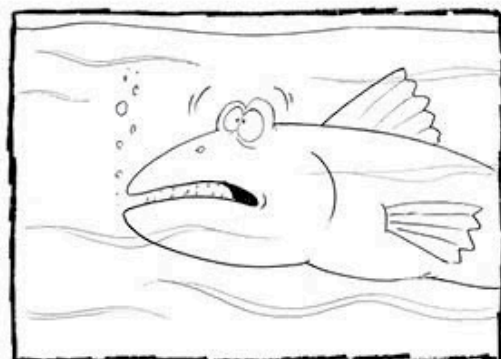
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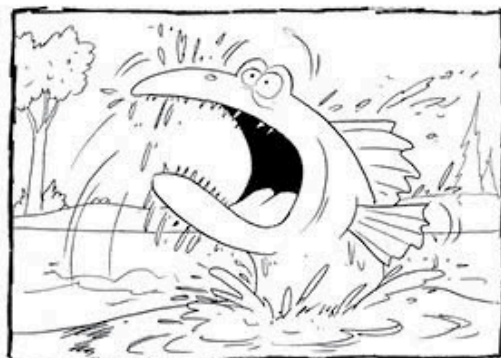
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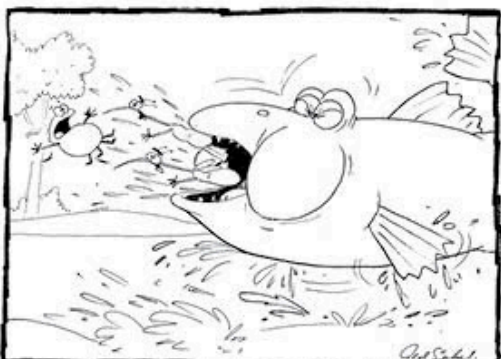
"Get ready boys, tickle tickle!"



"HUH?"



"AAAAAAHHH!"



"CHOOO000! EEEEEAAAAAHHH!"