

SKETCHES

THE SAN DIEGO AUDUBON SOCIETY

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Photo by Richard Halsey, The California Chaparral Institute



This large boulder at San Diego Audubon's Silverwood Sanctuary was exposed after the surrounding vegetation was burned away by the 2003 Cedar fire. The rock's surface contains a natural formation of a sunrise image. The rock sunrise was considered sacred by Silverwood's indigenous peoples, the Kumeyaay.

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President's Message

In the 1970s, when I was a graduate student and helping with the very first Earth Day, a stimulating book, *The Population Bomb*, was written by Dr. Paul Ehrlich, a biology professor at Stanford. The book was published in 1968, when the world population was 3.5 billion people (there were just over 200 million in the U.S.). Mass starvation was predicted within only a few years, at most within a decade. The author also raised the issues of environmental deterioration, pollution, pesticides and habitat and wild nature lost to make way for "development." Dr. Ehrlich emphasized the risk of unstable ecosystems that have been grossly simplified by human activity, resulting in a loss of biodiversity. He briefly noted the potential of a "greenhouse effect" and the possibility of climate change.

A recent article by Dr. Ehrlich, published in *The Reporter* 40 years later, acknowledges that, while mass world-wide famine has not occurred and huge population increases in developed countries have been less than he predicted, food shortages have occurred in many parts of the world and uncontrolled population increases in the undeveloped countries have continued unabated.

While there have been tremendous advances in pollution control, the degradation of the environment goes on. Modernizing societies are competing more and more for resources such as oil. Scarcity drives further exploitation. The stress on our ecological and life support systems continues.

Today, the world population is more than 6.7 billion. The U.S. population is more than 300 million. The National Center for Health Statistics reports that 4,315,000 children were born in the U.S. in 2007, more births than even at the peak of the baby boom in 1957. We make progress with technological solutions to specific problems, but the world's total population still increases. China, with the most stringent population controls on the planet, continues to increase its population.

At SDAS we strive to educate about the beauty of and the importance of nature. We work to preserve habitat, and on redevelopment projects to help species to survive. We must not forget that we humans by our activities, and by our very numbers, are the prime factor in our environmental crisis.

—Peter Thomas



FIRE AND

By Richard W. Halsey
California Chaparral Institute

When we are afraid, fear takes up all the room. Over the past five years, Southern Californians have experienced fear unlike anything in recent memory. Two catastrophic firestorms have killed 34 people, destroyed 5,827 homes, and dramatically altered our attitudes about the natural environment. The loss has been personal for many of us, including myself. While our own home survived the flames, many of our neighbors were not as fortunate. Five of my firefighting colleagues were killed in the 2006 Esperanza fire.

How do we respond? Understandably, fear is a pervasive feeling, but we must be careful. The fear the firestorms have created can prevent us from considering thoughtful solutions long after the smoke has cleared. Decisions based on fear can create more problems than the original challenge.

When we feel threatened, we usually respond by labeling the immediate source of the threat as an outsider, an enemy, rather than part of the world we have created. We externalize the conflict as "us vs. them"; a useful approach to rally the troops, but one that can be exploited by those who wish to profit from it. With banners waving and drums beating, we strike to vanquish the enemy outside ourselves, failing to realize we are often shooting at our own reflection.

While there are certainly times when life must defend itself, our instinctual response to threats that has been shaped over millions of years of evolution no longer serves us well. Our capacity to respond can now overwhelm the initial threat to such a degree that we end up destroying what we should have been protecting. In our response to wildfire, we may find ourselves confronting this very situation over the next few years. Our region's native shrubland ecosystems may end up being converted to non-native weed lots. This is why it is critical for all of us to make an effort to help each other, our families, neighbors, and government leaders, to truly understand fire and the natural environment in which we live.

Wildfire has now caused many to see nature as the enemy. Calls to eliminate habitat preserves, either by clearing, grinding, or landscape-scale prescribed burning, are heard repeatedly in the media. The San Diego Board of Supervisors is currently considering plans that would call for the removal of native vegetation on public lands

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by fire or other means. Those who defend the natural environment are vilified and labeled as extremists who care more about plants and wild animals than human beings. Comments posted at the end of web-based news articles about fire or environmental protection are dominated by personal attacks and irrational statements aimed at anyone who dares speak up for nature. Change the names and the rhetoric is the same as that heard during most human conflicts; us vs. them.

It's time to reject the old patterns of behavior and take advantage of the last several thousand years of intellectual and spiritual evolution. We can be better than our primitive past allows if we remember we are part of nature, fully accept others for who they are, and look within rather than outward to solve whatever challenges we face.

In this way, we no longer see fire and nature as foreign, but rather as integral parts of our lives. We adapt to the environment rather than attempting to force it to adapt to us. And we realize that to effectively change anything, we must see ourselves as part of the solution rather than innocent bystanders.

Where do we begin? We can start by approaching fire risk reduction "from our homes out" rather than "from the wildland in." This means rejecting the default response to wildfire risk (unnecessarily stripping the surrounding, natural landscape) and instead doing all we can to first make our homes fire resistant. Modifying vegetation is an important part of the total fire risk reduction equation, but it is by no means the only component - a concept that is unfortunately misunderstood by most. Homes typically burn because embers have landed on flammable surfaces or have entered the home through vents, windows, or other openings, not because of direct flame contact from burning native vegetation.

Another way to incorporate nature and fire into our world view is to take the necessary time to understand

both. Much of what is considered conventional wisdom about wildland fire in Southern California is incorrect. Past fire suppression has not led to unnatural levels of vegetation in shrubland ecosystems, chaparral and coastal sage scrub do not "need" to burn to remain healthy, and neither ecosystem is adapted to fire in the way most people think. All ecosystems are sensitive to particular fire patterns. Change the patterns and native shrublands can be destroyed, replaced by flammable, non-native weeds. For example, chaparral can be seriously compromised or eliminated if fire returns more than once or twice within a 15-20 year period.

Ultimately the philosophy that underlies this inclusive approach to solving problems is a reverence for life, a world view best articulated by Albert Schweitzer nearly a century ago. To protect and preserve life, including all the plants and animals we share the world with, is good. To destroy life is evil. Obviously some life will be destroyed to sustain another, but all our actions should be measured against this one basic principle, a reverence for life. In this way, all decisions that may result in the loss of any life are understood for the tragedy that they are and should be mitigated to the best of our ability. Bulldozing acres of chaparral instead of replacing a wooden roof is indefensible.

For those of us who embrace the reverence of life as a guiding principle, it is our responsibility to share it with others. Not in a pedantic or judging way, but one emphasizing understanding and acceptance. People listen when they are valued for who they are, because in the end change depends on successful human relationships.

The sadness and loss caused by wildfires in California over the past five years can heal if we chose to see them as an opportunity to build a better understanding of each other as well as nature.

SDAS tackles fuel management to preserve open space and protect local wildlife

The City of San Diego's Brush Management program has recently experienced exponential growth, due in part to a multi-million dollar grant from FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency. This budget increase will allow the City to conduct brush management activities on almost 700 acres of open space in fiscal year 2008-2009. This is a substantial increase in brush management activities—up from only 70 acres two years ago. It is feared that current City brush management practices will result in the loss of hundreds of acres of native chaparral and coastal sage scrub wildlife habitat. While a certain amount of fuel reduction is certainly required to reduce fire risk within the city, previous brush management implementation by the City has resulted in type conversion from slow-growing, deep rooted coastal sage

scrub vegetation to highly flammable, shallowly rooted, weedy invasive vegetation. This previous experience, coupled with the rate at which this program is progressing and its ability to effect significant change on our local landscape, has left many residents and organizations concerned about the possible long-term ramifications of these actions.

The San Diego Audubon Society is addressing this important conservation challenge by collaborating with other organizations in a 'Fuel Management Working Group' with the mission of "advocating for altering the City of San Diego's brush management ordinances, bulletins, policies, and implementation practices in order to increase public safety, reduce fire risk, and minimize

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