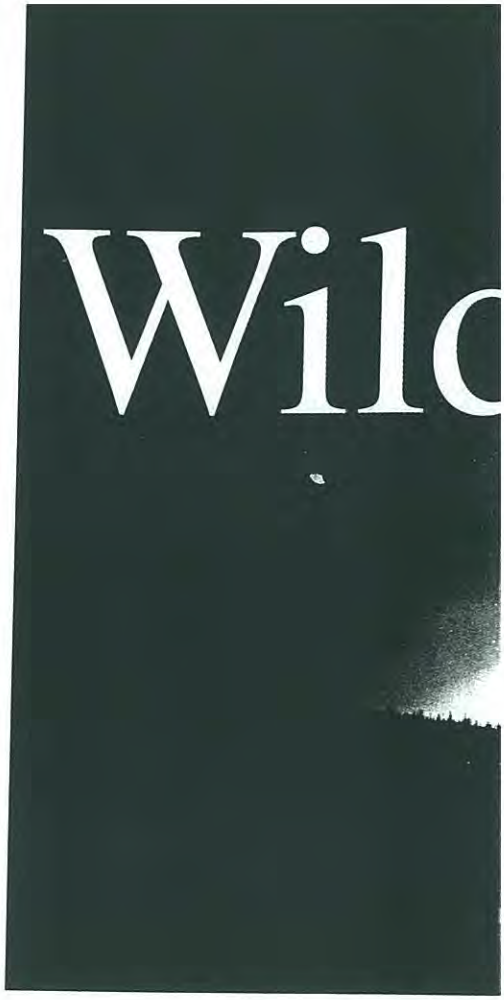
Fire | Policy | Communication

The Politics of Wild



Land managers and ecologists generally agree that the 1988 fires in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem were an ecologically important part of a natural disturbance pattern and that little could have been done to stop them. For policymakers, however, the fires were a major public relations failure. Land managers and ecologists need to understand how citizens' and politicians' view of wildfire as a crisis can undermine the stability of natural resource agencies, then find ways to build support for natural fire.

By Pamela Lichtman

Fire is a favorite subject of debate and investigation in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, which comprises Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks plus seven adjacent national forests and other federal, state, and private lands in Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho (Clark and Minta 1994). Did fire policy fail in 1988? Did it irreparably damage our natural heritage and destroy commodities? Interest in these questions continues because of the dynamic debate over ecosystem management, but it surges whenever wildfires rage in the West.

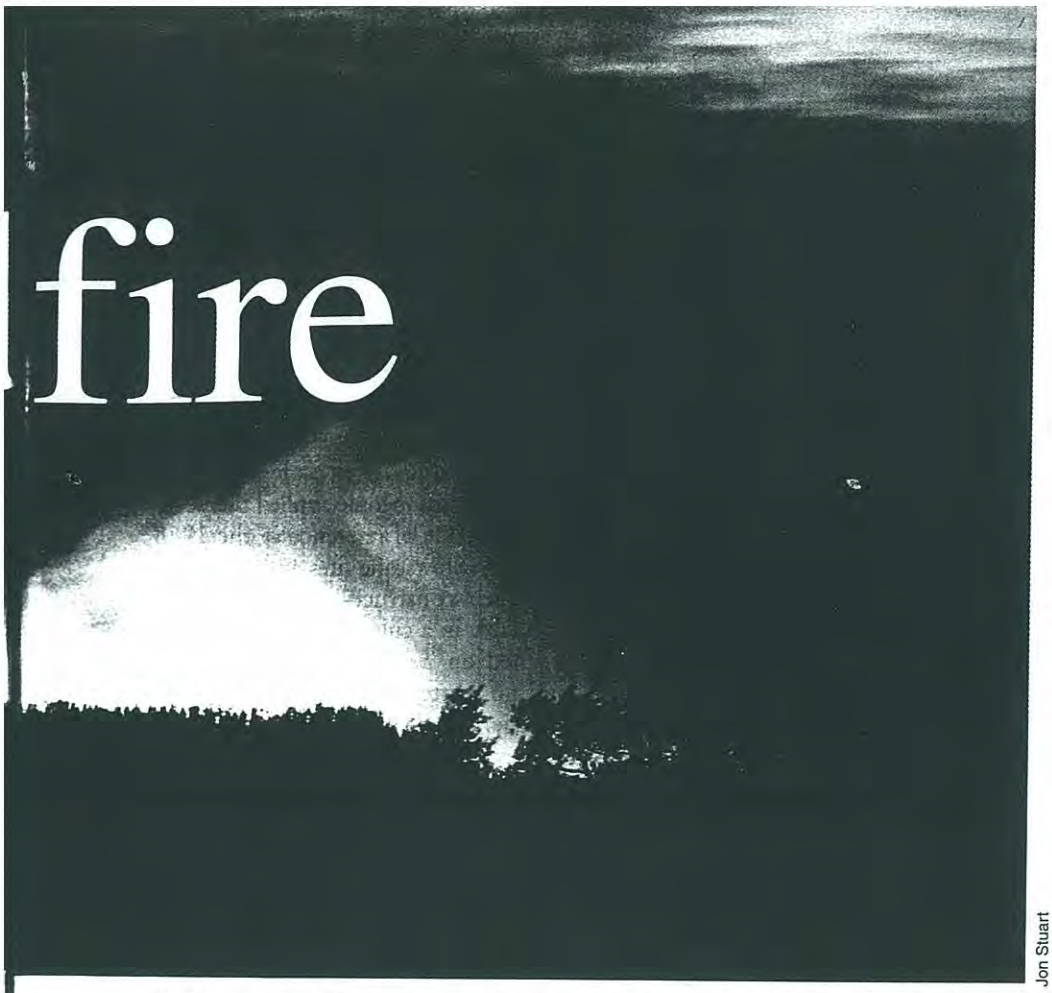
The fires of 1988 may have been inevitable, judging from ecological evidence about fire return intervals in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (Romme and Despain 1989). The political conflagration of 1988, however, could have been averted. Developing a consistent and stable set of policies for land management into the next century will require broad public support for ecosystem-based initiatives and a realistic appreciation of the complexities of land management in a political context. It is not sufficient to consider just the technological and ecological dimensions of fire in natural landscapes. To build support for their programs, land managers and decisionmakers need to understand how natural fire is perceived by citizens and then expand the idea of policy to include "packaging."

Antifire Sentiment

The 1988 Yellowstone fires officially began in late May with a lightning strike. The small blaze quickly died out, as many ignitions do under normal conditions. Others did not, however. Although as of mid-July only 8,600 acres had burned, the National Park Service started suppressing all new natural fires. Whether the decision had any effect has been a source of debate, given that the largest fires and the majority of acres burned after mid-July, when severely dry conditions and gale-force winds provided ideal conditions for large wildfires. Cooler temperatures and early September snows eventually brought the fire season to an end. All told, approximately 995,000 acres, or 45 percent of Yellowstone Park, burned in 1988, and roughly another 590,000 acres in surrounding national forests was somehow affected by the fires.

When the smoke cleared, many citizens and elected officials branded the government's fire policy a failure and predicted grave results (Whipple 1993). Some people said the fires would "keep people away by the droves for a long time to come," and they lamented "the loss of wildlife and beauty...[and] economic potential" (Meyers 1988).

The fire policy, however, has been largely vindicated. Both scientific research and casual observations have shown that the actual effects of the 1988 fires differ greatly from what was expected. Wildlife abounds, trees grow, and familiar historic buildings like Old Faithful Inn still stand. Studies of the



Jon Stuart

Lessons from Yellowstone

The Beaver Creek Fire was part of the nearly one million acres that burned in Yellowstone National Park in 1988. The intensity of such conflagrations was seemingly matched by the post-fire-season analyses proffered by armchair rangers and elected officials who criticized federal land managers for permitting the economic and ecological potential of the park to suffer such alleged damage.

effects of landscape-level disturbances in Yellowstone (Turner et al. 1994) have demonstrated that Yellowstone National Park was not "destroyed." Economic studies have shown that the fires did not impose excessive hardships on the region's human communities and may even have promoted growth in tourism by giving the park so much nationwide publicity (Snepenger et al. 1993).

The National Park Service and other land management agencies consider that vindication complete. The agencies withstood threats and invective from politicians, journalists, and armchair rangers, and the Park Service has been proven right about the effects on ecosystem components: grizzlies and geysers survived, elk and trees proliferated. Researchers' harrowing trip through the bottomlands of public opinion, followed by exoneration on scientific grounds, represents a major victory for the agencies. Scientists and land managers have mounted extensive campaigns—writing articles for general-interest media and scientific journals, producing videos, and convening conferences—to explain to citizens that the 1988 fires were a value-neutral ecosystem process. Yet in 1994, when wildfires burned in the western United States and provoked another massive fire-fighting effort, we saw once again the conflicting ways in which natural fire is depicted, interpreted, and understood in the United States.

Negative perceptions were common soon after the 1988 fires. Former Yellowstone Superintendent Bob Barbee and writer Paul Schullery (1989) observed that many descriptions of the postfire landscape relied on the metaphor of rebirth to suggest that the damage was not so bad after all. "Rebirth implies death," they noted, and in our culture, "death is evil. In the rhetoric of rebirth, Yellowstone has been killed by fires that must, by implication, have been evil, too." If the fires were evil, in the popular mind, then there should have been a policy to stop them. If the policy did not stop the fires, then it failed. By this logic, the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem is now in a period of "rebirth" despite fire policies, not because of them. This message is one that people understand.

Examples of that outlook are numerous. In 1988 a *New York Times* editorial said there was "no reason to think this policy is in error" but offered tepid reassurance: "Yellowstone may take years to grow back exactly as it was, but even as soon as next spring the change may not seem so terrible" (NYT 1988). This was hardly an endorsement of natural fire policy. In 1993 several area newspapers, including the *Jackson Hole News*, the *Billings Gazette*, and the *Casper Star-Tribune*, ran five-year retrospective articles on the 1988 fires. Writers expressed the sentiment that the fires were somebody's fault (Bellinghausen 1993; Thuermer 1993) and that Nature was being "reborn" in the aftermath of the fire.

Some sources were less equivocal about the meaning of the fires. *Country Living* magazine (1994) heralded

the planting of 482,008 trees "in our bid to reforest acreage destroyed in the Greater Yellowstone area during the fires of '88." Readers could pitch in by donating $15 to the reforestation fund (the actual planting sites were not specified). Other sources overtly indicted fire policy. A Jackson Hole businessman said,

> It's very shocking to see the degree of damage that was done... History has proved it was complete mismanagement. It was a tragedy and it could have been avoided...they've destroyed one of the greatest parks in North America (Thuermer 1993).

Even a former regional forester for the USDA Forest Service, defending clearcutting policies on the Targhee National Forest, implied that 1988 represented a policy failure. John Mumma told the *Jackson Hole Guide,*

> I wasn't in favor of the Targhee's aggressive cutting.... But when I think about an alternative, I scratch my head. If the Forest Service had done nothing, the trees would have burned like parts of Yellowstone in 1988 (Welch 1993).

The implication is clear: incorrect policies doomed Yellowstone to burn, while proper management spared the Targhee. Different management strategies have different tradeoffs, though: hunting on the Targhee has been drastically curtailed because of lack of elk habitat, and the Targhee is now legally mandated to restore grizzly bear habitat (Welch 1994).

It is hard to judge just how average citizens now view the 1988 fires. Visitors to Yellowstone and other areas of the ecosystem probably get the message that the national park was not destroyed and that interesting things are happening on the ground as a result of the fires. But do they believe that these outcomes were in spite of fire policies, that the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem is resilient in the face of "disasters," or that the fires simply were not as damaging as reported? If one of these reasons explains an average citizen's reasoning, then he or she may still see the 1988 fires as a policy failure.

What, then, did reviews of fire policy, research on fire impacts, and other responses to the firestorm of criticism accomplish? The federal reviews of fire policy focused on fire management: forecasting, interagency coordination, and appropriate refinements of decision criteria (Fire Policy Management Review Team 1989; Clark and Minta 1994). The major conferences on fire policy since 1988 have focused on ecological effects. Social scientists and economists have studied the economic impacts in areas adjacent to Yellowstone, and other analysts have looked at media coverage. Each of these inquiries is important and adds to our knowledge about fires and their effects on landscapes and cultures. The vindication of the Greater Yellowstone fire policy, however, has occurred largely within academic and government communities. An understanding of the ecological function of wildfires still eludes the general public.

Courtesy of Bridger-Teton National Forest

Forest regeneration was well established six years after a 1985 burn in Grand Teton National Park; fire policy, however, remains subject to political whims.

Political Feedback

The public's response to the 1988 fires was not to an ecological event but to the "construct" of an ecological event. In other words, people applied their customary frame of reference to the 1988 Greater Yellowstone fires and saw a crisis. Their construct—however understandable in a culture where people are weaned on *Bambi* and Smokey Bear, and no matter how unfounded it may be scientifically—has had real consequences for fire policy. It has also affected natural resource policy in general.

The most obvious consequence was the massive effort expended to fight the Yellowstone fires. Walt Thomascak, a Forest Service fire specialist (quoted in Wuerthner 1989, p. 50), offered this assessment of the costly suppression effort:

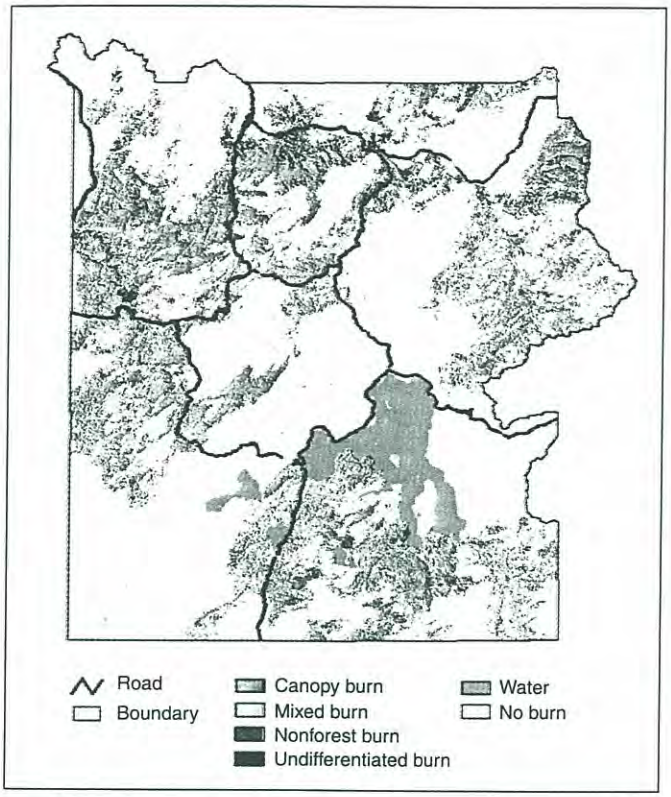
> When conditions get as bad as it was in the summer of 1988, you're wasting your money trying to suppress fires. But the public would never accept the fact that any federal agency merely stood around and watched a forest as it was consumed by flames, so the federal agencies have to put on a good show.

The firefighting effort was largely driven by public outcry from those who saw a policy failure. Although firefighters saved Old Faithful Inn, suppression in most cases was ineffective because of extreme fire behavior. For example, a human-lit backfire nearly destroyed Cooke City, Montana.

The agencies conducted a number of policy reviews after the 1988 fire season. Some resulted in minor adjustments, but none led to any substantive changes in fire policy. While the natural fire policy remained intact in principle, however, the impacts of political feedback may have altered the policy in

practice. John Varley, chief of research at Yellowstone National Park (quoted in Wuerthner 1989, p. 43), summarized these impacts:

> If we had to do it over again? Yes, I think we would do it differently. We would stomp on every single fire. Not because of the supposed "damage" done by fires, but because of the real damage done to people. Each of us has scar tissue on us that will last our lives. When I look at what people here had to endure in terms of public ridicule, and abuse from Congressmen, people in local communities, and the media people, who repeatedly attacked our integrity, intelligence, and professional ability—no, I don't think I or anyone else here would want to go through that again.



Ground conditions in Yellowstone National Park after the 1988 fire season.

Knight (1989, p. 99) also saw political consequences: "If change in the policy does occur, the reason will probably be adverse public opinion rather than adverse ecological effects." Schullery (1989, p. 53) expressed concern about the possible outcome of the reviews:

> A common thread in the current dialogues is the fear that while natural fire may be respected in principle, it will be eliminated in fact. It is easy to imagine that the political process may create a policy that in all respects is a model of approval—that expresses all the affirmative sentiments about the importance of allowing fire to play its natural role in the dynamic processes of the national parks—but that is so restrictive in its "circuit breakers" that in fact no fire of any useful size could ever occur.

Negative public perceptions also affected the way people perceived resource managers. If one believes that the 1988 fires were a policy failure, then one's trust in the land management agencies was betrayed. Although many who expressed a loss of trust in the agencies were perennial opponents of the federal bureaucracies, others were not. Neither group should be dismissed, since their opinion has ramifications for land management agencies' ability to function.

During and immediately after the 1988 fires, there was a spate of denunciations of the agencies. One Montanan wrote, "I suspect there has been widespread negligence by federal, state, and county officials, with the citizens of Montana the victims" (Wheeler 1988). The commissioners of Park County, Wyoming, issued a resolution that "[t]he outright lies that were told to the public were unnecessary. It lost the public's confidence and damaged the agencies' credibility" (quoted in Oudin 1989). And the town council of Dubois, Wyoming, passed a similar resolution that chastised the Forest Service and the National Park Service for their "irresponsible attitude toward the public needs, and the future of this portion of Wyoming" (Dubois Frontier 1988). Charges of hubris, character flaws, collusion with special interests, and a host of other accusations about the land management agencies were broadcast to the public.

Although those views represent the extremes of antifire (and antiagency) sentiment, the rhetoric had real impact. The administrators of Yellowstone National Park felt hampered in their ability to move ahead with management initiatives. John Varley (quoted in Williams 1989, p. 84) commented on the damage that the fire season had done to wolf recovery plans for Yellowstone:

> I think wolf reintroduction has been set back in a major way.... The credibility of the agency has taken such a nosedive that our going out and saying, "Here's our program, trust us," isn't going to fly.

The outcry indicated that opposition to ecosystem management could quickly mobilize in the event of another fire or comparable management issue. Sanctions would not necessarily be formal, as in legislation or firings; retribution could come as denunciations in the press, budget cuts, or resistance to new programs.

Continual opposition and political sanctions may eventually condition the agencies to avoid certain activities and adopt "routinized rather than adaptive behavior" (Wilson 1989, p. 110). An aversion to risk may take root. If giving priority to ecosystem integrity becomes associated with negative consequences, then as a matter of survival, agency managers will treat those values as risky. Rather than engaging in the experimental, adaptive behavior that ecosystem management requires (Lee 1993; Clark and Minta 1994), managers may respond with rigid procedures designed more to avoid retribution than to conserve natural resources.

We already see a pervasive lack of faith in government to deliver goods and services—in areas like health care, education, and public safety. Brewer and deLeon (1983, p. 4) note that "profound social implications can occur as disillusionment with the government, its processes, and its general ability to serve the public good spreads." Such disillusionment is the cumulative effect of government's perceived shortcomings and citizens'

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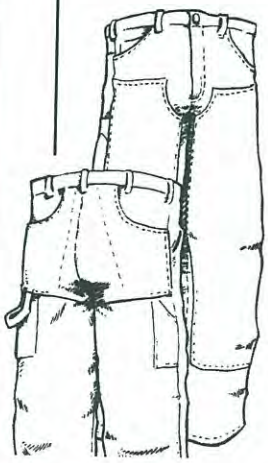

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unmet expectations—like the "failure" of the agencies to suppress the fires and "save" Yellowstone—and it undermines the long-term stability of the federal land-management agencies.

Improving Fire Policy

What options are available for fostering more accurate perceptions and "constructs" of reality on the part of citizens, scientists, and policymakers? We must start by restoring public confidence in federal land management agencies, and then we need to develop processes that will allow for genuine public dialogue about the issues.

A realistic view of fire policy must acknowledge that clear rules for every conceivable eventuality are not feasible. An honest appraisal of how much control humans have over wildfires must be communicated to the public. And the ecological objectives of a natural fire policy should be persuasively presented to resource constituencies and policymakers.

There are a number of models for facilitating constructive involvement of diverse publics. Alternative dispute resolution is one possible model. The Forest Service's wilderness management program in the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex is another model for participatory planning that includes input from citizens, land managers, and researchers. Political scientist James Fishkin has developed a deliberative opinion poll—a structured forum for introducing technical information into political deliberations of a small group of citizens. He finds that it "produces a voice of the people worth listening to" (quoted in Morin 1994).

Brunner (1994) recommends pilot projects that focus on tractable problems so that government can learn—and prove its ability—to resolve issues and serve the public good. Designing a coordinated set of policies to deal with spatially discrete problems like the management of the Greater Yellowstone would be one such pilot project. The strategy would involve a number of technical policies for issues like wildland fire, grizzly recovery, and geothermal protection. Most important, it would allow informed and competent citizens to help in policy formulation, decisionmaking, and implementation.

Selecting mechanisms for collective decisionmaking that best suit the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem is not an easy task. An important preliminary step is to identify active members of the policy community—such as elected officials, membership groups, stakeholders, and federal land management agencies—and collect some baseline information about their beliefs, attitudes, and values.

Efforts should begin with small-scale information-gathering projects around Yellowstone and throughout the policy community. Keeping deliberative processes small and decentralized maximizes citizens' chances to help develop policy. For example, it would be of little use to establish a citizens' panel for the whole Yellowstone ecosystem: the volume of site-specific issues would render the panel ineffective and unable to design policies for all areas, and the constituencies represented would be too numerous and diverse for a coherent voice to emerge. In any case, the practicalities of having citizens participate are daunting:

there are no highways that directly connect one side of this huge region with the other.

Conclusions

Fire policy in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem remains contentious. Fire is not "out there" or "on the ground" like grizzlies, elk, or trees. And when it does appear, people regard it as a crisis. Although the interrelated contingency plans that constitute current policy were scrutinized and refined in the wake of the 1988 fires, the possibility of error can never be eliminated from fire management.

Fire policy remains vulnerable to political repercussions. Just as a wildfire affects wildlife, timber, and tourism, fire policy has political impacts on large-carnivore policy, forestry, visitor management, and other issues central to Yellowstone; these impacts are inherent in the interrelated nature of ecosystem management.

No less than in 1988, the 1994 fire season provides a graphic illustration of how the political system responds to ecosystem processes. Although the ecological benefits of wildfires became clear following the 1988 Yellowstone fires, the wildfires of 1994 were still fought with equal vigor. In addition, the 1994 fire season prompted further consideration of how natural fires ought to be handled. For example, the 104th Congress approved legislation in 1995 that dramatically increased salvage logging and even exempted such sales from environmental review processes because of the putative risk of wildfires (Kenworthy 1995). Clearly, a negative construction of natural fire is driving or being used to justify this and other natural fire policies despite compelling studies clarifying the important ecological effects the 1988 fires had on Yellowstone.

Land managers, ecologists, and supporters of ecosystem conservation should understand that political feedback has real consequences for land management policy. The term politics itself embraces events and processes that involve human values and defy understanding, measurement, and explanation. Perhaps a fresh view of the things we pigeonhole as "politics" would lead to more effective participation in decisionmaking. Edelman (1988, p. 3) states that what makes political things political "is precisely that controversy over their meanings is not resolved. There is no politics respecting matters that evoke a consensus about the pertinent facts, their meanings, and the rational course of action." Our national parks and forests and natural fire do not evoke consensus, and thus they are political issues.

People who are involved in conservation of ecosystems cannot, then, dissociate themselves from politics. It is important to acknowledge and understand how land management policies and ecosystem processes are interpreted and reinterpreted by the participants in our political system—citizens, their elected leaders, and the media. Recognizing that events like the 1988 Yellowstone fires get interpreted as a crisis is a critical step in designing more effective participation by citizens.

The Yellowstone example reveals that the political repercussions on land managers and scientists are tangible and potentially damaging. Understanding how this process occurs and managing it will require not only effective communication with elected officials and public lands constituents nationwide but also mutual understanding and dialogue with people who are directly affected by fire, predation, and other ecosystem processes. Well-designed participatory structures incorporating the best available techniques from opinion polls, dispute resolution, and other specializations could increase effective participation by a region's residents.

Although it is important to be realistic and not expect to win near-unanimous support from residents for fire, wolves, grizzlies, and other controversies in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, such efforts could at least produce better-informed disagreements. We will never eliminate "multiple realities and relative standards" (Edelman 1988, p. 111), but progress in ecosystem management cannot come until we make these realities less disparate.

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Pamela Lichtman (e-mail: jhca@wyoming.com) is research associate, Northern Rockies Conservation Cooperative, Box 2705, Jackson, WY 83001.