

Wildfire perceptions largely positive after hiking in a burned landscape

March 26 2020, by Kat Kerlin



Students in a UC Davis fire ecology class walk along a burned ridge top of Stebbins Cold Canyon Natural Reserve in 2016. Credit: Alexandra Weill, UC Davis

When hikers returned to UC Davis Stebbins Cold Canyon Reserve in 2016, a year after a wildfire swept through its expanse of oak trees and chaparral in Northern California, half of them expected to see a devastated landscape. But pre- and post-hike surveys conducted by the University of California, Davis, reveal that roughly a third returned energized, awed and excited about the changes they saw.

Among the survey responses: "This area is restoring itself." "Awe-inspiring." "Nature is always changing, sometimes sad. Today I felt hopeful."

Results of the survey, published in the *International Journal of Wildland Fire*, indicate that people understand and appreciate the role of [fire](#) in natural landscapes more than is perceived.

"People can have really largely positive experiences hiking in a place that has burned," said lead author Alexandra Weill, who conducted the survey while a graduate student researcher in Professor Andrew Latimer's lab in the UC Davis Department of Plant Sciences. "They engage in it and find it very interesting and surprisingly beautiful. That can be used as a tool in education and outreach as places around us recover from wildfire."

Getting The Prescribed Burn Message

Survey responses were gathered from about 600 people between May 2016 and June 2017. Responses indicate that most participants—about 70 percent—were getting the message that prescribed burns can benefit ecosystems and reduce the threat of catastrophic fire.



A California poppy brightens the view at the UC Davis Stebbins Cold Canyon Natural Reserve in Northern California. Credit: Chris Nicolini, UC Davis

Survey participants were highly familiar with the narrative of the West's history of fire suppression and fairly familiar with fire topics related to conifer forests. But they were less knowledgeable about fire's history and role in the shrublands and woodlands that dominate much of Northern California.

Several of the state's most devastating recent fires—the Camp Fire in Paradise, Tubbs and Kinkade fires in Santa Rosa, the Mendocino Complex fire—were in environments including oak, woodland and chaparral, such as at Stebbins Cold Canyon. Fires in these areas burn differently than those in conifer forests.

This disconnect could indicate a gap in fire outreach and education. Weill suggested that educators and agencies adjust the narrative to reflect people's local landscape.

Nuanced Views

While positive responses were far more common than expected, most people held mixed views regarding effects of the fire. For example: "I know it's good, but it's sad when it's out of control and people lose homes." "I understand [it] needs to happen—but devastating!"

Such wariness is not surprising but it is illuminating, Weill said.

"People have more nuanced opinions than we give them credit for in understanding positive and negative effects of fire, but also difficulty in reconciling what they know about good fire versus what they see in the news or [personal experiences](#)," said Weill.

More information: Alexandra M. Weill et al, Walking through a 'phoenix landscape, *International Journal of Wildland Fire* (2020). [DOI: 10.1071/WF19053](#)

Provided by UC Davis

Citation: Wildfire perceptions largely positive after hiking in a burned landscape (2020, March 26) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-03-wildfire-perceptions-largely-positive-hiking.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--