

Engaging the Humanities to Address Wildland Fire Issues

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Abstract

This project examined existing programs and potential options for collaborations among the humanities, art, science, land management, and public concerning wildfire and wildfire policy and education. These programs and partnerships include creative residencies; conferences, workshops, and symposia; art-science collaborative field studies; and community programs and partnerships. We also reviewed how popular literature frames, reflects and has affected our cultural understanding of wildfire. Our analysis concludes that, compared to the richness of the subject of wildfire, compared to the way wildfire encapsulates all the complexities and controversies of culture, history, and ecology, wildfire's potential as a literary subject remains largely unfulfilled. Our intention with the reviews of both the collaborative programs and fire literature is to provide resources to JFSP-funded Regional Consortia for using arts and humanities in outreach programs. Through several presentations, a Words on Fire conference co-hosted with the Northwest Consortium, consultations with other consortia, and other communications, we exchanged information about arts-humanities-science collaborations that can further JFSP consortia objectives. A survey of consortium leaders in December 2012 revealed that 3 consortia have recent or on-going arts/humanities activities, 6 plan to do have them within the next 3 years, and 2 have no plans now; so, despite funding and staff limitations, there is substantial interest across many of the consortia.

Based on this background, we suggest a plan of action: Given the substantial interest of Consortia and high levels of interest in the recent Alaska and Northwest Consortia arts/humanities programs, it seems appropriate to continue a modest level of support for arts/humanities engagements as part of outreach programs at appropriate consortia. In

addition to supporting near-term outreach objectives, sustaining arts/humanities collaborations would broaden the base of experience among consortia, so that, if public outreach becomes a higher JFSP priority in the future, the consortia would be in a stronger position to engage in these fruitful partnerships. Specific steps are suggested.

Background

The Spring Creek Project

The Spring Creek Project for Ideas, Nature, and the Written Word, based in the Philosophy Department at Oregon State University, is a convening organization and think tank that works to connect science and the humanities in conversations regarding sustainability and our place on planet Earth. The challenge of the Spring Creek Project is to bring together the practical wisdom of the environmental sciences, the clarity of philosophical analysis, and the creative, expressive power of the written word, to find new ways to understand and re-imagine our relation to the natural world. This frame of reference is very relevant to the challenging societal engagement with wildfire.

The Spring Creek Project has spent ten years organizing and hosting intensive, humanities-arts-science collaborations in the ancient forests of the Cascade Range, producing a rich body of literature, events, ideas, and outreach. Much of this occurs through our flagship program: The Long Term Ecological Reflections program (LTEReflections). LTEReflections hosts a writing residency at the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest, a world-renowned research facility in the Oregon Cascades. Andrews Forest residents are encouraged to enter the field with working ecologists as well as conduct their own primary inquiries into the ancient forest. All resident's writings are accessible via our on-line journal: The Forest Log. We have also taken the lead in creating a national network of sites and organizations dedicated to similar artistic and scientific collaborations: the "Ecological Reflections" network (www.ecologicalreflections.com). Furthermore, Spring Creek organizes creative gatherings, conferences, and symposia, ranging from formal conversations among creative writers, philosophers, and environmental scientists to field-trip writing workshops in iconic sites in the Pacific Northwest. Spring Creek Project has organized networking and consultation workshops for both scientific organizations (the Ecological Society of America, Organization of Biological Field Stations) and artist communities (The Sitka Center for Art and Ecology and the North Cascade Institute.)

Spring Creek is just part of a groundswell of active interest in the US and Europe in many types of art-science-humanities-management collaborations. Organizations such as the Long-Term Ecological Research (LTER) network, Organization of Biological Field Stations, USFS Experimental Forests, special places (e.g., Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument), non-science programs (The Aldo Leopold Legacy Center (WI), Sitka Center for Art and Ecology (OR)) have all initiated programs. In Europe, sites and organizations such as CERN (the European Organization for Nuclear Research), The Kavli Institute for Theoretical Physics, and the Mediterranean Institute for Advanced Studies in Marseille, to name but a few, have all instituted collaborative programs.

Wildfire Humanities

We believe that similar collaborative humanities programs may help in a cultural reframing of the wildfire dilemma—it is in no small part due to the fact that fire has been framed solely in terms of a technical, political, and scientific matter that the American public is either unconcerned with wildfire or views it solely as a destructive force. As the writer Leslie Marmon Silko has said, “The way you change a human being and human behavior is through a change in consciousness that can be effected only through literature, music, poetry—the arts.”

For the Humanities are where we explore what it means to be human; they are where we go to determine that which we value, find worthy, and beautiful. Perhaps most importantly in regard to fire, we turn to the Humanities to sort out our relation to the rest of the world, to answer questions such as: What is our role in regard to wildfire and public lands? How and where does our understanding of wildfire ecology conflict and overlap with our societal needs and desires? By what basis do we reconcile the two?

The Humanities offer many paths to answer these questions: sociology, ethnology, anthropology, history, environmental philosophy, environmental studies, environmental humanities, cultural studies, environmental literary criticism, cultural geography, and religious studies. Within these various disciplines is a wide-range of mediums by which Humanists can broadcast and deploy their understandings of wildland fire to the greater public, including film, television, web-based media, visual arts, land art, poetry and prose.

However, very little has been done to utilize the arts and humanities in public outreach and education programs concerning wildfire. Whereas artists and artist collectives are engaged in every other Aristotelian element—water, air, earth—there is little engagement with wildfire. Our project sought to document what, if any, collaborative programs existed; survey Regional Consortia to determine their interest and ability in carrying out such programs, and consult with them if they were to choose to do so.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to assess the current state of engagement of the humanities with fire and fire use. This included:

- an assessment of various world-wide collaborative programs and partnerships that are relevant to the intersection of arts/humanities and wildfire —including any that exist with the JFSP Regional Consortia
- an assessment of what we are deeming the “literature of fire”
- consultation with JFSP Regional Consortia to encourage and facilitate their use of humanities and arts and to survey their interests in including arts and humanities in their outreach programs

From this background, this project offers a plan of action for sustaining the use of arts/humanities-science collaborations in JFSP Regional Consortia outreach programs.

Study description and location

Our study featured three major components:

1. To document any relevant programs involving the humanities currently underway, with an eye out for recommending these programs to the JFSP Regional Consortia.

We critically reviewed the potential value of various approaches for engaging the humanities in fire issues, particularly in the context of Regional Consortia programs. This was a vast field, so this assessment, while broad, was limited to identifying the most relevant examples. Our full report on this component, titled “Wildfire Humanities” has been uploaded to the JFSP website.

2. A literature review.

We focused on “fire-literature,” defining “literature” not as the entire body of writings dealing with a particular subject, but as the body of *artistic* writings characterized by some degree of beauty of expression and form and by breadth of intellectual and emotional appeal. In short, literature not by scholars and researchers, but by novelists, literary essayists, and poets.

Although we undoubtedly missed some worthy and relevant material, we compiled a catalogue of 151 books, published between 1943 and 2011. (Citations and notes on these books are organized in various bibliographic databases as addenda at the end of the document.)

We examined and organized this literature in two ways. The first was in light of five critical aspects of literature:

- moral imagination
- vicarious engagement
- creative vision
- capacity for complexity
- effectiveness

We also analyzed the recurring themes and narrative devices that consistently surfaced; themes which we organized into “literary tropes” of our own devising. We use “trope” to refer specifically to commonly-used (occasionally overused) techniques, themes, or devices.

- Fire as Battlefield
- Fire as Incident: The Great/Terrible/Devastating Burn/Inferno/Firestorm of 18__/19_!
- “All the World’s a Stage”: Fire as Plot Device or Setting/Background for Human Drama
- Fire as Dragon/ Fire as Elemental Evil/ Fire as Destroyer
- Fire as Renewal: Ecological Resilience Narratives
- Fire is Culture

Our report, titled “A Wildfire Literature Review,” has been uploaded to the JFSP site. This report is also being readied for submission to “Environmental Humanities” peer-reviewed journal.

3. Consultation/Collaboration with Regional Consortia.

- We contacted leaders of Regional Consortia to survey their interests in developing programs that capitalize on humanities in their outreach programs. Based on their interests and capacity, we collaborated with two Consortia for initial exploratory events: the Alaska and the Northwest Consortia. These efforts resulted in two programs that serve as test cases and models for the engagement of the humanities with fire science and management. These events were:
 1. The Alaska Fire Science Consortium created and conducted a program titled “*In a Time of Change: The Art of Fire*” which featured field workshops, art exhibits, a public performance, and the use of “AFSC’s web space on FRAMES to publicize and archive this project. More on this program can be found at: <http://www.frames.gov/partner-sites/afsc/projects/art-of-fire/#.UO2dLuTO0Qa>
 2. The Northwest Consortium co-hosted a symposium—“Words on Fire: Toward a New Language of Wildland Fire”—that brought together authors, a USFS District Ranger, scientists, a dancer, and Stephen Pyne to discuss new language and metaphors of wildland fire. All lectures and panel discussions were streamed, all content is posted on the Spring Creek Project webpage for public access, and Twitter feeds alerted many people to this resource. This conference was designed in part to help communicators (both inside and outside fire community) appreciate the important nuances of language and to get to the core of values that may motivate useful action or unhelpful conflict. The Spring Creek site: <http://springcreek.oregonstate.edu/>
- We participated in a presentation/discussion with JFSP Consortia leaders at the June 7, 2012 Boise JFSP Consortia Workshop, with an emphasis on conveying the potential of arts/humanities collaborations in helping Regional Consortia meet outreach objectives.
- We delivered an oral presentation, titled “Applying Humanities Perspectives to Wildfire Science,” at the 2012 Association for Fire Ecology Conference in Portland.
- We surveyed interests of Consortia leaders in continuing or undertaking arts/humanities collaborations via email in Dec. 2012.
- We are now getting requests for information from some of these consortia – most recently from California seeking to engage artists in fire issues.

Key findings

Our key findings are broken down by major project components:

- 1) To document any relevant programs involving the humanities currently underway, with an eye out for recommending these programs to the JFSP Regional Consortia.**

Our report outlines several options for collaborations among the Humanities, science, land management, and public concerning wildfire and wildfire policy and education. These partnerships and programs include creative residencies, conferences, workshops, and symposia; art-science collaborative field studies; community programs and partnerships; and the possibility of a new federal program or department designed to support collaborative humanities and science investigations. The report critically reviews the need and potential value of various science/management/art/humanities partnerships in hopes of broadening the effective scope of work and communication at JFSP-funded Regional Consortia

Despite the staggering potential of the artistic medium in regard to fire, there is a notable dearth of artistic engagement with fire as a subject. Art is naturally drawn to the nexus of the human-natural, and there is a rich diversity of artistic programs, exhibits, and movements associated with environmental issues. Artist's explorations of notions of resilience, reconciliation, harmony, chaos, synergy, sustainability, and place overlap tremendously with issues of wildland fire. In summary, there is a tremendous amount of artistic talent, enthusiasm, energy, and experience available and waiting to be tapped for addressing complex natural phenomena – JFSP Regional Consortia have a wonderful opportunity to do so.

2) *A literature review*

We review how literature reflects and has affected our cultural understanding of wildfire. Our task was thus to determine how fire has been framed by popular literature, to determine in what contexts and narratives the public receives information through this vital medium; and by doing so help to broaden and strengthen both agency and public understanding of cultural engagement with fire.

All in all, our literature review revealed a respectable volume of books dedicated to the topic of wildfire. Within this fire-literature is an interesting diversity of perspectives and engagements. Fire is seen as a force that must be fought just as it is an ecological process that it is impossible and ultimately detrimental to control. It is seen as a single event and an overarching process. It is seen as a backdrop for human drama, and it is seen as a central character in the narrative of the West. Fire appears in novels, memoirs, academic texts, poems, anthologies of essays, and general historic accounts. It is related in first, second, and third person.

Our analysis of this “fire-literature” finds the literature to be varyingly effective in terms of moral imagination, vicarious engagement, creative vision, capacity for complexity, and effectiveness. Compared to the richness of the subject of wildfire, compared to the way wildfire encapsulates all the complexities and controversies of culture, history, and ecology, wildfire's potential as a literary subject remains largely unfulfilled.

Regardless, the wealth of literature displayed bears witness to arts and humanities as rich, diverse, impassioned, influential sources of perspectives, calls for action, and inspiration for reframing our relation with fire and the land. Leaders of JFSP Consortia project involving humanities and arts would benefit by exploring this literature review

and the primary works to get a sense of the breadth of human engagement with wildfire.

3) Consultation with and Interests of Regional Consortia.

As described above, we helped facilitate two events to gain experience and test models for the engagement of the humanities with fire science and management. Based on the success of these two projects, we found that there is significant interest among artists, the public, academics, and management for these types of programs. The AK event had 455 people from the Fairbanks public come to the event, demonstrating the real potential of these exhibits as an outreach and education tool. These events were very fruitful approaches to use in advancing outreach programs of JFSP Consortia. Numerous useful models exist for ideas that can be tailored for local use.

We found that, in developing programs designed to spread information and perspectives across large and often disparate communities, it is best to target existing networks, early-adopters, and super-nodes (highly connected people).

We conducted our survey of interests of Consortia leaders in continuing or undertaking arts/humanities collaborations via email in Dec. 2012. Eleven of 14 Consortia responded with 3 having active programs, 2 with plans for 2014 activities, 4 planning activities in 2-3 years, and 2 with no plans. Several spoke with great enthusiasm for this work and appreciation for the encouragement to undertake it. A few Consortia leaders are not so enthusiastic because of factors like limits to staffing and funding, lack of a public outreach component in their charge, and/or skepticism on the part of advisors. Many Consortia are still getting their basic programs going, and do not yet feel ready. Responses to the two pilot programs in AK and NW range from interest and enthusiasm to “that’s beyond our skills and resources.”

Management implications – especially for Consortia programs

Our project also revealed several tangible implications for management regarding the potentials of engaging humanities with fire science and management, especially in the context of consortia programs. This leads to the following recommendations to JFSP:

Suggested Plan of Action: Given the substantial interest of Consortia and high levels of interest in the recent Alaska and Northwest Consortia arts/humanities programs, it seems appropriate to continue a modest level of support for arts/humanities engagements as part of outreach programs at appropriate consortia. In addition to supporting near-term outreach objectives, sustaining arts/humanities collaborations would broaden the base of experience among consortia, so that, if public outreach becomes a higher JFSP priority in the future, the consortia would be in a stronger position to engage in these fruitful partnerships. A sustained effort will make it possible to see if some of the few resistant members of the fire management community gain greater appreciation as they come to understand it better and can see accomplishments. Drawing on experience of the Alaska and Northwest Consortia, suggestions for a modest program include: 1. Conduct some shared field experience involving fire managers, fire scientists, artists, and writers in field

venues, such as firefighting training ground and sites of long-term ecological research in a burned area; 2. Encourage further private discussion and collaboration; 3. Hold a public performance/conversation where these views are represented by the diverse participants; 4. Engage communications media and education personnel throughout the process; 5. With this nascent community plan further activities. And, of course, as displayed on ecologicalreflections.com, many other terms of arts/humanities engagement are possible.

This suggested plan of action is an outgrowth of the following points:

- Land and fire managers, scientists, artists, and creative writers can converge on issues of our relationship with fire and the land. (witness: the strong performance of the Alaska group on this point both in shared experience in the field during fire season training activities and also in subsequent public performances.)
- Public can engage with fire (and many other) issues through the media of arts and humanities. 450 people went to the opening of the “Art of Fire” exhibit in Fairbanks. In survey responses a majority of these visitors affirmed that the art work inspired them to want to know more about the issues. Local media coverage reached many more than those attending the shows. A significant number of people involved with fire science and management are closeted artists and writers – distinctions of roles are not as sharp as we might expect. This provides opportunity to communicate in more numerous and effective ways than our traditional organizational roles and channels permit.
- Across the Ecological Reflections network of about 20 sites the programs are funded and operated in many ways, suggesting that the Consortia might be able to engage arts/humanities in their communities without relying solely on JFSP administration and funding. Examples of program organizations and objectives and contact information can be found at www.ecologicalreflections.com.
- We received reports of a cultural transformation relative to wildfire humanities, attributed to the ability to stimulate conversations that would not happen otherwise. One Forest Supervisor remarked: “I’ll have a different interaction with the public, if I begin a public meeting by reading a poem.”
- Although JFSP “has long recognized that investments made in fuels management and wildland fire science need to be accompanied by science interpretation and delivery,” and has frequently stressed the need to “transform knowledge into meaningful action,” in JFSP’s view, the “ultimate customers” are “the managers.” Whereas JFSPs actions are critical and commendable, as both managers and “practioners” serve undeniably important roles, the ultimate customers may well be the public. Increasingly, both scientists and land managers recognize that learning to live with fire remains primarily a social issue that will require not just greater political leadership and agency innovation, but public understanding, involvement, and responsibility.
- We can no longer afford to frame the issue of wildfire solely in terms of overcoming deficits in scientific knowledge; we need to think in terms of how to best act on and distribute the knowledge that we already know (or, to cite one of JFSPs “Guiding Principles,” how to “be innovative, pursuing new and creative ways to disseminate knowledge.”).

- Collaborations with artists and humanists may help further the adoption of a more holistic awareness of immediate fire issues in particular places and bioregions; and to encourage thoughtful and varied public engagement with those issues.

If JFSP elects to sustain an arts/humanities effort at consortia, this might be suitable for designation as a Working Group in the management scheme for consortia. The US Long-Term Ecological Research network (now over 30 years old) has evolved to having Working Groups with participants from multiple (but not all) sites who can then report out on activities as a Working Group rather than having reporting done only through individual sites. This could happen within JFSP Consortia regarding engagement of arts/humanities, which for matters of geography or personal interest involve a subset of consortia.

Relationship to other recent findings and ongoing work on this topic

As we document in our report, a number of JFSP Regional Consortia have conducted or are moving toward greater general inclusion or programs specifically focused on collaborations among fire science, management and artists and humanists.

- The Alaska Fire Consortium created and conducted a program titled “*In a Time of Change: The Art of Fire*” which featured field workshops, art exhibits, a public performance, and the use of AFSC’s web space on FRAMES to publicize and archive this project. More can be found at <http://www.frames.gov/partner-sites/afsc/projects/art-of-fire/>.
- The Northwest Consortium recently hosted a symposia—“Words on Fire: Toward a New Language of Wildland Fire”—that brought together authors, USFS District Rangers, scientists, dancers, and Stephen Pyne to discuss new language and metaphors of wildland fire. All presentations and the concluding panel discussion can be found at <http://springcreek.oregonstate.edu>
- Over the past several years we have become familiar with dozens of programs that have formed arts-humanities-science collaborations. The enthusiasm for this work has been infectious and the sense of accomplishment in outreach programs has been very impressive in some cases. Looking across the networks of sites/programs doing this work, such as LTER sites, USFS Experimental Forests, and Organization of Biological Field Station sites, the JFSP Consortia stands out as an excellent candidate collection of sites and network to profit in its outreach objectives to take this approach.

Overall, there is strikingly little engagement between fire science and management with humanities or art, especially in the United States. Compared to Australia, which has a Federal Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, which recently helped create the Australian Centre for Cultural Environmental Research (AUSCCER), which conducts numerous humanities-based wildfire inquiries, the U.S. is far behind the curve.

Future work needed

While the number of non-JFSP sites and programs engaging arts/humanities in outreach programs is growing, experience with the special issues related to fire remains very limited. Therefore, we encourage greater use of these collaborative approaches to explore new opportunities. For example, we have heard of cases where arts/humanities have been employed where communities are coming to grips after experiencing great loss to wildfire. At the Words on Fire conference there was discussion of how communities in the West are being confronted with re-imagining their entire relation with the public lands, and fire is just one part of the complex equation. We need new ways to think about the land and our relationship with it – much more than forest plan revision processes and decision support tools. Arts and humanities and the people who practice them can be powerful allies in this public process of re-imagination. Several programs associated with LTER projects have found arts and humanities as excellent media for engaging native people, especially youth, in programs that have science and climate change components. And as the body of works grows from activities such as those of the Alaska and Northwest Consortia, we need a system for archiving and more actively sharing the works and the information. This may be a web-based system, which may also allow interaction among Consortia and the public about the engagement of humanities with fire issues. This could include a “Fire Log” to share information via internet systems about humanities-fire interactions, keying off experience of several LTER sites that use webpages to display on-going engagements with the humanities and arts. We urge Regional Consortia to establish appropriate partnerships and use available resources in their areas. Federal, tribal, state, local, and private (e.g., arts programs) stakeholders and organizations can be considered potential partners and sources of collaboration.

Deliverables Cross-Walk

Proposed	Delivered	Status
Project Website	www.wildfirehumanities.wordpress.com	Updated as needed.
Document any relevant programs involving the humanities currently underway, including any international programs.	“Recommended Wildfire Humanities Programs” document.	Completed documents posted on JFSP website.
Critically review the potential value of various approaches for engaging the humanities in fire issues, particularly	“Recommended Wildfire Humanities Programs” document.	Completed documents posted on JFSP website.

in the context of Regional Consortia programs.		
Review the relevant literature and non-published sources.	“The Literature of Fire: An Analysis and Bibliography”	Completed documents posted on JFSP website.
Consultation with JFSP Regional Consortia for initial exploratory events, participation in planning and execution of event.	“Words on Fire: Towards a New Language of Wildland Fire.” Conference/Symposium, in collaboration with PNW Regional Consortia.	Completed document--“Words on Fire, Towards A New language of Wildland Fire.pdf”- - posted on JFSP website.
(ibid)	Consultation and participation in AK Regional Consortia event “In a Time of Change: The Art of Fire.”	Completed.
Presentation	“Applying Humanities Perspectives to Wildfire Science” delivered at the 2012 Association for Fire Ecology Conference	Completed.