I Don’t Want to Set the World on Fire: UN Report on the Threat of Extraordinary Landscape Fires

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published 05/10/2022

On June 29, 2021, thermometers reached 49.6° C in Lytton, British Columbia, the hottest temperature ever recorded in Canada. The following day a wildfire, stoked by drought conditions and 70 km/h winds, destroyed 90% of the village and led to the death of two individuals. In 2019 - 2020, Australia experienced the worst bushfire season on record. Dozens of people died, more than 10 million hectares of land burned and some estimate that over 1 billion animals died, bringing some species closer to extinction. In 2020, California experienced wildfires of historic proportion. That same year, Brazil faced over 44,000 fire outbreaks between January and August in the Amazonas and Pantanal. In the summer of 2021, unprecedented wildfires broke out in Greece and Portugal, countries that are not ordinarily associated with such natural disasters.

All of this and more set the stage for the February 2022 release of the United Nations Environment Programme/GRID-Arendal rapid response assessment report, *Spreading like Wildfire: The Rising Threat of Extraordinary Landscape Fires*. The report reflects the contributions of over 50 global experts from NGOs and government. It paints a picture of a planet that is becoming increasingly hot, “turning landscapes into tinderboxes”, with more extreme weather, including deeper droughts and hotter, drier winds. All is not negative. The report is a call for all to learn to live with fire and take steps to better manage and mitigate the risk of wildfires to human health and safety, the economy, wildlife, and climate.

The report makes a compelling case for governmental and transnational action to prevent and combat wildfires. People are not yet prepared for wildfires that burn longer and hotter and over wider areas where wildfires are expected, nor is the world prepared for wildfires in drying peatlands and on thawing permafrost. Citing the prominent medical journal, *The Lancet*, the report states that annual exposure to wildfire smoke results in more than 30,000 deaths across 43 countries studied. Wildfires in areas of high biodiversity can lead to

extinction of entire species.

The report identifies three crucial steps:

- Assess the full cost of wildfires and use this information to invest in planning, prevention and recovery, not just immediate response. Most countries do not assess the cost of wildfires. Most devote the bulk of their fire suppression budgets to firefighting, as opposed to planning and prevention.
- Proactively communicate and learn best practices from others. Make special effort to include Indigenous leaders and women in disaster risk management.
- Create a system for multilateral response. Provide the same levels of global humanitarian relief as other major catastrophes, such as earthquakes and floods. Provide support to affected countries. Keep in mind that fires and the impacts of fire do not respect national borders.

Emphasis of the report is placed on risk reduction. Technology can only do so much; after considering weather, fuel availability and site accessibility, a change in the weather is usually all that can bring a wildfire under control. Greater emphasis on fuel management through controlled burns (keeping in mind the attendant risk), physical removal, or chemical treatment, and other hazard reduction actions can prevent the frequency and intensity of wildfires. Here the traditional land management knowledge of Indigenous groups can play a role.

Integrated wildlife management is seen as the key to adapting to current and future changes in global wildfire risk management. This is based on what is described as the “5Rs”; along with the traditional response, there is review and analysis, risk reduction, readiness and recovery. The report calls for the allocation of the bulk of resources to risk reduction, whereas it is currently spent on response.

The authors of the report make a series of nine recommendations to reduce and mitigate the global effects of wildfires:

1. Recognition of the effect of climate change on the prevalence and behaviour of wildfires and taking steps to reduce greenhouse gas emissions that cause climate change.
2. Developing a better understanding of the behaviour of wildfires in a changing climate. This will support better data collection, analysis across countries, improving fuel management, facilitating ignition prevention, and bridging gaps in fire management preparedness and response.
3. Taking an integrated approach to climate and land use planning to incorporate fire management. This involves maintaining and restoring healthy ecosystems while meeting the needs of resident populations.
4. Support for an integration of Indigenous and traditional knowledge and experience in land management practices directed toward the reduction and mitigation of wildfires.
5. Enhancing international interaction and exchange and experience sharing in wildfire management and research. This is seen as having the greatest potential for consistent improvement in worldwide wildfire management.
6. Move resources from reactive fire suppression to wildfire mitigation and management. Wildfire risk reduction activities reduce the potential impacts of wildfires in a way that is more cost effective than firefighting and post-disaster recovery.

7. Help communities to understand and accept the risk of wildfires. Acceptance will bring actions to build response and recovery capacity. Planning involves risk reduction, infrastructure hardening, evacuation planning, air quality monitoring, recovery and rebuilding.
8. Protect firefighters by minimizing risk. The safety and long-term health of individuals who fight fires is paramount. Full stop. Safe work practices, including reducing the risk of smoke inhalation and minimizing the risk of entrapment by wildfires, is key.
9. Understand the gender dimensions of wildfire planning and response. Research suggests that men and women have different risk perceptions and decision-making approaches relative to wildfires. Women firefighters also face specific challenges. They face gender discrimination and sexual harassment. They also face greater risk using equipment and protective clothing that is not designed for women.

There is much more in the report. Geographically, it covers the globe with case studies from the Siberian Taiga to the Amazon rainforests. Topically, it deals with everything from fuel reduction to availability of insurance as a mitigation tool. It is a detailed but compelling read.

The data is there, as are the recommendations. They are there for the policy makers and politicians to act upon.

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