

How Nostalgia Drives and Derails Living with Wildland Fire in the American West

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Abstract: Representations of fire in the U.S. are often tinged with nostalgia: for unburned landscapes, for less frequent fires, for more predictable fire behavior, or for a simpler, more harmonious relationship between human communities and wildfire. Our perspective piece identifies four prevalent nostalgic figures that recur in popular representations of wildfire: the Giant Sequoia, the Heroic Firefighter engaged in “the Good Fight”, the Lone Frontiersman, and the “Noble Savage”. We assess the affordances and constraints of each of these figures for helping and/or hindering fire management. We consider how some forms of nostalgia position particular humans as heroes and fire as a villain, how others prioritize the communities that come together to face catastrophic fire events, and how some romanticize Indigenous burning practices. Drawing on knowledge from fire science, human geography, and the environmental humanities, we suggest that a more nuanced understanding of nostalgia can be useful for fire management and for finding healthier ways of living with more fire in the future.

Keywords: fire management; social dimensions; environmental humanities; wildfire suppression; firefighter; media; managed wildfire



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1. Introduction

Like most things that involve change and loss, fire representations are often nostalgic; they trigger strong emotional memories that inform our relationships with fire itself. The word nostalgia comes from the ancient Greek (*nostos* and *algia*) and means a painful longing to return home. First diagnosed in soldiers and exiles in the 17th century, nostalgia has always had environmental dimensions; the cause of this mysterious new illness was “the desire for return to one’s native land” [1]. The home we long for is a real, physical place, although the memories we attach to it, combined with the passage of time, often distort that home [2]. In colloquial discourse, we sometimes say the nostalgic person sees the world through rose-tinted glasses, as if the past was simpler, happier, and fundamentally better. When it comes to fire, it might be more apt to cite another nostalgic truism: you can’t go home again.

“Home” is a complex physical and emotional place, with powerful material and ideological dimensions. For our purposes, home serves as a “shorthand for a set of important hopes worth defending”, including “serious and genuine relationships to places and their biotic regimes and landforms” [3]. Home is especially complicated for fire managers and scientists, who must not only determine if, when, where, and what fires should burn or be suppressed, but also imagine a future: a new home. Some turn to the

historical fire regime concept, which simplifies decision making by referencing the period of pre-European colonization as the model for the future [4]. But faced with the dramatic and irreversible ecosystem changes of the last century, as well as climate change impacts that are difficult to predict, fire managers confront unprecedented challenges. Should historical fire patterns of the pre-suppression era be the benchmark, given the likelihood that combined conditions of fuels buildup, invasive plants, climate warming and drought, and land use and ownership change create scenarios where historical regimes may no longer achieve desired or predictable results [4,5]? Is the historical fire regime concept itself, nostalgic?

Thanks to news stories and other popular media representations of fire, public awareness of complex questions such as these is growing. But answers are hard to agree on, leaving many wistful for an imagined, simpler past. The discomfort and anxiety of intensifying fires prompt new varieties of nostalgia: for unburned landscapes, for smoke-free summers, for less frequent fires, for more predictable fire behavior and effects, or for a more harmonious relationship between human communities and fire. We suggest that there is both diagnostic and reparative value in identifying these forms of nostalgia and the “homes” they point us toward. Becoming aware of our attachments to these landscapes and relationships reveals some of the ingrained cultural values—both positive and negative—that shape human relationships to the physical environment. Understanding nostalgic perceptions of fire stands to benefit fire managers, fire scientists, firefighters, and people who are impacted by fire—which is to say, all of us.

Fire behavior in the cultural landscape is an essential complement to understanding its role in the natural landscape. Shifts in how we talk about and represent fire—in news media, in scientific publications, among fire information officers, with our next-door-neighbors—can change our emotional relationships to environments and ecological processes. While collective emotions and attitudinal shifts may be hard to pinpoint in the moment, that does not make the impact of such shifts less real or influential. Nostalgia, as a poignant emotion felt at both individual and collective scales, plays a strong role in these shifts. We argue that (1) nostalgia is an often-overlooked motivator that shapes perceptions of fire and influences management; (2) identifying and coming to terms with that nostalgia reveals the assumptions we hold dear about human relationships to the more-than-human world, including fire, and about the processes and kinds of communities we value; and (3) recognizing nostalgia will help us more consciously envision and realize sustainable fire futures.

In what follows, we explore four popular representatives of fire and the forms of nostalgia associated with them: the Giant Sequoia, the Heroic Firefighter (fighting the “Good Fight”), the Lone Frontiersman, and the “Noble Savage”. We assess how each of these figures represents powerful forces that can drive or derail our ability to live with fire. We suggest that becoming aware of our nostalgia opens us to new relationships with fire and releases us from an unhealthy, perhaps even addictive relationship, built on comfortable human–nature binaries and hero–villain narratives. Finally, we argue for affective agility: an emotional shift toward accepting complexity and uncertainty, and preparing ourselves both emotionally and materially for a future with more fire in it. More pragmatically, we suggest that identifying, exploring, and potentially revising popular nostalgic narratives about fire can serve strategic purposes. We propose that nostalgia’s potent force might be used as a catalyst for clear-minded evaluation of progressive fire management practices [6] and the policy changes [7] required to adapt to a future in which fire is treated not as an enemy, but rather as a wild partner with considerable agency in human and more-than-human ecosystems.

2. The Giant Sequoia

High-profile wildfires in California in recent years—among them the KNP Complex Fire and the Windy Fire in 2021, and the Castle Fire the year before—have brought a new “hero” to television, phone, and computer screens around the world: the giant sequoia. These trees can live for thousands of years, and they depend on low-intensity fires for

reproduction and resilience. But fuel load buildup and ongoing drought means that the fires burning through California—including through Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks—are putting these otherwise fire-resistant trees at risk. Many say walking among the sequoias is like being in church, and Gaudi's Sagrada Familia cathedral is said to have been inspired by the sequoias' close relatives, the redwoods. These trees possess what Lorimer terms aesthetic charisma: "the distinguishing properties of an organism's behaviour and appearance that trigger particular emotions" and "catalyse individuals' ethical sensibilities" when we encounter them visually [8]. Like polar bears, and other charismatic megafauna that have become poster children for climate change, giant sequoias have emerged as *charismatic megaflores* that inspire strong emotions, including awe and wonder as well as humility [9]. Witnessing these magnificent trees being threatened or dying can trigger both grief and nostalgia for a time before our rapidly changing climate began to pose a serious threat to some of the largest and oldest living beings on earth. Giant sequoias in the news exemplify how nostalgia works as an emotional hook to spark concern in individual viewers and in humanity as a whole about the negative impacts of fire suppression for fire-adapted ecosystems (Figure 1).



Figure 1. A firefighter reaches to connect with a giant sequoia wrapped in protective fire shelter "blankets" in Sequoia National Park during the CA wildfires of September 2021. *Image Credit:* Gary Kazanjian, Getty Images.

A recent PBS News story combines footage of "The Guardsmen" with moving testimony about the impacts of fire on these "national treasures". In an emotional interview, U.S. National Park Service (NPS) ranger Christy Brigham remembers hiking out to the burn site in the spring after the Castle Fire destroyed 10–14% of the entire giant sequoia population [9]. Seeing the damage done to these "pillars of living history", she recalls that she and her colleagues "all cried"; close-up footage of her distraught face and sounds of her breaking voice as she recounts this memory convey her grief to viewers. Combined with the romantic, familiar NPS uniform, which signals nostalgia and patriotism, this is a powerful scene [9]. The military history of the uniform, especially the iconic NPS flat hat, is implicit here, and General Sherman's name hints at the violent settler colonial project and its role in the formation of the National Park System. On the one hand, then, some viewers might be feeling what Ronato Resaldo called imperialist nostalgia: grief for the loss of a thing one has had a hand in destroying and a corresponding desire to preserve or restore it [10]. This form of nostalgia is dangerous because it casts the destructive processes of settler colonialism as innocent and reifies a human–nature divide as well as a linear progress narrative tied to conquest and white supremacy. Where fire is concerned, imperialist nostalgia may support a "business as usual" approach in which fire is not a partner but an enemy.

On the other hand, when seen as individual members of a valuable species rather than metaphors for an idealized wilderness, these trees can elicit a different kind of nostalgia for a wilder past, a "home" in which fire was not something to conquer or tame but rather

an essential part of a vibrant, beautiful, dynamic ecosystem. This nostalgia is closely aligned to the early twentieth century nostalgia that inspired the formation of the NPS as an agency, which was initially created to protect America's most awesome places and secure opportunities for sublime encounters with the more-than-human world. By framing the trees' mortality in human terms and tearing up while describing how these "ancient beings . . . [are] dying before our very eyes", Brigham uses evocative anthropomorphic language that encourages a sympathetic response in viewers. Her comments invite both real-time grief at the tree mortality that has already happened, along with anticipatory nostalgia for projected losses. This future-oriented form of nostalgia is a "nostalgia experienced, paradoxically, before actual loss" [11]. It is the kind of anticipatory nostalgia Aldo Leopold drew on in his *Sand County Almanac*, when he asked readers to imagine a world without goose music, and the kind Rachel Carson elicited with her eerie, cautionary "Fable for Tomorrow", a pastoral town turned apocalyptic in which "no birds sing".

The PBS story is savvy in connecting its emotional message to an ecological one: it reminds us explicitly of the necessity of low-intensity fire for the sequoias' regeneration and resilience, as well as the fact that "they'll need some help" from human managers, especially in the form of prescribed burning and restorative thinning before the burns happen—a view widely held by fire ecologists [6]. Brigham personifies the trees with heroic language: they, along with the firefighters who try to save them, are "like superheroes". Because they have evolved with fire and have learned how to live well with it, the sequoias are role models for human fire managers, who could likewise treat fire as a partner. The PBS story concludes by noting that the name of the tree comes from Cherokee Nation tribal member, Sequoyah—a poignant reference that reflects the growing trend in film, media, and fire management to turn to Indigenous peoples and their burning practices for management models.

The giant sequoias and the nostalgia they elicit can thus be assets for fire management. As a "flagship species", these trees and their aesthetic charisma could catalyze concern and even help raise funds—like the giant panda brand has done for the World Wildlife Fund [8]. Feeling the loss and acknowledging the costs of the human actions—fire suppression and anthropogenic climate change—that are contributing to the deaths of these "ancient beings" might prompt viewers to take responsibility for our impacts to both the trees and to the ecological communities they critically support. Taking responsibility might in turn motivate support for more strategic actions in the form of fuels management, embracing fire use, and accepting the regenerative necessity of fire. Perhaps nostalgia can be a catalyst for helping the public connect with the science of fire ecology and invest in the necessary actions to enable fire-adapted species to continue living better with more fire. Awareness of ecological interconnectedness can help us practice and hone affective agility and cultivate an ethic of care that crosses species boundaries.

3. The Heroic Firefighter and "The Good Fight"

Heroic firefighters, and the battles they wage on our behalf, often evoke nostalgia for a world where everyone is united about what is moral and good. In Svetlana Boym's words, this "restorative nostalgia" promotes the sense of a shared past as "a place of sacrifice and glory" that is anchored in often false ideals of truth, tradition, and "collective belonging" [1]. This type of nostalgia can manifest as a longing for pure categories, as in Bill McKibben's "end of nature" nostalgia [12], or as a longing for an earlier period of moral righteousness, tied to military endeavors—WWII, for example [13]. Not surprisingly, then, this brand of nostalgia manifests in war-evocative language surrounding our relationship with wild-fire, a rhetorical mode so common that we rarely comment on its power of persuasion. Headlines such as "More than 700 firefighters lose ground to raging Nevada wildfires 24 h after the funerals of 19 colleagues who died" and "Canada provides assistance to California in battle against historic wildfires" could easily replace "firefighters/colleagues" with "soldiers" and "wildfires" with "wars" without changing the sentiment.

Such headlines not only reinforce an inherently antagonistic relationship with fire, but also depict a common humanity united in its opposition to a foreign and “wild” enemy, fighting “the good fight”. The positioning of man over nature in Judeo-Christian belief systems sets the mold for the language we use and the stories we tell about wildfire. The closely related taming of the wild in general has unearthed numerous paradoxes in American lands management over the past centuries. Consider Leopold’s realization that the once-noble genocide of wolves led to nearly irrevocable ecological damage (and is the center of ongoing debates even today). Much of the world now stands at the same crossroads where Leopold stood more than a century ago when he saw the eternal “green fire” in a dying wolf’s eyes. We are realizing that attempts to battle the wild are futile, while still yearning for dominion over nature and its elements. Those who battle wildfires are heroes in part because they defend the anthropocentric dominion over the more-than-human world that we have come to think of as natural.

Firefighters also defend us from ourselves. Exemplified by the firefighter heroes of 9/11, who sacrificed themselves in response to a global threat, they unite our country in a way that, given current sociopolitical divides, many are understandably nostalgic for. In the same way, wildfire unites communities against a common enemy with a contagiousness of purpose akin to the spread of fire from burned home to home. Popular media continues to portray firefighters whose lives are lost while defending homes as heroes in the story, in part because it assuages nostalgic yearnings for a simpler relationship with the assumed enemy. For example, in the film, *Only the Brave*, about the Yarnell Fire where 19 members of the Granite Mountain Hotshot Crew were tragically overrun and killed, the story was recast to show that the crew was engaged in a winnable, righteous fight—a band of brothers defending their town against a common adversary (Figure 2). Little is mentioned of whether they should have been there to begin with [14]. This simplified version avoids the more complicated and nuanced truth and perhaps even our collective responsibility for such tragedies.

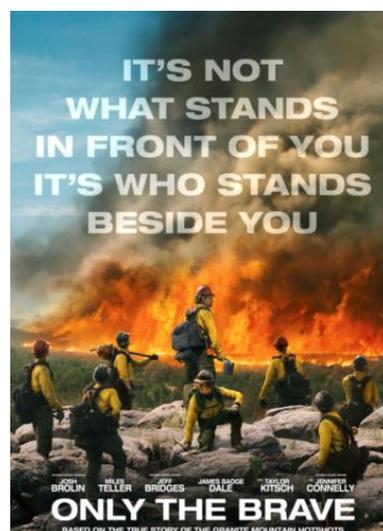


Figure 2. Poster advertising *Only the Brave* (Columbia Pictures, 2017), which depicts the tragic loss of 19 Granite Mountain Hotshots during the Yarnell Hill fire of 2013. A review of the lessons learned from the fire summarized, “Federal fire policy stipulates firefighter and public safety is the first priority . . . there will be times when full fire suppression will not be an option. Fires will have to be allowed to burn meaning the potential loss of natural resources and threats to values at risk such as homes and farms” [14].

As part of the tunnel vision this moralizing view of “the good fight” perpetuates, firefighters are expected to engage wildfires under all conditions regardless of whether the fight is winnable. The compulsion to justify a futile war is perhaps a fundamental

personality flaw in the American psyche (think Vietnam, Afghanistan), and it characterizes the last hundred-odd years of wildfire suppression, and the accompanying tragic loss of firefighter lives. When we agree that fighting fire is a moral obligation, no cost is too great to be deployed to win the battle. A fire suppression industrial complex has thus been amassed to support this “good fight”, and it perpetuates the public’s economic (costing taxpayers billions annually) and emotional investment in a strictly antagonistic relationship with fire, one that lacks the nuances appropriate for our ecological understanding of fire’s role. Nostalgic thinking about man/fire as a right/wrong juxtaposition has immediate and negative consequences for fire management. It fundamentally contradicts the concept of prescribed fire use or managed wildfire: how can you manage something you are obligated to destroy? Such choices are too rarely put in the hands of the fire managers, who have the experience and wisdom to choose which fires may be contraindicative for full-fledged battle (“managed wildfire” [15]). When policy makers or fire managers are given the latitude to decide not to fight, they often suffer severe public criticism: only traitors make friends with the enemy. This issue has risen to the surface as one of the most complex and contentious in fire management today [15] because it directly challenges the nostalgic attachment to human dominion over nature.

4. The Lone Frontiersman

The American West has long been a staging ground for culture clashes. Most recently, the Bundy Standoff, Malheur Occupation, and the pardon of “America’s Toughest Sheriff”, Joe Arpaio—clashes where individual freedom/liberty is understood to be at odds with the “oppressive” institutions of modern government—point to the larger and still-unfolding war between American right-wing populism and modern liberalism. These Western-style dramas featuring ranchers, sheriffs, and good guys with guns inevitably play into the myth of the frontier and its nostalgic positioning, according to environmental historian William Cronon, as the “last bastion of rugged individualism” [16].

Within the arena of the West’s public land, resources, and fire management, the clashes reveal long-standing antipathies between, on the one hand, an individualist or neo-Jacksonian frontier ethos (limited government, privatization or transfer of public lands and waters, environmental deregulation, greater resource extraction), and, on the other, the more modern and cross-boundary cooperative North American Model of conservation (multiuse public lands, limited resource extraction, biodiversity/wilderness, eco-tourism, prescribed fire councils and associations; Figure 3). Fueled by questions and uncertainties related to the West’s troubled new state of nature (climate change, megadroughts [17], massive wildland fires . . . etc.), today’s “mythic frontier individualist” or “Lone Frontiersman” as we have identified the figure—a Dwight Hammond Jr. or Ammon Bundy, appeals to a time when heroic and masculine individuals broke free of the “confining structures of civilized life” [16] and subdued the frontier’s violent state of nature. However, the Lone Frontiersman’s romanticized model of individual land stewardship is rooted in a colonialist myth of the West as an unsettled region devoid of Indigenous peoples, their histories, or government interference. In addition to perpetuating the erasure of Indigenous history, this enduring myth helps fuel the present backlash against government owned and managed lands, and ultimately makes it more difficult for public fire and land managers to do their jobs. It is little known but important to recognize the consequences of such individualism in the hundreds of annual human ignitions started on private lands, which grow into destructive wildfires impacting multiple ownership boundaries [18].



Figure 3. Prescribed Fire Associations, like Prescribed Fire Councils, where private and public lands managers work together across boundaries to share equipment, human resources, and knowledge to improve fire management and use, represent a growing recognition that the Lone Frontiersman remains alone at his own peril, and to the detriment of sustainably living with wildland fire. *Image:* Reid Scivally and Andrew Bivins conduct a prescribed burn as part of the Texas Panhandle PFA.

The Lone Frontiersman is perhaps best illustrated by the Hammond arson case, which later became the primary inspiration for the 2016 Malheur Occupation. In 2012, Oregon cattle ranchers, Dwight Hammond Jr. and his son, Steven Hammond, were convicted of arson on federal land for wildland fires set in 2001 and 2006 (they were later pardoned by President Trump in 2018). Set by the Hammonds in order to destroy evidence of deer poaching, the 2001 Hammond–Hardie fire burned 139 acres of public land and endangered the life of Steven’s teenage nephew, Dusty Hammond, who escaped the fire by sheltering in a creek. Steven Hammond was also convicted on a second arson count for illegally igniting federal land during the 2006 Kumbro Butte fire, which forced the removal of four BLM firefighters for safety reasons.

Representing only the more egregious and prosecutable of many unpermitted burns by the Hammonds, the 2001 and 2006 fires belonged to an increasingly violent multi-generational conflict with local federal officials over cattle grazing rights to the nearby Malheur National Wildlife Refuge—a refuge created by Roosevelt in 1908. Apart from destroying evidence of a crime, the fires were meant as a challenge to federal authority and the principles of multiuse land management. For Ammon Bundy, a believer in the “sovereign citizen movement”, the individual and unilateral actions of the Hammonds positioned them as individual sovereigns—heroic frontiersmen—operating outside the sphere of U.S. government control. In protest of their imprisonment, as well as the constitutional authority of the U.S. government to administer public lands [19], Ammon Bundy led a ragtag extremist group in the takeover and Texas Alamo-style defense of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge headquarters.

Whether a Hammond or a Bundy, the “sovereign citizen” Lone Frontiersman is a misguided if not understandable response to the continued onslaught against the West’s rural economic base by corporate capitalism [20]. But as Cronon notes of two paragons of “rugged individualism” from yesteryear, Teddy Roosevelt and Owen Wister (whose 1902 novel, *The Virginian*, helped establish the Western genre), they were men from well-to-do backgrounds. While not upper-class elites such as Wister or Roosevelt, both Dwight Hammond Jr. and Ammon Bundy hail from landowning families that are decidedly not working class. “The curious result”, writes Cronon, “was that frontier nostalgia became an important vehicle for expressing a peculiarly bourgeois form of antimodernism” [16]. It is a similar story today: though dressed like a working-class cowboy, Ammon Bundy’s Lone Frontiersman is little more than a Stetson-wearing bourgeois whose success, should he and others like him get their way, only stands to benefit capitalist elites such as the

Wilks Brothers, or their political appointees, in rolling back environmental regulations and privatizing public resources. By diminishing the value of publicly owned lands and waters, as well as eroding our trust in the officials who manage them, the Lone Frontiersman stands as a powerful hindrance to 21st century fire management. Without the counter-Frontiersman ethic of a broad commitment to a robust and multiuse American commons, much-needed landscape actions such as prescribed burning and fuels reduction programs will be difficult to enact at the scale required to make the West's forests safer for human communities and more ecologically resilient in the years to come.

5. The “Noble Savage”

The phrase “noble savage” first emerged in the late 17th century, around the same time as nostalgia's first diagnoses. The “noble savage” is a nostalgic character, tied to a distant past when people lived in perfect harmony with the more-than-human world. In this story turned stereotype, Indigenous peoples are assumed to be untouched by civilization, idealized and free of sin, pure and one with nature, and clearly “other”. In the U.S., “noble savage” discourse helped legitimize the colonization of the West, and dominant narratives such as Turner's “frontier thesis” cemented the stereotype in our cultural imagination; Indigenous peoples are either rendered past-tense (as “disappearing Indians”) or romanticized as “close to nature”, and so, part of the wilderness in need of taming. This form of imperialist nostalgia obscures violent histories and “reaffirm(s) the racialized, progressivist ethos of industrial capitalism” [21].

In U.S. culture, Indigenous identity has become “both a versatile cultural signifier” and “a sign of something unchanging, a first principle” [22]. As Deloria shows in *Playing Indian*—a book that traces cultural and political appropriations of Native identity from early colonial settlement through the twentieth century—representations of Indigenous peoples are often tied to a nostalgia for simpler Edenic relationships with the more-than-human world. The “noble savage” has evolved into the “ecological Indian” [23], and iconic images such as the “Crying Indian” PSA of the 1970s, tether Indigeneity to nostalgia [2]. Among the many downsides of this romantic version of Indigeneity is that it dehumanizes real people, homogenizes tribes, and flattens Native identity into a set of stereotypical traits that are ripe for appropriation.

As fire managers, fire scientists, and a variety of publics across a diversity of landscapes (cultural and physical) become more aware of how Indigenous fire practices continue to shape landscapes and inform fire practices globally, nostalgic tendencies may play both positive and negative roles. At its worst, nostalgia leads fire managers into the well-worn trenches of the “noble savage”. Take, for example, Vinyeta's 2021 examination of the United States Forest Service's suppression era scoff at low-intensity controlled burning as “Paiute forestry” and the ways in which the agency invoked tropes of “Indian savage”, “Vanishing Indian”, and “Terra Nullius” to support its own forestry agenda [24].

At its best, nostalgia may help the fire community acknowledge and learn from continuous Indigenous fire practices, rooted in deep, dynamic, and changing knowledges of the relationships among people, place, and fire. For example, Hoffman et al. [25] suggest that engaging Indigenous-led fire stewardship can protect human communities from increasingly severe wildfires, enhance biodiversity, and increase ecosystem heterogeneity. Consideration of continuous and dynamic Indigenous histories may also help fire communities expand time scales, recognize greater complexities of human–environmental relationships, and counter “lone frontiersmen” attitudes with more collectivist approaches.

Looking critically at fire management history requires disrupting harmful forms of nostalgia and recognizing tribes as distinct entities with continuous histories. In Lucy Walkers' recent documentary film, *Bring Your Own Brigade*, Plains Miwok Tribal Practitioner and Chico State University geography professor, Don Hankins, describes watching California's Paradise Fire burn, reflecting on the way fire sweeps across the landscape in his Tribe's first fire story: “the one that destroys everything” and leaves you with nothing. Watching such destruction leads Hankins to reflect that “our society is experiencing the first fire

stories” and that we need to learn the lessons they teach so that we can “come back to the second fire stories that tell us how to use fire”. Tribes are not static or fixed in time; they continue to live dynamically and adaptively with place. As we build awareness of nostalgia and the role it plays in perceptions of Indigenous burning, two examples are especially noteworthy. First, nostalgia may play a role in whether publics view Tribes as heroes or villains. In fact, they are neither. Rather, sovereign Tribes are both their own distinct managerial entities, employing practices based on their own tribal histories, value systems, treaty rights, and fire practices—and embedded in complex governance networks that include various configurations of state, federal, and local land managers. Second, climate change, land use, invasive species, and impacts of colonization have dramatically changed landscapes. Pre-colonial practices may not lead back to pre-colonial landscapes, and past Indigenous practices may not lead to desired outcomes in the present. Tribes, as part of the changing global communities, are not static, and neither is the relationship between fire regimes and ecosystems.

Bring Your Own Brigade concludes as Mountain Maidu Tribal Fire Practitioner, Trina Cunningham, encourages us all to pay closer attention to place in our present (Figure 4): “Once people realize that the place that they’re in has its own voice, if they take the time to start to learn the language of that place then that place will respond to them in a different way, and they will understand that place in a different way and that’s when it becomes really beautiful”. This attention to unique places now, and in the community, is both nostalgic and appropriate to forging new and complex relationships with fire.



Figure 4. Mountain Maidu Tribal fire practitioner, Trina Cunningham, employs fire to manage Tribal lands and resources. Image credit: video still from *Bring Your Own Brigade* film by documentary filmmaker, Lucy Walker.

6. Conclusions

Climate change is making our world and our weather more extreme and less predictable. Meanwhile, as we continue navigating another uncertain and chaotic situation—the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic—many core values and tenets of American culture are being tested. In addition to exposing sociopolitical fractures surrounding labor (the value of “essential work”), individual liberty/risk (the politicization of vaccines and masks), and justice (the disproportionate impacts of the virus on the poor and people of color), the pandemic also reveals our tendency to turn to nostalgia in the face of change. In our longing to “get back to normal” and return to “the before times”, the pandemic reminds us of nostalgia’s powerful force at both individual and national scales.

Like wildland fire, a virus exposes the limits of individual boundaries and encourages community-oriented decision making. To lean on an all-too-familiar metaphor, we have the means to vaccinate our wildlands against future outbreaks of destructive megafires, instead of relying on the current regime of symptomatic treatments that include fire suppression (aimed at “controlling” its chronic inflammatory response) and triaging its would-be victims (i.e., our homes and our lives). Included among fire’s symptomatic treatment, it should also

be noted, is the emotional catharsis produced by narratives of renewal and rebuilding that dominate the post-wildfire mediascape. By contrast, a holistic understanding of fire as both servant and master can support the implementation of fire-mitigating fuels treatments and an expanded playbook (coupled with public information campaigns) to support wildfire use and management. Vaccines are not perfect and there will be some “breakthrough infections”, but if we work to change the narrative around wildfire and firefighters, we give ourselves a fighting chance.

To do this, society must adapt to uncertain conditions, including a “home” that is perpetually unstable. As eager as many of us are to see fire returned to the West, we cannot forget that many western Americans have developed a sense of place in which fire is absent, or when it does become present, is treated as an enemy incursion at the first sign of smoke and made war against. New emotions, such as *solastalgia*—a nostalgic longing or homesickness that emerges when we have not left home, but are witnessing environmental changes all around us—are symptoms of a broader sense of uneasiness that philosopher, Glenn Albrecht, suggests is growing in our epoch [26]. Affective relationships to change must become more agile in order to complement and productively respond to a rapidly changing material world. Affective agility is not easy to achieve, especially when emotional attachments to nostalgic ideals, such as the Lone Frontiersman or hero firefighters, are part of the fabric of our national identity.

Fire offers a unique opportunity to shift the emotional landscape of the American public in favor of holistic management practices based on the principle—effectively demonstrated by climate change itself—that human and ecosystem health cannot be separated. Learning to live with fire, that is, breaking the cycle of society’s material and cultural investment in landscapes and airsheds shaped by fire suppression, requires more than simply informing the public about the ecological and human-safety benefits of fire: it requires persistent and public reckoning with the figures and forms of nostalgic attachment—the Lone Frontiersman, the Good Fight, Bambi, Smokey the Bear—that taught and continue to teach us to antagonize fire. More than anything, it requires sharing diverse stories including practices as different as Indigenous burning traditions and “redneck” ecosystem management [27], as well as collaborating on new strategies for living with fire in the 21st century.

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