

Introduction: Humans, Fire, and Forests—Part II

In issue 17(6) of *Society and Natural Resources*, we introduced the first in a series of research articles on humans, fire, and forests. We continue that introduction of a new generation of research initiatives on humans and fire here. In issue 17(6) the research presentations were eclectic, reflecting the emerging range of fire studies now appearing in the literature. One study focused on public attitudes and perceptions toward fire issues, while the other two articles provided insights into experimental economics and lessons learned from the natural hazards research field.

In this and subsequent issues of the journal that focus on humans and fire, the theoretical concept of community moves to center stage. As social scientists continue to investigate the relationships of people to wildland fire, the social context for human values, human behavior, and social interaction comes to the forefront. It is human community and its social/ecological environment that provide the linchpin for human action. As Wilkinson (1991) notes, there are three components to community: a geographical form (a common territory), community structure, and locality-oriented associational action. For Wilkinson, social interaction is the key ingredient. He notes, “Social interaction delineates a territory as the community locale; it provides associations that comprise the local society; it gives direction to processes of collective action; and it is the source of community identity” (Wilkinson 1991, 13). The articles included in this issue address these different aspects of community as they attempt to understand and explain human behavior and fire.

Brunson and Shindler open this series of articles with a geographical perspective of community. They refer to social context in which values and social acceptability are defined and human actions are executed. Their social context is geographical location. Their research area is physical community locations near federal land. The authors suggest that values and attitudes are individual responses, while social acceptability is an inherent contextual response initiated within a collective group such as a community. This article begins to place in perspective the idea of human landscapes and public lands as intertwined human space requiring national policy to be legitimized at the local scene.

The article by Steelman and Kunkel embraces community in two ways—structural responses and social responses. For these authors, structural responses are physical adaptations that individuals and their community make to interpret the social and biophysical environment in a way that mitigates fire damage. Social responses include collective interaction to entail better decision-making processes. Communities with effective decision-making structures and processes are primed to make effective choices.

Moseley and Toth illustrate the role of community by addressing the question of whether rural communities are deriving benefits from the allocation of National Fire Plan (NFP) dollars. The NFP is not just about fire hazard reduction; it is also about providing economic benefits to communities and the workers and businesses that reside in those communities. The kinds of evaluation done by Moseley and Toth are essential for understanding if policy performance matches policy promises.

As these three articles illustrate, fire interacts with communities in many ways. The design of effective, efficient, and equitable policies and managerial actions is dependent on understanding and adapting to these social interactions.

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Reference

Wilkinson, K. P. 1991. *The community in rural America*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.