Smokey Bear and Fire Suppression

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Smokey Bear is the most recognizable government mascot in America. His story has a dual nature, that of a fictional, anthropomorphic bear partly developed by the National Ad Council and of a real black bear found orphaned in New Mexico. As a spokes-bear for the National Forest Service, the life of the real bear and the cartoon mascot have been documented in official publications, reports, and archives. Because of the partnership of the National Ad Council many of the promotional materials were not distributed through the Government Printing Office and fall into a gray category of government information. In 2024 Smokey turns eighty years old and his story is retold; the story of a mascot and the more complicated story of wildfire suppression.

Smokey's story starts as early as 1910 when extreme fires in Idaho and Montana burned 3 million acres, killing eighty-six people and destroying several towns.[1] This wasn't the first large or deadly fire in U.S. history: an 1871 fire in Green Bay, Wisconsin, killed 1,500. That same year 750 were killed in a fire in Humbolt, Wisconsin.[2] It was in 1910 that Congress earmarked funds for fire suppression and the Forest Service took significant steps for that purpose. The federal perspective had a focus on preventing the loss of timber by developing a system of lookout towers, trails, fire breaks, and phone lines to quickly coordinate firefighting efforts. The use of fire to reduce undergrowth and fuels that could make a fire worse was not considered acceptable. The technique had been practiced by farmers and ranchers to clear land, and by indigenous peoples as part of their traditional land management. In a 1910 annual report, this practice of forest management with controlled burns was described as "unthinkable . . . for a future production of timber."[3] As a result, traditional, indigenous uses of forests were prevented.

Establishment of the U.S. Forest Service

The United States Forest Service, an agency within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), which had been formed in 1905, was in part created to prevent the exploitation of forest resources and the environmental damage caused by unrestricted logging. The agency rarely used fire to improve forest or rangeland conditions due to expense and the need to have "absolute control" to prevent damage to young trees wanted for harvesting.[4] Fighting fires required a budget for temporary employees. More than 1 million dollars was spent on these temporary workers in 1911.[5] An issue of *The Forest Patrolman* reminded Deputy State wardens to extinguish fires within twelve hours of ignition, including working all night and morning as those were optimal times. The firefighting units were made up of twelve people.[6] The need for seasonal fire crews was a result of the large areas of land each ranger had to supervise.

Regular Forest Service employees had vast areas under their supervision and those tracts of land grew from 107 million to 150 million acres in 1907. That year there were 1,210 rangers, guards, and supervisors present at the local level and it was estimated field officers were charged with patrolling 132,236 acres each.[7] In 1911 H.R. 11798, also known as The Weeks Bill, allowed the Secretary of the Interior to make agreements "with any state or group of states to cooperate in the organization and maintenance of a system of fire protection on any private or state forest lands within such state or states."[8] These agreements were, in part, for state aid in fire prevention and suppression activities. By 1913 the national forest areas had grown to 180 million acres.[9] In 1924 the Clarke-McNary Act led the federal government to purchase land in the eastern portion of the country that could produce timber. The bill also increased funding for fire prevention and suppression to 2.5 million dollars. The 1926 Agricultural Appropriation Bill House Report 1034 justified an increased budget for Forest Service employees stating that each forest ranger or guard had to watch over 50,000 acres (80 square miles).[10]

With the New Deal came more forestry workers from the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). Starting in 1933, CCC provided workers who could engage in twenty-four-hour fire control activities. By 1937, the program boasted an average of 1,000 camps in game refuges, national, state, and private forests, and 4,000,000 "man-days" (eight-hour workday) of work

fighting fires.[11] Training was provided to the men, but the work was still dangerous. The Blackwater Creek fire of 1937 was the fourth deadliest in Forest Service history, killing fifteen crew members and injuring thirty-eight others.[12] Forest fires could cost lives, jobs, and further degrade soil. The Dust Bowl had stripped millions of acres of topsoil just a few years earlier, the economy was still recovering from the great depression, and fires threatened logging jobs. In 1937 Franklin Roosevelt stated,

> Foresters and the men of the CCC are doing their part in the battle to protect and increase our forest wealth, but they are waging a stubborn war against fire. Behind this simple statement there is a tragic story. Nine times out of ten the thing that starts a forest fire is man's carelessness or his indifference. It is hard to believe, but twenty-five percent of all our forest fires are incendiary in origin. Another twenty-five percent are caused by smokers. We are destroying our forest wealth through fire alone at the rate of $51,000,000 a year.[13]

To help promote the effort to reduce the number of fires, Uncle Sam declared on a poster "Your Forests–Your Fault–Your Loss." The image was created by the original creator of the iconic Uncle Sam poster, Montgomery Flagg.

During World War II there was a shortage of firefighters due to the draft, yet an increased need for timber for the war effort continued the need to stamp fires out quickly. In addition, fire was weaponized by the U.S. and Japanese militaries. The U.S. attempted to use bats from Carlsbad Caverns, New Mexico, to deliver incendiary bombs in Japan. The Japanese released 9,300 balloons with incendiary devices, of which 25 reached the Washington coast. One balloon reached Michigan and another was found in Mexico.[14] Forest rangers received training on dealing with firebombs; fire suppression as a form of national defense.

The methods for fighting fires also took on a military aspect. The creation of units of parachuting fire fighters began in 1939 and by 1940, the first "smokejumpers" Rufus Robinson and Earl Cooley parachuted into the Nez Perce National Forest. The 555th Airborne Battalion, an African American unit of paratroopers known as the Triple Nickles, was involved in Operation Firefly to extinguish fires and dispose of Japanese firebombs.[15] The message from the Forest Service to the public was similarly war-like and echoed that of other propaganda warning of not aiding the enemy by being careless with fire and equated a carelessly tossed match to enemy sabotage. One bookmark carried the statement "Sabotage; Our country is in greater danger today than ever before in history. So are our forests. One careless match or cigarette—no matter who throws it—can do as much damage as an incendiary bomb to thousands of acres of precious timber and valuable watersheds."[16] This statement accompanied an unflattering, stereotypical image of a Japanese soldier holding a match.

As the war continued, the Forest Service looked for new, graphic ways to encourage the public to prevent fires—less accusatory than Uncle Sam and less militant than "careless matches aid the Axis." They wanted an image with broader appeal. Walt Disney's *Bambi* was released in 1942, and in 1943 the main characters were loaned for one year to the Forest Service for use on a poster. The poster was popular with children, who received copies and bookmarks through their school or public library.[17]

The Creation of Smokey

Encouraged by the popularity of the Bambi poster, the Forest Service was looking for a new animal mascot to encourage the public to prevent forest fires. One of the original artists for Smokey was Forest Service illustrator Harry Rossoll, who also worked on a number of different possible mascots including "Joe the Beaver" and a bear in dungarees and an army hat. When Rossoll was drafted into the Navy in 1944, the image was forgotten. Later, a squirrel character was also suggested, but on August 9, 1944, the Forest Service Forest decided that a bear would be the best fit for the role.[18] This date is considered Smokey's birthday even though his first poster would not be released until 1945. The Forest Service worked with the Wartime Advertising Council, a nonprofit organization founded by members of the marketing profession during WWII to create public service campaigns for the war effort. The advertising agency Foote, Coone, and Belding would also be part of what was then called the Cooperative Forest Fire Prevention Campaign (CFFP) and their artist, Albert Staehle, would create the first Smokey poster. The Forest Service did not and does not pay for the advertising. The work by Foote, Coone, and Bell and the materials are donated.[19]

Smokey's campaign took off like wildfire, with 30 million pieces of fire prevention materials distributed between 1944 and 1976.[20] The first Smokey poster in 1944 shows the bear pouring water on a campfire; the next poster in 1946 introduced a bear cub. Smokey already appealed to children, and the addition of the cub reinforced that connection. The bear's first slogan, "Care will prevent 9 out of 10 forest fires," echoed Roosevelt's speech. The message was not accusatory but a call to action to prevent fires. Unlike the Flagg poster, which implied the wasted value of trees and blames the viewer, Smokey suggests mindfulness on the part of the viewer and protecting the lives of the creatures in the forest. The 1948 pamphlet "Campaign

to Prevent Forest, Woods and Range Fires" featured a praying Smokey with an assortment of woodland animals with their offspring. This theme was continued in a 1953 poster of Smokey appealing to the heavens as two cubs pray over a grave.

Smokey Bear was a successful spokes-animal, and in 1952 the Smokey Bear Act was passed placing his image under copyright controlled by the Secretary of Agriculture. This prevents use of his image for commercial purposes, and money earned from Smokey Bear merchandise is used to fund wildfire awareness. In addition to government-provided publications, businesses could sponsor a Smokey comic in the local newspaper. In 1972 royalties from Smokey merchandise were more than $179,313.17 from forty-nine licenses.[21] Licenses were granted to businesses that were in-line with or promoted Smokey's message. One of the first licenses granted was to Ideal Toy Corp, who created a rubber-faced bear that came with a form children could fill out to join the Junior Rangers. These were mailed to Smokey, and the high volume of mail resulted in the bear receiving his own ZIP code.

Smokey was intended to appeal to all ages, and the materials distributed had this in mind but the greatest effort in terms of publications and products was for children. Having a character and message that resonates with children was recognized as a way to communicate in a "manner they will carry for life."[22] As the Smokey campaigns evolved, more educational materials were made available. The 1948 campaign had posters, stamps, buttons, display cards, and newspaper ads for sponsors. The fire prevention efforts for 1952 saw the Forest Service launch the "Only You Can Prevent Forest Fires" campaign with Junior Ranger kits. Children received a Junior Forest Ranger membership card, a signed photograph of Smokey, stamps, and a Smokey Bear song sheet. Children could also become members of the Smokey Bear Reading Club. Kits could be obtained at the Smokey Bear Headquarters in Forest Service Division of Information and Education, Washington, D.C., or from state forestry agencies.[22] Catalogs of Smokey and fire prevention materials were regularly offered. Smokey's 1982 campaign offered coloring pages, workbooks, comics, teacher's resources, pens, pencils, posters, balloons, board games, and other materials.

Efforts to spread Smokey's message utilized different media, including a film trailer with Eddy Arnold singing the Smokey Bear song, which was "shown at many of the theaters, particularly those away from the metropolitan area."[23] The song "Smokey The Bear," written by Steve Nelson and Jack Rollins in 1952, led to confusion regarding Smokey's name with the inclusion of "The" to match the meter of the music. Films and television programs were listed in the *Department of Agriculture Monthly List of Publications and Motion Pictures* and could be borrowed from the Forest Service. Children could tune into a radio program where announcer and voice actor Jackson Weaver gave Smokey his voice. Radio kits were available to stations and sometimes included recordings of famous guests such as Walter Cronkite. Rod Sterling featured in a *Twilight Zone*-style PSA, and John Wayne asked audiences to "Please Prevent Forest Fires." Celebrities who joined Smokey for birthday celebrations included Betty White, Steven Colbert, Barbara Mandrell, Mickey Hart of the Grateful Dead, B. B. King, and Laurindo Almeida.

Current efforts to spread the message of fire prevention include the website Smokeybear.com. This site is focused on children ages five to thirteen and educators. Moving beyond posters and costumes, the current Smokey Public Service Announcements use computer generated images that range from realistic to cartoonish. In addition to traditional posters and booklets, the public can now tweet to Smokey and watch YouTube videos.

The Real Smokey

On May 5, 1950, the Carson National Forest Supervisor's office received a call for assistance with the 1,000 acre Los Tablos Fire in the Capitan Mountains of New Mexico. The Taos Pueblo Snowballs were assembled, and twenty-five members boarded a bus for the long drive south. As the Snowballs were finishing their work on May 11, the Capitan Gap Fire was reported nearby.[24] A Fort Bliss army crew was also working the fire line and reported seeing a bear cub to the Snowballs. The Fort Bliss crew had not been able to pick up the frightened bear as he still had sharp claws and teeth. Reports from that time and recollections of crew members describe finding the bear in or near a hot, rockslide area the fire had burned over. There were many people on the fire lines the day Smokey was found. Soldiers, high school students, and the famous Mescalero Red Hats were present.[26] Many people saw the bear, but Snowball crew member Adolph Samora recalled "[A crewmember] picked it up and placed it in my arms. The cub had blisters all over his hands and feet."[25] The crew wrapped the bear in their jackets and took him to safety.

Game warden Ray Bell flew the bear, then called Hotfoot Teddy, to Santa Fe for treatment by veterinarian Dr. Ed Smith. It was the Bell family who cared for the bear and as he recovered the public could see him at the Department of Game and Fish. A popular image of the bear in front of a Smokey poster with Judy Bell was published in newspaper around the country. The story of the bear cub rescued from the fire gained national attention. An article in the June 8 edition of the *Alamogordo News*, stated "The tiny injured bear, playing in a cardboard box in the Department of Game and Fish office in Santa Fe speaks more

eloquently than any poster the need to 'Prevent Forest Fires.'"[27] Orphaned and injured, the little cub became the living embodiment of Smokey Bear. Smokey had found his origin story. The ad agencies did not use images of the cub in public service announcements, but his story was adopted as that of the mascot and featured in comics such as *The True Story of Smokey Bear*.[28]

Once recovered, Smokey was sent to the National Zoo in Washington, D.C.. However, commercial airlines would not allow a bear in the cabin of a plane, or a human escort in the cargo hold. A private company, Piper Aircraft, offered to fly him, and Smokey had "his own seat in the 'cabin,' the plane was personalized and adorned with a mural of Smokey with his paw in a sling and ranger hat on his head."[29] There were hundreds of people awaiting his arrival in D.C. on June 27, 1950, including Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts.[30]

Life at the National Zoo

Although the cub was not used in advertisements, the fact that there was a real version of the bear children saw on posters and other promotional materials made Smokey very popular and he was receiving 13,000 pieces of fan mail each week. This was partly due to requests for Junior ranger kits, of which there were 500,000 in 1956 and a total of 3 million Junior Ranger members by 1957.[31] The quantity of mail was enough for the bear to be given his own zip code (20252) in 1964, and three assistants to answer mail. His diet at the zoo included a variety of fish, peanut butter sandwiches, and honey sandwiches on special occasions. The sandwiches sometimes contained medication.

Smokey the mascot appealed to children, and children who visited to the National Zoo saw a real black bear. Much to the disappointment of fans, the real Smokey did not talk or wear pants. Mrs. Betty Wynkoop of Purcellville, Virginia, sent a letter to the Forest Service suggesting a display of Smokey's uniform in an enclosure by Smokey's habitat at the zoo. In 1956, the Forest Service took this recommendation to Dr. Theodore H. Reed, director of the National Zoological Park. The enclosed display by Smokey's exhibit held the expected ranger hat, dungarees, and a shovel.[31]

In 1962 a female black bear named Goldie arrived to be a companion for Smokey. In press releases she was referred to as Smokey's wife. Goldie was another orphaned, New Mexican bear. Found by loggers in the Ciboa National Forest near Magdalena, she lived at the Ghost Ranch Museum for a year before arriving at the National Zoo. She was accompanied by Ray Bell on the flight, a Cessna loaned by the New Mexico State Land Office. The zoo had hoped the bears would eventually produce offspring, but this did not occur.[32]

In 1971, the pair were joined by "Little Smokey," an orphaned bear cub from Cloudcroft, New Mexico. He flew to Washington, D.C., in the cargo hold of a commercial flight. The addition of this bear, sometimes referred to as Smokey's adopted son, was intended to take on the role of Forest Service spokesbear. Little Smokey was found in the Lincoln National Forest by Ray Bell, who was by then retired from the Forest Service.[33]

In 1960, a Smokey Bear Museum had been created by community members in Capitan, New Mexico. Efforts for his return to New Mexico and criticism of his habitat at the National Zoo followed but were denied until the 1974 Congress passed a bill to return the bear to Capitan when he died.[34] On May 2, 1975, Smokey Bear officially retired, passing on the trademark hat to Little Smokey who now took on the title of Smokey Bear II. At this point, the original Smokey had lived at the National Zoo for twenty-six years. Suffering from arthritis and possibly still suffering from long lasting effects of his burned paws, he could barely walk. His retirement was short-lived, and he died on November 9, 1976. His body was returned to New Mexico, and he is buried in the Smokey Bear Historical Park in Capitan.[35]

Legacy

There is debate whether Smokey's campaign to prevent forest fires has helped or hindered natural ecology. In 2001, Smokey's slogan was changed to from "Only You can prevent forest fires" to "Only You can prevent wildfires."[36] This was in recognition of the important use of controlled burns. Research also showed that aggressive suppression of fires was allowing dense build-ups of flammable materials and more intense, destructive fires. Low-intensity fires set naturally and monitored or purposefully set as part of land management reduce the amount of fuel and therefore can reduce the severity of a fire without destroying mature trees.[37]

While controlled or prescribed fires are beneficial, Smokey is concerned with unintentional fires. Climate change, urban encroachment, and high usage of forested areas all increase the chances of devastating fires. Starting a fire by tossing a cigarette or not extinguishing a campfire can have terrible consequences. Droughts, especially in the west, and "persistent heat set the stage for extraordinary wildfire seasons from 2020 to 2022 across many western states, with all three years far surpassing the average of 1.2 million acres burned since 2016."[38] With more people enjoying natural areas the chances of an unintentional fire increase. In 2022, the National Park Services areas "received 312 million recreation visits, up 15 million visits (5%) from 2021."[39] In 2022, there were 61,429 human-caused fires that burned 3,370,169 acres.[40]

Although the number of fires in 2022 was high, this number could be far worse. After the launch of Smokey's campaign there was a reduction in fires. According to the 1968 publication *Smokey's Record,* the Smokey Bear programs had "saved America more than $10 billion in losses that did not occur."[41] When Smokey turned 50 in 1994, Representative Glenn Poshard of Illinois stated,

> The Forest Service estimates that human-caused wildfires have been reduced by approximately one-half since Smokey Bear was introduced in 1944. This is despite the fact that more than 10 times as many people visit our national parks and forests today as in the 1940's. I have to admit, that is quite an accomplishment for a bear.[42]

In addition to reducing the number of fires, the licensing of Smokey merchandise has raised millions of dollars to support fire prevention education. In 2022, Smokey's licensing program resulted in $1,134,000 for fire prevention education.[43] As long as most fires are caused by humans, there will be a need to remind people to be careful, only you can prevent wildfires.

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Notes

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