

Along The Trail

by

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Ecology of the forest! We had recent discussion on the propriety and desirability of removing fallen redwood trees from the forest. During this discussion certain facts came to light which indicate to me that the progressive and successful individual is one who can change his thinking to fit the times.

What may be a fact today may not be a fact tomorrow!

Forests maintained as recreational places have been looked upon as most desirable for that purpose if they were "natural." Just what we mean by "natural" is not really clear, but supporters of this condition are generally referring to the fact that the land and its processes have been inalienable. If civilized man and the things he does are to be thought of as unnatural then there is probably no place in North America which is natural.

But in our broader concept of natural forests I think we mean that trees are not cut, streams are not impounded, the land is not paved by roads, and the plants and animals are existing unaffected and unaided by man.

A few years ago another thought was interjected into the subject. What of fires, or rather the lack of fires, on "natural" areas. We had chosen to label every condition, every phenomenon, as "natural" except fire.

Now this is not surprising, for fire is a destroyer. And we usually peg destroyers as inadmissible. If a hawk catches a bird he is a bad creature; if a plant kills another plant it is a bad plant—anything which destroys or endangers any of our precious possessions we dislike.

And so fire had to go. And a few years ago all out efforts were made to teach the science of fire suppression. And we were so successful in stamping out fire that in many cases we have created unnatural conditions, for fire was as natural before the advent of white man as snow and wind and thunder and all the other elements, conditions or phenomena.

It is now recognized that we have a monster on our hands in some places, because certain areas which in primitive times were swept by fire annually have had fires excluded for 20 years. The exclusion of fire, even though thought to be wise and proper, has created an unnatural condition. The litter that was consumed regularly by small fires has accumulated to the point where so much fuel is available that a fire going through now would have a devastating effect.

But this is only a discernible act. How about the effects of fire exclusion that we do not see? Nature has ingenious ways of off-setting some of the effects of fire. We know, for instance,

that some of the pines open their cones and liberate seeds only after a fire. The seeds of some plants lie dormant until passed over by fire. Indeed, certain species of ceanothus are becoming extinct in parts of the state because the natural phenomenon of fire is not periodically present to aid in their natural reproduction.

I know of a forest slope which is literally covered with blue-blossom. Nothing but trees were seen here at one time. Then the trees were cut. A fire swept over the slope and in the wake came millions of shrubs; plants germinated by fire.

I talked to an old time woodsman the other day. Douglas fir conk is on the increase. He tells me he can remember when a tree with conk was a rare thing; now it is hard to find one without it. He believes that the exclusion of fire has allowed the spores (spores which lived in the ground litter and were regularly killed by fire) to multiply and grow.

Not a far fetched thought!

When fires were uncontrolled, portions of fallen wood were consumed. I know places now in mixed Douglas fir-redwood stands where the floor, the canyons and the slopes have limbs, tops, trees and roots in a jumbled, jackstraw mess. Fire never got in and did its cleanup job. If and when it ever does things might be rough.

Has the jumble of down stuff had other non-apparent effects? Are there more shrews for example because there are more down logs? What of the nature of the ground, the moisture, the fungi, the insects and every minute creeping and crawling thing? Has anything been done to the tree reproduction potential? Are more rodents harbored here — do they eat more seed?

Do more insects find homes here — do they eat more seedlings? We just don't know, but I think it is safe to assume that fire exclusion has had its effect and what the effects are we may not see today, but we may see them 50 years from now. We may lose the forest to something else because we saved it from fire!

Atomic Indian

Albuquerque, N. M. (AP).—Frederick Young, Shiprock, N. M., Navajo Indian, is preparing at New Mexico university for a career in nuclear engineering. Young, who served four years with the air force in England, Germany and Japan, is attending on a Navajo tribal scholarship and under the GI bill. He is married to Helen Smith, also a Navajo, and they have two children, Rocky, 2½, and Joyce, 15 months.