

# Welcome to the Wildland Fire Edition of the Natural Inquirer !

Wildland fires have been in the news a lot. Every year, it seems, we hear about more frequent and more severe wildland fires. Wildland fires are fires that burn in forests, on prairies, or over other large natural areas. Wildland fires may start naturally or they may be started by human activity. Wildfires are large, uncontrolled wildland fires that usually burn large areas of land. They are typically started by lightning or by a careless human act.

In the past, we thought that most wildland fires were bad, and we tried to stop these fires from burning. We now know that wildland fire is neither good or bad, it is simply a natural part of the environment. Many plants need occasional fire to reproduce, and fire offers other benefits to the natural environment. For example, when fire burns

decaying branches and stumps, the nutrients from the plants are released into the soil, making them available to new plants. Without fire, open environments such as prairies eventually become covered with trees. When fires are not allowed to burn occasionally in the wildlands, the thick growth of plants near the ground level provides a lot of potential fuel. If a wildfire then begins to burn, it burns hotter and faster because of the extra fuel. Thus, by trying to eliminate wildland fire in the past, we have actually enabled larger fires to burn. To keep this from happening, land managers can start small, controlled fires that burn the fuel that is close to the ground. These fires are called managed fires or prescribed fires.

This edition of the *Natural Inquirer* is all about wildland fire. You will learn about the

benefits of wildland fire, as well as some of its dangers. You will learn what fire scientists are learning about wildland fire. They are learning, for example, that wildland fire should not be completely eliminated from natural environments, but it should be managed. They are learning how to predict which weather conditions most favor a wildfire being started. They are learning about the relationship between wildland fires and global warming. They are learning how to best protect homes and other buildings from wildfires. And they are learning about how wildland fires can benefit the natural environment.

Even though wildland fire can be beneficial to the environment, it is always dangerous. As you have always heard, you should never play with matches or with fire. If you see an uncontrolled fire burning, no matter where it is, immediately get away from the fire, and report the fire to an adult. Never leave a campfire unattended, and make certain that it is completely put out before you leave it. Wildland fires are interesting, and they are fun to learn about. As you will see when you read the articles, all of the scientists in this journal enjoy learning about wildland fire. We hope that you enjoy learning about it too!

## Is Your Community Firewise?

No forested community is completely safe from wildfire, but we can be wise about how our homes and communities are designed and built. A Firewise home and community is one that is designed, built, and maintained to withstand a wildfire without the help of the fire department. To help people create Firewise

homes and communities, the Firewise Communities program was created. This program teaches people that live in forested communities how to keep their homes safe from wildfires. You can read some of their tips on page 46 of this journal, and you can visit [www.firewise.org](http://www.firewise.org) for more information.