BOOK REVIEW

A biologist challenges common wisdom in 'Fire, Chaparral, and Survival in Southern California'

Reviewed by Terry Rodgers
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Biologist and fire ecologist Richard W. Halsey sees ample evidence that Southern Californians simply don't get it.

Surrounded by a highly flammable chaparral landscape, we insist on building housing in inappropriate locations that are impossible to defend against wildfires. When the inevitable happens, we expect firefighters to accomplish the impossible by saving every structure, no matter how stupidly constructed. In the fire's aftermath, there's a clamor for more equipment, more choppers, more air tankers.

The public believes chaparral wildfires whipped up by Santa Ana winds can be easily subdued by a bigger, better-equipped army of firefighters. Using tragedy to push a political agenda, some try to blame the fires' destruction on the chaparral itself and those who favor open space conservation.

In "Fire, Chaparral, and Survival in Southern California," Halsey directly challenges the common wisdom that has fostered the pattern of tail-chasing after every wildfire disaster.

This is an interesting and important book that could dispel the public's misperceptions and improve public policy to minimize death and destruction from wildfires. Halsey forces the reader to rethink how mankind should live in Southern California's estimated 8.6 million acres of chaparral. He makes the case that much can be done through better land-use planning, improved building codes and a renewed vigilance on the part of homeowners.

"Past fire suppression practices or environmental regulations limiting vegetation treatments in wild spaces cannot be blamed for the wildfires we see today," he writes. "We must recognize fire will always be part of the California experience, with or without chaparral."

The initial chapters read like a chaparral-habitat field guide, before the book switches abruptly to Halsey's intriguing treatise on wildfire management, including lessons learned from the catastrophic wildfires of 2003.

The early chapters are worthwhile for amateur naturalists or natural history guides seeking a comprehensive understanding of chaparral ecology. Like the Golden State's once-robust population of grizzly bears, native chaparral and its cousin habitat, coastal sage scrub, are being systematically eliminated. For too long, the beauty and utility of the chaparral have been underappreciated. These plant communities are crucial to a healthy watershed that deters erosion and provide habitat for wildlife.

While it's true that periodic fires are healthy for chaparral, humans have increased the frequency of wildfires. Such overburning allows non-native grasses and other plants to take over.

"Considering development, increased fire frequency and the possibility of continued drought conditions, the future (of chaparral) looks extremely difficult," Halsey writes.

Much of the book is a how-to manual for homeowners who wish to create a reasonable defense against wildfire. Halsey argues that, rather than rely on firefighters to come to their rescue, homeowners need to be more savvy about how they prepare for the fires. They can create "survivable spaces" with intelligent (not clear-cut) brush clearing along with on-site measures such as misters under vulnerable wooden eaves.

The author supports his theories with a collection of interviews and anecdotes of residents and firefighters who have first-hand experience battling wildfires.

"What had become clear after the 2003 firestorm is that people had become so unfamiliar with the environment in which they lived and so dependent on outside assistance that they had lost control of their own lives," he writes. "They had neglected to prepare for the inevitable."

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