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"Physicians of the Forest": A Rhetorical Critique of the Bush Healthy Forest Initiative

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This article explores national debate over federal fire policy that emerged during the 2002 fire season in the United States and the ensuing shift in ideology that culminated in the Bush Administration's Healthy Forest Initiative. Several dimensions of the wild fire debate prompt the attention of environmental scholars in multiple disciplines. At one level the debate focuses upon rhetorical efforts to redefine the legitimate stakeholders responsible for formulating and implementing federal policy. At a deeper level, the debate highlights the way in which humans define wilderness, apply science, and position them within nature itself. The Healthy Forest Initiative represents a significant change in national forest management, logging, and fire suppression policies and offers a compelling case study of environmental rhetoric and its role in public policy debates.

Daniel Botkin, one of the preeminent ecologists of the 20th century, believes that humans need a radically different orientation toward nature if life on earth is to survive. Part of this orientation requires a new way of talking about the natural world. Botkin (1990) contends "the way to achieve harmony with nature is first to break free of old metaphors and embrace new ones so that we can lift the veils that prevent us from accepting what we observe" (p. 189). One belief that must change is the idealized view that nature is constant, stable and harmonious. Botkin writes, "as long as we could believe that nature undisturbed was constant, we were provided with a simple standard against which to judge our actions" (p. 188). This standard has created a touchstone that can be misleading and shortsighted. Botkin (1995) believes that nature "is never constant. Left alone the environment shifts continually among many conditions" (p. 14). The result is that nature "does not provide a simple answer to what is right, proper, and best for our environment. There is no single condition that is best for all of life" (p. 15).

In Botkin's view, the study of nature demands the attention of all scholars, not just that of scientists and policy analysts. Our collective concern with understanding nature should be "not merely scientific curiosity, but a subject that pervades philosophy, theology, aesthetics, and psychology" (Botkin,

1990, p. 188). As a result, scholars need to go beyond traditional scientific boundaries and consider the fundamental human archetypes that help define nature, including one of the most powerful symbols of all, fire. Historian Stephen Pyne (1995) concurs, concluding that human history can only be understood when studied within the context of fire. "Fire has become a pyric projection of human life, thought, and character," he writes. "In its flames the biologic agency of humanity can be judged" (p. 16). Life in the American West as such can be told through a recounting of the big fires. Whether one is considering the Idaho/Montana inferno of 1910, the most deadly of the century; the 1949 Mann Gulch fire which killed 14 young men; the 1988 Yellowstone fires; the 2000 Bitterroot complex of fires; or the 2002 season that saw record-setting fires in Arizona, Colorado, and Oregon-in each instance fire changed the way humans view nature. In any story of wild fire, the human connection seems paramount in the social construction of the event: who started the fire, who is hurt by the fires, who allowed the conditions that fueled the fires, who has a plan to prevent catastrophic fires of the future, and so on, as the discussion continues over the social/cultural/political meanings of fire.

In this article, authors explore the national debate over federal fire policy that emerged during the 2002 fire season. Specifically, they examine the public demand for accountability during the fires and the ensuing shift in ideology that culminated in the Bush Administration's "Healthy Forest Initiative" plan. Several dimensions of the wild fire debate prompt the attention of environmental scholars in multiple disciplines. At one level the debate focuses upon rhetorical efforts to redefine the group of legitimate stakeholders who are responsible for formulating and implementing federal policy. At a deeper level, the debate highlights the way in which humans define wilderness, apply science, and position them within nature itself.

2002 Fire Debate

"Fire has become the defining characteristic of the West," writes Gantenbein (2002b) for *Scientific American*. "From May until September, from New Mexico and Arizona to Washington, Idaho, and Montana, plumes of smoke as high as 40,000 feet punctuate the horizon as tens of thousands of acres below them burn" (p. 82). In 2000, one of the worst fire seasons in history occurred and brought with it a new sensitivity over how the nation's fire policy should be managed. The news magazine *Time* (Morrow et al., 2000) reported it this way in September of that year, "Nature sometimes has suicidal tendencies. This year in the American West, it has set itself on fire-fire's version of The Perfect Storm, a convergence of dry summer lighting, blast furnace air and millions of acres of tinder. The worst is yet to come." But the "perfect firestorm" of 2000 was not a once-in-a-lifetime event; only

two years later more acres burned and more money was spent than ever before, and a new presidential administration proposed a different course in national fire policy.

For many observers the size, intensity, and potential threat to human life of the western wild fires seem to increase dramatically every year. Jim Paxon, the U.S. Forest Service lead spokesperson during the 2002 Rodeo and Chediski fires in Arizona, compared these wild fires with those he had fought at Yellowstone in 1988, and New Mexico and Montana in 2000. In Paxon's judgment, Arizona's Rodeo-Chediski fire was "the biggest, fastest, most aggressive, most climactic, awesome fire I've ever seen" (as quoted in Davis, 2003, p. B1). The size, scope and intensity of the 2002 fire season overwhelmed many charged with managing the flames. The arson-caused Hayman fire in Colorado began in early June and the Rodeo-Chediski fire began soon after. By late July, "it seemed the entire West was ablaze. At that point, more than four million acres of forest and brushland had burned—twice the annual average in the past decade" (Gantenbein, 2002b, p. 82). By the end of the season, wild fires in the United States had scorched over 7 million acres of public and private land and set a new record for the cost of fire suppression. Fires affected "hundreds of communities across the country, as 21 firefighters were killed battling these fires, tens of thousands of people were evacuated from their homes and thousands of structures were destroyed" (*Administrative actions*, 2002).

The Arizona fires of 2002 surprised fire officials in terms of their size and growth. In less than 24 hours, the Rodeo Fire exploded from less than 600 acres to almost 36,000 acres. More telling is a graph printed in the *Arizona Republic* showing that on Tuesday afternoon, June 18, a 15-acre fire had been spotted. By Thursday morning, June 20, it had reached 30,000 acres. By noon it was 60,000 acres and by midnight it had reached 85,000 acres. By Friday morning, June 21, the Rodeo Fire had reached 100,000 acres with the nearby Chediski Fire covering 25,000 acres ("Despair, defiance," 2002, p. A22). The two fires quickly merged and eventually destroyed 467 structures and blackened 468,638 acres within just a few days, becoming the largest fire in state history. More than 30,000 residents of central Arizona were evacuated from their homes and many were not allowed home for more than two weeks. Not only were Americans deeply moved by the nightly newscasts of the flames and the fleeing citizens, but they were angered by the fact that both fires were arson-caused. White Mountain Apache tribal member Leonard Gregg apparently started the Rodeo Fire to create work for himself and other seasonal firefighters on the reservation. Lost Phoenix resident Valinda Jo Elliot, who wandered away from a stranded vehicle, started a signal fire to attract a news helicopter; the unsuppressed fire became the Chediski Fire. For many observers, the human element was

nearly as disturbing as the fire damage itself.

One of the manifestations of the crisis atmosphere during the Rodeo-Chediski fire was a concerted effort to assign blame for the conditions that allowed such large and powerful fires. For example, the Political Economy Research Center, a conservative think-tank located in the Pacific Northwest, issued a press release on July 12 charging that environmentalists were to blame for the fires. Claiming that a sustained program of logging would help thin the forests of dangerous fuel build-ups, the editorial concluded that, "the fact is that environmental organizations have opposed logging, including restorative thinning, for years. Their opposition has played a deadly role in helping the fuel buildup to reach dangerous levels. . . . Fires will continue to burn unless the environmental opponents change their actions, not just their rhetoric" (Fretwell, 2002). Moreover, the Arizona fires paved the way for politicians to chastise the apparent excesses of forest management. Arizona Senator John Kyl blamed "radical environmentalists. They would rather see the forests burn than to see sensible forest management" (Graham, 2002). Arizona Governor Jane Hull, a strong ally of President Bush, seethed with anger. "The policies that are coming from the East Coast, that are coming from the environmentalists that say we don't need to log, we don't need to thin our forests, are absolutely ridiculous," charged Hull. "Nobody from the East Coast knows how to manage these fires and I for one have had it" (Graham, 2002). A particularly vitriolic guest opinion appeared in northern Idaho's *Lewiston Morning Tribune* in late August:

Some years back, the granola-crunching, crystal-worshipping environmental community gained control of forest policy. They argued that fire was a natural part of forest ecology and that lightning-started fires (i.e. natural fires, as opposed to flicked cigarette-started fires) should be allowed to burn unhindered so that forests would return to health. . . . Uncontrolled wildfires should be tolerated no more than uncontrolled floods. If health can be restored to our forest by thinning, then that seems to be the wiser path. And if somebody makes a profit on the deal, that's even better. Where the environmentalist wackos and their socialist allies see profits as a sin, sensible people see profits going hand in hand with jobs. (Costello, 2002, p. A10)

Although most advocates did not employ such polarizing language, many shared the underlying sentiment that environmentalists had gained the upper-hand in setting fire policy in recent decades and that it needed to be radically changed to include logging as a means of achieving healthy forests.

In order to reduce the power of environmentalists in the process of formulating federal public land policies, two lines of argument appeared during the crisis atmosphere of the 2002 fires. First, advocates demanded that government officials give greater voice to the scientists. Forestry doctoral student Cynthia Holte (2002) claimed that the polarized debate about fire between the logging and environmental forces fostered misinformation and injustice. "The informed and objective decisions needed to manage this forest will not come from a round-table discussion between environmentalists, profit seekers, or vote-seeking individuals within the state or community," Holte wrote (para. 15). "The forest needs to be managed by the U.S. Forest Service and their research advisors. This is what they were educated and trained for. Truths, rather than mistruths, need to be presented to the community" (para. 16). Former Forest Service firefighter and logging company spokesman Frank Carroll (2002) prepared an opinion piece for the *Denver Post* attacking environmentalist support for natural fire as a management tool. "It turns out that none of their arguments were based on science," charged Carroll. "What no one has bothered to study so far-so sure are we of our philosophical and ideological purity-is whether the impacts of human management are worse than the impacts of these outrageous fires." Ultimately, Carroll concluded, "we need more study and more evaluation" but at the same time national environmental groups "should abandon their anti-logging stance and help in the search for honest answers" (p. E1).

The second argument appeared as logging advocates demanded new federal legislation to prevent the so-called "frivolous" lawsuits filed by environmentalist groups that essentially stopped significant logging on federal lands. As the summer fire season started, Interior Secretary Gale Norton and Republican Governors Judy Martz (Montana) and Jane Hull (Arizona) attacked the environmental community, claiming "environmentalists were to blame for recent wildfires because they had gone to court to block the federal government's proposed thinning projects" (Kriz, 2002, p. 2092). In late July, as the Rodeo-Chediski fire was in its final stages, but while the Oregon Biscuit fire and smaller Colorado fires were still uncontrolled, two Arizona Congressional leaders introduced legislation to exempt western states from lawsuits that prevented logging projects on public lands. According to the *Arizona Republic*, the bill would "fully exempt 'all Western states' from every type of lawsuit that could be filed to stop a forest-thinning project. It would also block any U.S. court from hearing such a legal action" (House, 2002, p. B8).

Rhetoric of the Bush Healthy Forest Initiative

Within this volatile atmosphere the Bush Administration presented a new

proposal for fire prevention called the "Healthy Forest Initiative." The plan received wide coverage in the national media in August and September 2002 and continues to be at the center of an attempt to significantly shift public land management in the United States. At the core of the plan is an effort to create private sector incentives to promote logging/thinning projects in the national forests. The plan calls for a "reduction in overlapping environmental reviews and more long-term contracts for timber companies to thin overgrown forests" (Leavenworth, 2002, p. A1). Industry officials embraced the plan, claiming it would restore balance to the process of managing the nation's forests. For example, Chris West, representing the American Forest Resource Council, announced, "We support the Bush administration's efforts to turn the management of these national resources over to the professionals, the ones that live and work with these resources day in and day out" (Kriz, 2002, p. 2093). The American Forest and Paper Association told its members to write to their federal representatives and demand support for the Bush plan, which would "address the grave forest health crisis by restoring common sense and balanced to federal land management without sacrificing needed environmental protections and oversight" (American Forest and Paper Assn., 2002).

The Bush Healthy Forest Initiative presents a major change in the manner in which the federal government will manage the public lands, especially its forests. From a rhetorical perspective, the public discourse supporting the Bush plan centers upon the metaphors of health, prescribed actions, and treatment. In carrying this metaphor of the physician and the patient to the public, the Bush administration and its allies are constructing a new vision of wilderness, politics, and fire. Before examining the Healthy Forest Initiative in detail, it is instructive to consider how environmental discourse functions in policy debates.

Daniel Botkin (1995) identifies four "kinds of answers" that must be addressed in setting environmental policy: utilitarian, ecological, moral, and aesthetic. Although writing about the reintroduction of wolves, Botkin's four lines of public reasoning are appropriate for studying other environmental issues, including forest management and fire. Significantly, Botkin believes that all four reasons must be addressed in formulating policy. He writes:

It is worth repeating that each of these justifications has its place, but that all four are necessary if we are to understand the human desire to conserve the great diversity of life around us, along with the utility and prudence that lies with the conservation of species. In my experience, we get ourselves into trouble when we have one motivation and attempt to justify with another. (p. 156)

Botkin offers an insightful perspective for discussing public advocacy surrounding the Bush Healthy Forest Initiative. A good beginning point is President Bush's announcement of his new initiative at Central Point, Oregon, in August 2002. Bush (2002) opens by claiming that "our job is to make sure we do everything we can to prevent forest fires from happening in the first place." But, "we've got other challenges. Listen, any time anybody who wants to find work, who can't work, it means we've got a problem. So I want to talk to about the job we have of making sure we grow our economy, so people can work." This juxtaposition of a healthy forest and a healthy economy dominates the speech and provides a clear vision of how the Bush administration views nature. Later in the speech, Bush reiterates this vision:

I believe a healthy economy will mean that we work to have-in order to have a healthy economy, we've got to have a healthy forest policy. I mean, if you have good forest policy, it will yield to a better economy. (Applause.) After all, the fires that have devastated the West create a drag on the economy. It costs money to fight these fires. It means people lose property. There's opportunity lost. No, good forest policy not only is important for the preservation and conservation of good forests for future generations, it's good for the economy.

Bush (2002) continues by elaborating on the need to make the nation's forests healthy by thinning. "We need to thin, we need to make our forests healthy by using some common sense. . . . it makes sense to encourage people to make sure that the forests not only are healthy from disease, but are healthy from fire." In proposing a common sense approach to the nation's wild fire problem, Bush asks for regulatory reform. "And plus, there's just too many lawsuits, just endless litigation. . . . there's a fine line between people expressing their selves and their opinions and using litigation to keep the United States of America from enacting common sense forest policy."

The written plan, detailing the president's policy more specifically, was also released on August 22, 2002. Titled *Healthy Forests: An Initiative for Wildfire Prevention and Stronger Communities*, the document offers a compelling vision for changing wilderness policy. The document opens by laying out the specific entities that suffer from wild fires, stating, "the American people, their property, and our environment, particularly the forests and rangelands of the West, are threatened by catastrophic and environmental degradation" (*Healthy forests*, 2002, p. 1). Significantly, this opening sentence becomes the structural device for the initiative's overview

of the need for change. In the section outlining "The Need for Healthier Forests," the report declares that "catastrophic wildfires harm people, property, and the environment" and each entity becomes a detailed subdivision of the report. People are at risk because of evacuation, air pollution, and property damage, and there are threats to those who fight fires. Economies are threatened by loss of tourism and damage to watersheds. The environment is damaged in a number of ways, including wildlife habitat, soil erosion, and disease and insect infestation. In this structure, the report subtly identifies the priority list for setting environmental policies: people first, their property second, and the environment last. As a result, the Healthy Forest Initiative hearkens back to the fundamental rule guiding wild fire management in the previous half-century-save humans and their structures first, think about the other elements later.

In line with the crisis atmosphere of the summer's massive wild fires, still burning in some places as the President spoke; the report fosters a sense of immediacy. "Given the urgency and scale of the work to be done, it is imperative that we act quickly. We must reverse a century of misguided mismanagement of our forests. We must undertake a new century of forest restoration-yet land managers and local economies are too often held back by red tape and litigation" (*Healthy forests*, 2002, p. 13).

An insightful representation of the administration's rhetorical efforts to control the terms of the forest debate appeared in a Department of Agriculture Fact Sheet issued in December 2002 identifying the steps taken to implement the president's initiative. In the document's concluding paragraph, Botkin's four lines of environmental discourse are addressed:

The Administration will continue to work with Congress, state, local and tribal officials and the public to advance additional *common-sense* efforts to protect communities and people and *restore forest and rangeland health*. The Administration is committed to building upon these efforts to improve the regulatory processes to ensure more *timely decisions, greater efficiency* and *better results* in reducing the risk of *catastrophic wildfires* and *forest diseases*. If implemented, these proposed tools will assist land managers in restoring forest health and *social, economic, and ecological harmony* in communities.
(*Administrative actions*, 2002, emphasis added)

Using "common-sense" actions to "protect communities and people" reflects a moral response to a dangerous situation. Promising "timely decisions, greater efficiency, and better results" affirms an aesthetic of unity,

completeness, and care about the process. Reducing the risks of "catastrophic fires" and "forest diseases" within the context of achieving "social" and "economic harmony in communities" stresses the utilitarian aspect of the plan. Finally, gaining "ecological harmony" in the forests and rangelands speaks for itself.

Republican surrogates for President Bush attempted to kindle strong public support for the Healthy Forest Initiative in speeches, editorials, and other public forums. Montana Governor Judy Martz addressed the Montana Wood Products Association annual meeting one week after the Bush plan was announced. Martz reiterated the guiding principle of the Bush plan as she declared, "Show me a healthy forest and I'll show you loggers at work, mills operating at full capacity, wildfires that we can stop and a stronger economy" (as quoted in Devlin, 2002, p. A1). Responding to environmentalist criticism that the initiative was "all about logging," Martz replied, "You're darn right it's all about logging. It's about cleaning up the forests. And who's going to do it if loggers don't? Who else? . . . You are the physicians of the forest" (Devlin, 2002, p. A1).

An important component of the Healthy Forest Initiative is the Bush administration's reliance upon science to enhance the plan's public credibility. Four days after President Bush's Oregon speech, Interior Secretary Gale Norton appeared on National Public Radio to promote the initiative (Conan, 2002). Noting the "decades of mismanagement" leaving overgrown and unnaturally dense forests to manage, Norton observed that federal officials have two tools for managing the forests, "One is prescribed burns, and the other is mechanical thinning." When asked if mechanical thinning was simply a euphemism for logging, Norton replied, "Not necessarily, because mechanical thinning involves taking out the trees that have become too dense, that ordinarily fires would have to take out." The President's plan, Norton continued, is based on developing partnerships with local communities and logging companies. The small trees of the nation's forestlands, overgrown because of fire suppression, are "not something that loggers are going to get excited about. Really, what we have to do is to find creative ways to make that thinning process self-sustaining, by finding some creative way of using those small-wood products. . . . We would be essentially paying them to do the thinning and offsetting the wood product costs." When reminded that some critics have called the Healthy Forest Initiative a "giveaway to the timber industry", Norton turned to science in her refutation of that claim:

I think there is strong research that-I've visited the areas where they are doing the research of thinning the forests, using a combination of thinning and then a continuation of prescribed

burns over time to restore the forest to a healthy condition. And it makes such a dramatic difference. And you can tell that this forest is healthy, as opposed to the ones that are clogged with lots and lots of little trees. . . . Yes, fire's a natural part of the ecosystem, but once the forests have become so dense, it is unnatural and it destroys even the large trees that have withstood centuries of fires in the past. (Conan, 2002)

Norton's call to embrace science is an integral aspect of the Healthy Forest Initiative. One authority cited regularly by federal officials is Wallace Covington, head of the Ecological Restoration Institute at Northern Arizona University. He contends that instead of "just focusing on houses burning up we need to focus on entire ecosystems, and forest restoration treatments should be the fundamental approach." According to Covington, "It's time for a healthy dose of preventative medicine. We need to thin out trees, protect old-growth trees and reintroduce fire into the ecosystem." The foundation for Covington's ecological restoration plan comes in the form of "treatments" of forest areas. "These treatments seek to return forest health and reduce the risk of crown fires," argues Covington. "They are designed to treat the forest so that fire may again play its natural role with low-intensity ground fire" (as quoted in Holmes-Stevens, July/August 2002). Covington and his research institute have emerged as the leading source of scientific data in the Bush forest plan. One journalist, clearly taken with the physician analogy, calls Covington an interesting person who is "intelligent, articulate, with the soothing manner of a good pediatrician, yet harshly critical of past Forest Service practices that have led to the current fire-prone state of forests" (Gantenbein, 2002a). Covington has used his national stature to call for an immediate response to the pending future crisis while appearing on major television newscasts and being interviewed in many of the nation's leading newspapers. In an essay written to generate support in the academic community for his work, Covington identified "ecologists, natural resource professionals, and others with relevant expertise" as the primary authorities in the debate. In contrast, Covington cautioned against "being misled by logical dodges, faulty premises, and faulty arguments" of critics to the Healthy Forest Initiative. In Covington's opinion, the opposition's "inflammatory rhetoric only increases the likelihood of continued ecosystem-scale destruction of the western forests" (Covington, 2003, p. 7).

In 2003, many Republican leaders, including President Bush, continued to speak in favor of the Healthy Forest Initiative, relying in large measure upon the rhetorical themes that emerged in previous messages. In March, Congressional hearings on the plan were held in Flagstaff, Arizona; the bill was passed in the House of Representatives on May 20, 2003 (with 256 votes in favor and 170 opposed). Also in March the President's major

political advisor, Karl Rove, met with timber officials in Oregon and urged them to fund a national "grass-roots" public relations campaign to help get the legislation passed in both Houses (Mapes, 2003). Approximately 100 people attended the meeting, representing a "broad spectrum of timber-related industries, including representatives from companies involved in firefighting. Pledge forms were distributed urging companies to contribute a slice of their sales in the West, up to a maximum of \$275,000, to the public relations campaign" (Mapes, 2003, p. A17). The Administration stepped up its rhetorical efforts to engage the public as well. In June 2003, Interior Secretary Gale Norton (2003) attended the Western Governors' Conference in Montana and called for immediate passage of the Initiative. Norton took note that when she assumed office, "There was no method, no plan for making fuels treatment work. There were no priorities, no data base to keep track of the work" (p. 3). In contrast, the Bush Administration had set clear policies and priorities that were most clearly found in the Healthy Forest Initiative.

President Bush also took time in 2003 to support the Healthy Forest Initiative, presenting three speeches from May to August advocating Senate passage of the legislation. On August 11 he spoke at the site of the Summerhaven fire that destroyed over 300 homes and businesses in a small resort community outside Tucson, Arizona. *Common sense* served as the theme of his speech. "And interestingly enough," the President concluded, the Initiative "will not only save our forests, but will create jobs. . . . we have to rely upon local contractors who will clear away and be able to sell smaller trees, the trees that provide the kindling." He pointed to the other controversial element of the bill, limiting environmentalist court challenges. "We believe all voices should be heard," the President declared. But "we want to the process to work quickly so we can get on about the business of saving our forests" (Bush, 2003). Later in August Bush returned to Oregon to continue his campaign for the Healthy Forest legislation. Speaking in an area with forest fires burning, the President called for reducing the appeals process in selecting areas for forest thinning. The President asked for "reasonable limits" on litigation by environmental groups because "forest health" must be a "high priority, when courts are forced to resolve disputes." The President returned to his theme of protection, health and tourism in this speech; "it's a good common-sense piece of legislation that will make our forests more healthy, that will protect old-growth stands, that will make it more likely endangered species will exist, that will protect our communities, that will make it easier for people to enjoy living on the edges of our national forests" (Bush, 2003).

Analysis of the Bush Administration's Fire Rhetoric

It is instructive to return to Botkin's broader concern with finding language that changes the manner in which we think about nature and human efforts to control it through legislation and policy. Bush's Healthy Forest Initiative is designed to appeal to Americans by answering all four questions that Botkin claims must be answered in environmental policy-making. The utilitarian and ecological justifications are the cornerstone of the initiative-healthy forests and a healthy economy go hand-in-hand. But what of the two other questions, addressing the moral and aesthetic reasons for the forest plan? Two metaphors become instructive at this point. First, to "discard decades of mismanagement" suggests strongly that the "unhealthy" forests of today can become "healthy" through appropriate actions. Health implies harmony, beauty, and balance, all aesthetic standards that have high value in Western culture. In contrast, we are offered visions of unhealthy forests that are diseased, dense, overgrown, and may even be tinder boxes. Second, the essence of the Healthy Forest policy is the vision of a physician who diagnoses her/his patient, seeks the best "treatment" for the ailment, and promotes healing. The moral imperative is clear-our culture does not deny the sick individual (in theory) access to health care because it is immoral (and illegal in some cases) to deny care in life-threatening situations. In these ways, the Bush Healthy Forest Initiative is constructed to answer each of Botkin's four necessary qualities of environmental advocacy. Although the Initiative's opponents believe that the utilitarian standard is the primary goal (and underlying rationale) of the plan, their response will need to address the other levels of environmental discourse as well.

There is little doubt that wild fires are getting larger, costing more money, and threatening people and their property in record numbers. The question of how to respond to the fires demands attention, study, discussion and policy-making, all achieved through public discourse. But a more fundamental question emerges in considering the fires of 2002 and the corresponding Healthy Forest Initiative. How does the Bush plan fit into a context of biodiversity, sustainability, and an ecological conscience? Rhetorical critics Philip Wander and Dennis Jaehne (2000) offer a striking perspective for those who study the symbolic meanings associated with nature. They suggest that scholars should respect the power and function of societal constructs such as capitalism, religion, and science, but at the same time "keep them at a distance" because they are "made for us and they should be made to serve *human* needs" (p. 216). This perspective, to resist the reification of science, becomes "all the more crucial as our understanding of human needs is redefined in an emerging ecological context" (p. 216). Wander and Jaehne add that, "this is because eco-logic radically alters our notions of time, space, and consequence. Eco-logic points to worldwide problems reaching a thousand years into the future" (p. 216). This challenge, to resist the single path and embrace an eco-logic, corresponds to

Botkin's earlier calls for a revolutionary change in thinking about nature.

In Botkin's view, three distinct images have dominated human thinking about nature—the machine, the creature, and the divine. Ironically, the mechanical and divine images of nature "share much in common. Both lead to the idea of nature as constant, unless unwisely disturbed, and as stable, capable of returning to its constant state if disturbed" (1990, p. 13). The rise of ecology in the 20th century was consistent with the machine view of nature, which in practice "reinforced the idea of the balance of nature" (Botkin, 1995, p. 14). More significantly, the machine view of nature fostered the belief that "nature is completely malleable, and that we can change it and improve it in any way we like to achieve the balance of nature and whatever other economic or social goals we may have" (1995, p. 14). In contrast, the organic view "focuses on change and processes, with change seen as inevitable, to which, like it or not, human beings must yield" (1990, p. 13). Botkin does not reject the practice of science and the continued accumulation of knowledge; instead, he offers a much broader and complex view of nature. The "deeper perspective" he calls for demands two points of departure from the machine model of nature. First, he advances the idea of nature as being highly complex (simultaneous, interconnected, independent networks). Second, he believes that chance and random actions must be considered to be a part of the natural world of life and death (1990, p. 129). Botkin concludes that "wilderness is a nature of chance and complexities that we need no longer fear as unknowable or unpredictable" (1990, p. 131).

What then may one say about the Healthy Forest Initiative and its goal of bringing "common sense" principles to forest management? Or the explicit effort by the Bush Administration to link healthy forests with healthy economies? Or even the promotion of "mechanical thinning" with economic incentives offered to the "private sector partners"? In our reading of the Healthy Forest Initiative and the rhetorical texts of its supporters, it appears that nature is being conceptualized using the language and thinking of the machine. The initiative's definition of health is predicated on the notion of achieving balance and harmony, not only within specific ecosystems, but also with the human economic and social structures connected to the forests. This sense of harmony rests on the expertise of the specialist—the scientist, the forest ranger, the logger. Some scientists, for example, argue that the key to proper management is to identify an ideal historical time and return the forests to their state of ecological health at that time. Forest science professor Tom Bonnicksen suggests that there is "only one way to break this cycle of monster fires and that's to restore our forests to something like they were historically" (as quoted in Schmidt, 2002, p. A1). Covington agrees, calling for a return to the "kinds of conditions that the

forests were in before Euro-American settlement" (Sawyer, 2002).

The eco-logic that Wander and Jaehne call for in dealing with questions of nature, wilderness, and sustainability demands a rethinking of time and space in considering how humans should respond to their environment. Many advocates have identified the federal government's "Smokey Bear" philosophy of suppressing all wild fires by ten a.m. as *the* primary cause of the "monster" fires of the last 20 years. That level of maintaining balance, control, and harmony failed and Americans are being asked to embrace another vision of balance, control, and harmony. As Interior Secretary Norton says, the Bush plan endorses "mechanical thinning" and not logging, although administration critics believe that two are the same thing. The combination of thinning and controlled burns, using science and industry in partnership, will eventually return the forests to a state of health. But as Botkin has pointed out, those seeking any sense of order and harmony in the short term may fail to see the constants in the long term. Moreover, the element of risk, danger and chance that Botkin views as an integral part of life and death, is subsumed in a belief that fires can be managed with technology. The Arizona fires of 2002 were started intentionally; one was an act of crime and the other was an act of desperation and/or ignorance. In either case, the scientific basis of forest management, based on the machine model of nature, does not easily compute such actions.

Critics of the Healthy Forest Initiative have appropriated, in a manner, Botkin's call for a new way of thinking about fire and ecology. Paul Zelder, an environmental science professor at the University of Wisconsin, was direct. "The thing that troubles us as fire ecologists is how grossly oversimplified the reasoning is, not just on the part of politicians, but by the general public. That's understandable because fire is such a complicated subject" (as quoted in Tobin, 2002, p. B1). In response to the President's call for "sound science" as a guide to thinning the forests, a coalition of major environmental groups called the claim misleading. The coalition, called Wildfire Watch, noted that:

The Administration's forest policy is not based on the best available "sound science" and will fail to control the threat of wildland fire. No single cause can explain the variety or number of wildfires that may occur. . . . There is no simple, proven prescription for meeting the threat of wildfires and solutions require treatments adjusted to local needs. (*Wildfire Watch*, 2003)

Conclusion and Implications

The record-setting fires of 2002 prompted a fundamental rethinking of natural resource and wilderness politics in the United States. Not since Ronald Reagan entered office has such a major reorientation toward nature appeared in American politics. Fires present to us the power of nature in ways that other environmental events cannot match. Moreover, many people see fire within the human construct of control. To perceive fire as equivalent to an earthquake, flood, or tornado goes against the shared experiences of humans. Stephen Pyne (1995) reminds us that people "are genetically disposed to handle fire, but we do not come programmed knowing how to use it" (p. 15). As such, fire will continue to demand our collective attention as we reconstruct its meanings, both in terms of its power to create and to destroy. The Bush Administration believes that human values must be at the core of environmental policy-making in the United States, moving policy away from ecosystem-centered values. In this way, fire and its rhetorical meanings will continue to be part of the nation's larger effort to understand and be part of the natural world of forests, mountains, rivers, and wildlife habitat.

In the summer and fall months of 2003, President Bush and his supporters used the major wild fires burning throughout the West as a call for passage of the Healthy Forest Initiative. When it became clear that Democrats would not help pass the act as originally presented in August 2002, the legislation was altered and became known as the 2003 "Healthy Forest Restoration Act." It received Congressional approvals in November 2003 and was signed by President Bush on December 3. Passage of the Act demonstrated the President's success in defining the context of the public land debate and many elements of the original Healthy Forest Initiative became law, including limits upon appeals and environmental reviews of thinning projects. Moreover, the bill nearly doubles the amount of federal funding for forest thinning projects (House, 2003). The debate over federal fire policy, however, will continue as the 2003 Healthy Forest legislation is implemented and revised. As Jay Watson of The Wilderness Society said, "How the law is implemented will determine if it is helpful to the forests or a payback to the timber companies" (as quoted in Gehrke, 2003, p. A7). In this manner the symbolic meanings of forest health will remain significant parts of the nation's environmental debate.

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