

Mr. Wilson

Wildfires

A raging wildfire is a frightening thing. Flames race through the treetops, sometimes (1) faster than a person can run, burning at temperatures hot enough to melt steel. A wildfire can be a major disaster, capable of destroying hundreds of homes and costing human lives.

But not all fires are bad. Fires in nature can help as well as harm. A burned forest allows (5) young plants to begin growing. And fire is necessary for some trees, such as sequoias, to release their seeds. Instead of being an ending, fire is often a new chapter in the continuing story of the natural world.

For many years, Smokey the Bear warned that “only you” could prevent forest fires, making people think that all fires were enemies. But wildfires are a fact of life in the (10) wilderness, and plants and animals have adjusted to them. Many trees are so dependent on fires that they need cycles of fire in order to grow. Other kinds of trees and shrubs quickly grow back after a fire, often healthier than before. Animals are rarely killed in forest fires. Most are able to flee from a spreading fire. And plants that grow quickly after a fire provide food for animals that might otherwise starve. (15)

After a fire, burned areas quickly burst into life. In fact, when the ground is still warm from the fires, ants, woods beetles, millipedes, and centipedes are busy. Fire beetles actually seek out fire to breed and lay their eggs in charred logs. The first plants that appear are those whose roots and seeds were there before the fire. But soon new seeds are carried in by the wind and on the fur of animals or in droppings. (20)

If you watch the movie *Bambi*, you might think that deer and other animals panic and flee in all directions from rapidly approaching flames. But that is not what really happens. Fires often move slowly through forests and grasslands. Larger animals, such as bears, elf, bison, moose, and deer, simply walk away from the fire. Bison and elk graze as usual, sometimes on the flaming edges of the fire. Elk even step over fiery logs to eat patches of (25) unburned grass. The animals that are affected die mostly from smoke inhalation rather than from the flames.

Fire removes dead trees—making room for new trees. In addition, younger trees are usually surrounded by many different kinds of trees. Before the fire, the towering older trees blocked sunlight from the forest floor, allowing only a few other species of plants to (30) flourish there. Without the periodic fires, low growing plants that have survived in the park for thousands of years would die off completely.

Wildfires are neither good nor bad. In forests and grasslands, they are a part of the endless cycle of change. (34)

Source: Source: Simon, Seymour. Wildfires. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1996.