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Book Review: Smokescreen: Debunking Wildfire Myths to Save Our Forests and Climate

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BOOK REVIEW

Smokescreen: Debunking Wildfire Myths to Save Our Forests and Our Climate by Chad T. Hanson (University Press of Kentucky, 280 Pages; 2021)

In recent years it has become nearly inevitable to see news coverage of large wildfires around the globe. The public is bombarded with footage depicting the ash-covered communities and landscapes left behind after a fire. Frequently, these events are followed by fervent calls for better forest management, “fuel” reduction, and reforestation. In *Smokescreen: Debunking Wildfire Myths to Save Our Forests and Our Climate*, author Chad T. Hanson¹ takes strong and somewhat controversial stances on the complex role of wildland fires in fire-adapted ecosystems, the current debate about wildfire’s impact on climate change, and importantly, the effects of pro-logging narratives employed by the logging industry and various land management entities such as the U.S. Forest Service.

Hanson—an environmental advocate and ecologist—has significant experience with forests and fire ecology and has conducted extensive research on wildland fire in the Sierra Nevada region. In the first few pages of the *Prologue*, Hanson lays out the origins of his interest in forest preservation and sets the tone for what is to come in the rest of the book. Hanson first became interested in forest preservation in 1989 when he and his brother hiked the 2,700-mile Pacific Crest Trail from Mexico to Canada through California, Oregon, and Washington. While in California’s Sierra Nevada mountains he encountered vast sections of clear-cut forests on public land, with the logged sections hidden from passersby by the U.S. Forest Service using detour and washed-out trail signs. On that trip, Hanson learned about the Forest Service’s commercial logging program which allows the agency to generate revenue from the sale of timber acquired from projects described as “thinning” and post-fire restoration—an arrangement that incentivizes logging.

Smokescreen tackles different wildfire and pro-logging myths in each of its chapters. Specific sections of note include *Keep It in the Forest*, *Keep It in the Ground*, *A New Wildfire Vocabulary*, and *The “Megafire” Narrative*, which each shed light on specific mischaracterizations of wildland fires. Of these, *Keep It in the Forest*, *Keep It in the Ground*, is a more technical chapter that aims to dispel the narrative that logging our forests helps reduce the amount of carbon released into the atmosphere in the event of a wildfire. Many times, discussions about overcoming climate change focus solely on moving away from the burning of fossil fuels. Hanson adds to this discussion by arguing the importance of protecting forests from logging and promoting natural forest regeneration in post-logged areas as a way to reduce atmospheric CO₂ levels and increase carbon storage. Another notable chapter, *A New Wildfire Vocabulary*, exposes the negative or inaccurate connotations presented behind an array of common terms used by pro-logging entities—and even by well-meaning journalists—to qualify or describe fires and forests. Instead, Hanson

1. Chad T. Hanson has a Ph.D. in Ecology from the University of California and a J.D. from the University of Oregon. Hanson is the director and a co-founder of the John Muir Project, a nonprofit conservation organization.

proposes alternative terms that more accurately describe forest and forest fires as natural and normal. Readers should be aware that most of the in-depth case studies presented in *Smokescreen* take place in the Sierra Nevada region. However, Hanson does include a chapter discussing wildfire cases and studies in the eastern part of the United States, which can serve as an introductory chapter for wildland fire in that region. Hanson also provides insight on prominent wildfires in countries across the globe; Australia and Brazil for example, receive attention in a chapter titled *The "Megafire" Narrative*.

Hanson's scenic first-hand stories about his various research excursions trail throughout the book, allowing the reader to visualize the various types of forest landscapes in the Sierra Nevada region, while also lending credibility to Hanson's claims. In his quest to debunk or expose the misinformed narratives propagated by the U.S. Forest Service and pro-logging entities, Hanson visits many post-fire sites and proposed logging sites. He conducts independent research—sometimes reviewing the same data sets used by logging scientists—discovering wildly inaccurate or misrepresented findings. Hanson's first-hand descriptions of these sites are often very different from what is portrayed in logging project proposals. These site visits and independent research show Hanson as an authority on the subject. The support he provides enables the reader to be confident in his work and his findings.

Hanson's personal experience and extensive professional background give him a unique perspective. Many times, descriptions by journalists or politicians of "Megafires" or "catastrophic wildfires" fail to tell the full story about the role of wildland fire in nature. Hanson's perspective brings awareness to the life-giving effects of wildfire by showing that what an average person may see as a lifeless, desolate landscape is often a lifeline for various local species that depend on the conditions created by varying-intensity fires. For example, Hanson highlights at least two wildlife species found in the Sierra Nevada that depend on post-fire landscapes: the northern spotted owl, a threatened species, and the black-backed woodpecker. The black-backed woodpecker is perfectly camouflaged from predators against the charred trees left behind after medium and high intensity fire. The spotted owl population benefits from the food that is more readily found in snag forests; landscapes covered with dead or charred "snag" trees. Post-fire logging, however, removes the snag forest habitats that are essential for the survival of these and many other species. Not limited to the importance of post-fire habitats for wildlife, Hanson also addresses the benefits of fire to the natural forest regeneration process and how this process is interrupted when logging removes essential nutrients from an ecosystem.

Throughout *Smokescreen*, Hanson takes a strong stance against the logging industry and against land management entities. While his arguments are compelling and well supported by research, Hanson also strives to not combine all of the different parties into a monolith to be attacked—*Smokescreen* is peppered with examples of perceptive players who recognize the devastating effects that aggressive logging has on the environment and who try to make a change. Ultimately, Hanson determines the issue is with the outdated system of laws that govern agencies like the U.S. Forest Service and that prioritize the financial benefits of logging over biodiversity and natural forest regeneration. Hanson states: "it is a system that forces good people to behave badly, and it needs to change."

Smokescreen is a valuable effort toward that change. Readers can expect to learn about competing narratives on the nature and impact of wildland fires in relation to specific ecosystems, both animal habitats and human communities, climate change, and how these narratives have been exploited to benefit logging interests. Interested readers may range from average people who live in fire-adapted or fire-prone areas to local leaders and policymakers who are receptive to forest and wildlife protection. Notably, Hanson makes a special call to environmental journalists who write about these topics and whose work influences the public perceptions that sustain current pro-logging narratives. *Smokescreen* advocates a critical view on current pro-logging forest management and educates readers on its resulting negative effects, both on a local and global scale, through accessible science-backed insights.

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