

Wildland fires: Sub-Saharan Africa



Alexander Held discusses the UNISDR Regional Sub-Sahara Wildland Fire Network – AfriFireNet

THE 2008 FIRE SEASON IN MOST parts of southern Africa has been devastating.

Botswana, for instance, had fires covering three million hectares; South Africa lost thousands of hectares of valuable timber plantations and hundreds of thousands of hectares of grazing grounds, bushveld and savannahs. The knock-on effect of these fires on the rural poor with houses, income opportunities and jobs lost, does not attract enough international media interest. Thirty fatalities have been reported from South Africa, four from Botswana and an estimated 60 from Mozambique. In most African ecosystems, fire is a natural and beneficial disturbance of vegetation structure and composition for nutrient recycling and distribution. Nevertheless substantial unwarranted and uncontrolled burning does occur throughout the region in increasing frequency and intensities.

Rural poverty and climate change are two of the most pressing issues facing African governments today. As rural subsistence communities are reliant on their immediate surroundings for food, shelter, energy and water – continued environmental degradation is part of the poverty trap. Unless a reasonable alternative to current land use practices

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is identified, the poverty cycle is likely to continue. Through a reliance on surrounding areas for resources, rural communities are also disproportionately exposed to the risks of climate change and uncontrolled fires.

The United Nations' International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) Regional

A well-trained hand crew equipped with PPE and tools

WoF / GFMC

Sub-Sahara Africa Wildland Fire Network (AfriFireNet) is facilitating the enhancement of local, national and regional fire management capabilities by creating synergies of participating scientists, managers and policy makers, as well as fire management agencies and organisations. Particular emphasis is given to reducing the devastating effects of wildland fires on property, resources, health and the environment and to promote the beneficial use of controlled fire. The working group will contribute to strengthen institutional fire management capabilities and bring the world's knowledge and technical expertise to communities suffering from the devastating effects of wildland fires.

Establishing and maintaining an operationally functioning regional and national level wildland fire network for the African continent south of the Sahara will take a long time, but we are well on the way.

AfriFireNet was founded in 2002, under the umbrella of the UNISDR as an independent network of interested individuals and

organisations. However ambitious and visionary the aims are, the fact is that AfriFireNet started and is still working without any operational budget and is dependent on the goodwill and funding of supportive partners.

The offer of the South African Working on Fire Programme (WoF) in 2005, a founding member of the network, to act as the host organisation for the network, providing office space and other resources, was greatly appreciated. However, the lack of sustainable funding is still evident.

The WoF is a labour intensive initiative that provides training and empowerment for the marginalised in society. It is an integrated wildland fire management resource and a poverty relief programme that has recruited and trained-up previously unemployed men and women into a national resource of over 2,000 proud firefighters, supported by some 35 fixed and rotary wing aircraft.

Teams of 22-person 'Hot Shot Crews', led by crew leaders, are deployed at over 70 fire bases in eight fire-prone regions across the country. Women currently make up over 30 per cent of all working fire teams and the goal is to increase this number. The firefighters are employed on a one-year contract, which is renewed annually based on performance.

A rigorous recruiting process, followed by life skills and firefighting training ensures that Hot Shot Crews are physically fit, capable of high endurance levels and trained to international firefighting standards. This empowering process gives crew members dignity and leads to increased status within their communities.

To ensure the safety of employees a strict code of discipline and fitness is instilled and teams are equipped with the best Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) possible. Firefighters are supplied with appropriate tools and equipment to allow them to carry out their integrated fire management functions to the best of their abilities.

Out of fire season, ground crews carry out fire prevention work such as fuel reduction, prescribed burning and clearing fire breaks.

These motivated firefighters are available to supplement the WoF partner's existing firefighting resources. Each fire base is equipped with the basic equipment required to assist the partners with Integrated Fire Management. The crews are all well trained and adhere to international standards. Primarily, the crews are available to act as hand crews and use mainly hand tools to accomplish their work.

Pooling and deploying resources through a co-ordinated national network has proven effective and economical. A fundamental goal of the WoF is to control wildfires effectively at

the lowest possible cost. The great strength of building a national network is the reduced number of resources that are needed to supply an efficient and affordable service. Hand in hand with this is the importance of strategic and co-ordinated management of aerial and land based resources to effect a rapid initial attack. The effectiveness of the initial attack can ultimately determine the magnitude of a wildfire.

TRAINING INVESTMENT

Investment in training is costly, especially in poverty relief initiatives where, at the end of the project, participants may find themselves among the ranks of the unemployed. The WoF found that 25 per cent of a participant's time was spent training during the first two years of the programme. By carefully

5TH INTERNATIONAL WILDLAND FIRE CONFERENCE

AfriFireNet and South Africa have been selected to host the 5th International Wildland Fire Conference to be held in Sun City, South Africa in 2011. The conference is held under the auspices of the United Nations and will bring together representatives from governmental and civil agencies from all over the world, the United Nations and other international organisations. Two-thousand international delegates are expected to visit the event. The conference will be conducted with the support of the United Nations' International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR), and convened by the regional sub-Saharan Wildland Fire Network, AfriFireNet.

■ For more information visit: www.wildfire2011.org



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SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA



selecting candidates, levels of attrition can be diminished so that those who stay the course get the full advantage of the training.

It was discovered early that the biggest concern for better fire management is the lack of capacity at grass roots level. Therefore, the network strives to support capacity building activities at all levels and fields of integrated fire management.

Over the past years AfriFireNet facilitated a number of fire management training courses, developing of standards for PPE and equipment, workshops and conferences. The network fire training centre has, since 2008, been incorporated in the WoF National Fire Training Academy which is providing certified and accredited training according to international standards.

AfriFireNet has conducted or participated in capacity building activities in Ghana, Uganda, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Namibia and Mozambique. It has established a network co-ordinator for West Africa from a Ghanaian fire prevention organisation.

From 2009, the network co-ordinating function will be supported by the Ugandan Wildlife Authority. The next AfriFireNet consultative meeting will be held in Uganda in 2010.

As mentioned earlier, the network has a serious funding problem. With no operational budget it is very difficult to accomplish the network's aims and to actually act as a network bringing people together. A recent AfriFireNet facilitated study tour of Namibian Foresters to the WoF programme and the Kruger National Park in South Africa was extremely beneficial for both sides, but WoF had to sponsor the majority of the costs. These funds should be provided by the network. With a relatively small but sustainable budget the network could facilitate many more of these exchanges and other activities.

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AUTHOR

Alexander C Held is chair of the UNISDR Regional Sub-Sahara Wildland Fire Network – AfriFireNet. As a former staff and current affiliate of the Global Fire Monitoring Center (GFMC) he is involved in the EU Leonardo EuroFire project that is currently developing competency-based standards for the qualification of European wildland firefighters. He is responsible for the preparation and implementation of the 5th International Wildland Fire Conference in 2011

