



FINDING SOLUTIONS TO WILDFIRES

Workshop Summary

Sigrisvil, Switzerland, 26 May 2004

Fire scientists from six continents gathered in Sigrisvil, Switzerland, 16–18 May, 2004, to assess the ecological consequences of fire on a global scale and recommend priorities for action. The workshop was organized by the Global Fire Partnership, a coalition of IUCN and its two member organizations, WWF and The Nature Conservancy.

The effects of large destructive wildfires have made headlines in many countries in recent years. In addition to causing enormous human suffering, including loss of lives, wildfires in many parts of the world can also have significant and long-term negative environmental consequences. Nevertheless, one important finding from the workshop was that fire is also a beneficial and necessary process in approximately half of the Earth's ecoregions slated for immediate conservation action. The challenge for conservationists is to promote ecologically appropriate fires in these "fire-maintained" areas, while preventing wildfires in areas containing "fire-sensitive" ecosystems and in both cases accommodating the needs of people who live in and around these regions.

At regional scales, conservation agencies concerned with fire will also need to deal with the effects of global climate change, which is projected to cause longer, more severe fire seasons in some parts of the world. Because the majority of damaging wildfires are caused by humans, research and strategies to effect changes in human behavior are needed to complement studies on fire behavior. Another promising strategy could be to work with country governments to develop legislation that allows for ecologically beneficial fire while addressing the root causes of damaging wildfires. In many parts of the world, sites that have been harmed by fires need to be restored, especially in regions where invasive plants are likely to gain a foothold and further alter natural fire regimes.

WWF, The Nature Conservancy, and IUCN are compiling the results of a global fire assessment that was conducted at the meeting. The Partnership plans to present its findings this November at the World Conservation Congress in Bangkok. In response to expert recommendations, and to take advantage of the groups' different strengths, the three organizations are also looking at ways to expand their partnership to include field projects in Mesoamerica and Amazonia.

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