

Dear Smokey,

Now that you're 70, please . . . don't do wildlife many more favors

In 1944, fueled by fears that World War II bombing might spark horrendous forest fires, a group of advertising wizards gave birth to what would become the most successful ad campaign ever: Smokey Bear. Eight years later, New Mexico contributed to the campaign by providing the perfect mascot, a burned, orphaned bear cub rescued from a forest fire.

Soon, Smokey's message had become a mantra. "Only you can prevent forest fires," was on signs, on television and in comic books. All forest fires were vigorously fought. No one dared to suggest that some fires might benefit the forest or the wildlife. A "prescribed burn" was unthinkable.

Forestry and firefighting have come a long way since then, as scientists and conservationists have recognized the value of some fires and toned down Smokey's message. Ladd S. Gordon, director of the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish from 1963-1975, was one of the pioneers in those efforts. His message, published in "New Mexico Wildlife" and controversial at the time, eventually was embraced by conservationists concerned with forest health and wildlife.

We thought that message was appropriate to repeat now that Smokey is 70.

Department director urged Smokey to recognize 'good' fires

By Ladd S. Gordon, 1970

We think it is time for those of us in the game and fish business to take a good hard look at the bare facts surrounding the symbolism portrayed by Smokey Bear.

We think, here in the State of New Mexico, and, particularly in the Department of Game and Fish, we have more reason than most in feeling free to take a critical look at the relationship between the Smokey Bear program and wildlife management. After all, the real live Smokey is a New Mexico product and owes his life to personnel of this Department who rescued him in a badly-burned condition during a forest fire on Capitan Mountain some 18 years ago.

Contrary to the belief supported by tens of millions of Americans, Smokey Bear is not necessarily synonymous with all that is good in conservation, though we will all readily admit there is much good to be said about his teachings. Smokey certainly has played a major role in conditioning the minds of a vast majority of younger Americans, as well as a few of the rest of us, toward a deeper awareness and respect for conservation of our natural resources.

We feel, however, that he has overplayed his part in the role of a fire fighter.

Smokey has played his role so well and with such deep-seated conviction that he can be blamed for declines in wild animal populations, particularly big game, throughout the western United States. It is obvious to those of us involved in wildlife administration that Smokey's glowing success in the fire prevention campaign has changed the ecology of forested lands and this change is far from favorable for many game species.

Obviously, there are many other factors interwoven into this complex picture, but we strongly feel that highly efficient fire prevention and control measures over the past several years, aided and abetted by Smokey Bear, have played a major part in removing favorable game habitat conditions throughout much of the country.

Many Americans have learned the Smokey Bear fire-prevention story too well and our outspoken thoughts probably will alienate . . . temporarily we hope . . . many individuals who question how we, as conservationists, make such rash statements.



Ladd S. Gordon, Director, New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, 1963-1975

This typifies the problem that faces many professionals today. We recognize that old Smokey has sold his program better than we have been able to do and we fear public reaction in trying to expose him for the damage he has done and is continuing to do. However, it is time for us to get our heads out of the sand and to recognize our responsibilities to the sportsmen and to start taking positive steps to correct the Smokey Bear illusion that all forest fires are bad.

This will not be a popular or an easy job for us to carry out, but all the facts and evidence are on our side. At this point, I, perhaps, should say again that I am not suggesting "Smokey Bearism" is all wrong. None of us are advocating any change in attitude toward public carelessness with fire, nor do we favor wild, uncontrolled fires in any form, even though we undoubtedly realize some distinct wildlife benefits from large forest fires, such as we had prior to the Smokey Bear era. We recognize that such uncontrolled burning is not in the best overall public interest.

Our big problem lies in the fact that Smokey has done his job so well that we find it exceedingly difficult to gain acceptance of the idea of using controlled burning where it is badly needed to create wildlife habitat. There are many areas in

forested lands throughout New Mexico and other Western States where properly controlled burning and less active control applied to accidental man-caused or lightning fires, during certain periods of the year, would significantly enhance wildlife conditions.

Most game animals prefer areas that have openings interspersed with forested areas, places where there is an adequate food supply, but which have nearby escape cover as well. Ecologists call this a sub-climax or dis-climax. Fire, if properly used, can be the quickest and most effective way to provide this desirable habitat condition.

Without some form of interruption in the ecological process, the "climax" forest, consisting of large, heavily forested areas, develops and is undesirable as far as game habitat is concerned.

Most foresters also recognize the need for burning, under proper conditions, to bring our forests back to their former productive state.

Fire, as a beneficial game management tool, is certainly no new or novel idea and some good work has already been done on national forests and on other lands in some parts of the country. Here again, however, many of the people responsible for the administration and management of our forested lands are reluctant to proceed with such programs, fearing that such action will be in conflict, in the public mind, with the Smokey Bear "prevent all forest fires" philosophy.

What can the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish do to start bringing this problem into proper perspective? First, as a department, we will begin to de-emphasize our use of the typical Smokey Bear slogans. We have, for many years in cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service and other land management agencies, strongly promoted Smokey Bear anti-fire slogans in our releases, hunting and fishing proclamations and in many other ways. Second, we will take advantage of every opportunity to discuss this problem with sportsmen and others and, with the evidence and facts available to us, convince these people that our game populations can no longer afford the luxury of almost total protection from fire.

This Department can and should take the leadership in reversing and correcting this particular Smokey Bear concept. We're behind this idea and, once again, are going to stick our necks out a little for the benefit of wildlife in our state.

