

# Santa Barbara — After the fires

I had forgotten about last summer's Zaca Fire until October, when the Santa Ana winds blew Malibu and San Diego wildfires into conflagrations. Those Santa Anas also blew Zaca ash onto our fair city. I acquired a nagging cough that lasted until Thanksgiving.



**KAREN TELLEEN-LAWTON**

Now I'm healthy and hiking again on the Los Padres trails, which have newly re-opened. Everything's back to normal. Or is it? While the backcountry moonscape is mostly out of

sight, the headaches are just beginning for those charged with providing us water and protecting our ecosystem.

Of course, our California landscape evolved with fire. But for many years, the Forest Service's policy was to attempt to extinguish all fires, resulting in a gargantuan buildup of fuel. In 1994, the policy changed to recognize the complexities of ecosystems. While the first priority is still protection of human life, key points include, "Wildland fire, as a critical natural process, must be reintroduced into the ecosystem. Fire will be allowed to function as nearly as possible in its natural role to achieve the long-term goals of ecosystem health."

Wilderness is essential to civilization, providing innumerable services like cleaning air and water and providing a library of genetic material for food, medicines, and inventions. As long as we have civilization, we will have to manage the gray area between cities and wilderness. After a fire like Zaca, the second largest in California's recorded history, issues like wildlife, erosion, and water become paramount.

Naturalist and author Ray Ford has already hiked into the burn area. He found many pockets of forest - Coulter pines, incense cedar, big cone spruce, and ponderosa pine - that survived. These trees provide habitat for mountain lions, bobcats, and the endangered spotted owl.

It remains to be seen how these species will be affected. Birds mostly escape fires and can travel some distances to new territories. I have heard that a spotted owl was sighted

recently in Tuckers Grove, far from its natural habitat. Big cats, on the other hand, are territorial. They will have to fight for a share of the unburned habitat. Ford writes that since deer populations thrive in the cleared-out spaces, their populations may explode. If so, this abundant deer prey will help the survival of the big cat predators.

The heaviest hit may be aquatic species like steelhead and rainbow trout, which will likely suffer from post-fire erosion, leading to creek sedimentation. Los Padres ForestWatch worries that other rare wildlife could be similarly affected, including birds like the least Bell's vireo and reptiles like red-legged frogs, pond turtles, 2-striped garter snakes, and arroyo toads. The erosion potential is anywhere from 38 to 190 times normal, depending on the degree of burn, steepness of the terrain, and severity of the rain year.

But what does the increased sediment mean more directly for humans? The Forest Service calls the Santa Cruz Creek drainage, fully half of which was burned in Zaca, "a big-time problem with few

solutions." Whatever flows into the drainage goes directly into Lake Cachuma. Cathy Taylor, Santa Barbara's water systems manager, agrees. "It's a disaster waiting to happen," she says. "With a lot of rain we could lose Gibraltar [to sedimentation]." There goes our water supply. I'm thinking this warrants a steeper price curve on water now, in the hopes of fending off future water rationing.

While we can't afford a flood year, neither can we afford drought. I hiked my favorite canyon last week, up the mostly dry creekbed beside the Rattlesnake Canyon Wilderness Trail. It was as parched as you'd expect after a year of less than half the normal rain and two months into a rainy season with little measurable precipitation. A green leafy cucumber vine wound through the creekbed's center. The pond by Indian dam was only two feet deep; the waterfall dry except for plaintive drool on the west side. Half the leaves on the delicate Venushair fern were brown; the green ones stretched out from the dam as if in supplication for moisture.

There were still signs of life and hope. A canyon wren was scaling the dam, calling with its high rising buzz, its bright white chest standing out against the gray day. I spotted a banana slug lounging under a rock. I continued up, seeking flowing creek. Finally, I climbed high enough to see an abundance of water. Thirsty, resting at a view point, I spied the blue Pacific.

*Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of people, nature, events, and observations transporting the reader around the world and back to Santa Barbara.*



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