

Park Conducts Prescribed Fire to Restore Forest Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Tennessee National Fire Plan - Rehabilitation

Park managers at Great Smoky Mountains National Park conducted the Wash Ridge Prescribed Fire on a 300-acre tract of forest bordering Cataloochee Valley near Maggie Valley, NC on April 6-9, 2004. The burn was conducted to help restore a natural, but increasingly rare forest type, and is expected to help create additional and attractive habitat for the park's experimental elk population.



The park used fire to remove the closed canopy and restore the oak forest.

The central purpose of the park's fire use in the interior regions of the Smokies is to replicate, as closely as possible, the role that naturally-occurring fires played in shaping and maintaining the park's diverse ecosystem. In the case of the Wash Ridge Burn the park's goal is to perpetuate and maintain the xeric oak forest community. The xeric forest type is made up of largely fire-tolerant species including black, scarlet, and chestnut oaks and various hickory species. The xeric forest canopy has numerous breaks that allow sunlight to reach the forest floor which supports a rich variety grasses and herbaceous vegetation and a diversity of wildlife.

Until the last few years, all fires within the park were vigorously suppressed for almost 70 years. One consequence of that long-term fire suppression was that areas that historically were xeric oak have been taken over by hemlock and maple which out-compete the oaks, but are much less fire-resistant. The new forest has a closed year-round canopy that allows little light to the forest floor, resulting in a decline of biological diversity. The burn was designed to reduce the density of hemlock and maple and to promote the regeneration of the xeric oak species.

The burned area borders the open meadows of Cataloochee at the western end of the valley. The burn area is contained by natural boundaries including the grassy meadow, two wet drainages, an old road, and by a short stretch of pre-dug fire control line. As a precaution, approximately 25 park firefighters and an engine were assigned to make sure the burn stayed within its planned limits.

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