Wildfire and Conservation

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[Columbia Mountain and Teakettle Mountain]

Columbia Mountain (left) and Teakettle Mountain (right), Montana. Plate 9a. Fire Group 9: Moist lower subalpine fir. Elevation 6,400 ft. (1,951 m). Looking southwest toward Columbia Mountain (left) and Teakettle Mountain (right) from the fire lookout tower on Desert Mountain, Coram Experimental Forest, Flathead National Forest. Scene shows mosaic of burned and unburned terrain following an intense wildfire that swept the valley between Columbia Falls and Lake McDonald on August 14-17, 1929. USDI photograph by E. Bloom. Date: 1935-08-24.



[Coram Experimental Forest, prescribed burn [umt019318]]

Control burn on Coram Experimental Forest. Flathead National Forest, Montana. Fire control; Prescribed burn. WO# 544 R-1. Date: 1966-08.



[Men building a fire line on the Half Moon Fire, colorized]

Tinted lantern slide showing men building a fire line on the Half Moon Fire. USFS negative 239009. Originally marked 32-HI-37. Lantern Slide No. 1146. Date: 1929.

Contextual Paragraph:

Following the destructive and tragic Peshtigo Fire of 1871, the Hinckley Fire of 1894 and the Big Burn in 1910, public fears around wildfire grew, leading to a period of wildfire suppression. Wildfire suppression led to a buildup of fuels in Northwest Montana forests, which included significantly higher levels of dead trees, downed logs, dry duff, and forest litter, causing conditions for high-intensity wildfires. By the 1970s, the Forest Service in Montana began permitting prescribed burns. Native tribes like the Blackfeet, Salish, and Kootenai have been using controlled fires as a land management practice since time immemorial. Low-intensity surface and ground fires clear forest floors of litter, allow new plants to grow, and are important for the forest succession cycle.

Key Questions:

1. How do both wildfire and prescribed burning play a role in conservation?
2. How are fire management and land management connected?
3. What do you think are the challenges of wildfire on borders between public and private land?
4. How has the history of tribal controlled burning affected current land management practices?
5. What are the impacts of fire on Montana ecosystems?

Assessment Question:

1. How would you create a land management plan that takes into account the role of wildfire on the landscape? Would you include or not include prescribed burning in your management plan? Why or why not?