



JAMES JOHNSTON

Prescribed burning in Yosemite kills some trees while protecting others

Range of Fire

Following the footsteps of John Muir

Sierra Club founder John Muir left San Francisco for Yosemite Valley, deep in the heart of the Sierra Nevada Range, on April 1, 1868. He was on foot, with more than 150 miles of walking ahead of him. The rugged Scotsman, history's most famous wanderer, could have made the trip in less than a week. But he was moving slowly, less than 7 miles a day, for the last 40 miles. The penniless Muir was paying his way to the magnificent valley as a herdsman. His companions for the trip were 3,000 head of sheep.

Muir was dazed by the scenery — the open park-like stands of massive ponderosa and sugar pines, the great granite monoliths and the waterfalls. His breathless writing about the area persuaded President Theodore Roosevelt to create in Yosemite what is today America's most popular national park, and

transformed the country's relationship with wildlands.

Underfoot, the sheep — what Muir would later rue as "hoofed locusts" for their devastating impacts to quiet Sierra meadows — were doing their own work transforming the landscape. Muir did not then, and most of us don't now, understand the ecology of disturbance. The mountains Muir called the "Range of Light" were really a range of fire. The grasses and forbs being consumed by sheep had carried low fires around the giant tree trunks, clearing out smaller, competing trees. Muir did not then understand that the great conifer forests of the Sierras were born in fire, and without that fire, the forest would die.

I retraced Muir's journey 139 years later, barreling up Highway 120 in a fleet of seven shiny white Chevy Suburbans, in the com-

pany of (in)famous forest ecologist Jerry Franklin and a herd of University of Washington forestry students. Jerry, whose groundbreaking work on the ecological significance of the Pacific Northwest's old-growth rain forest led to huge reductions in federal lands logging, is convinced that judicious thinning and prescribed fire is in the best interests of Sierra Nevada forests.

The forest that Muir encountered walking along old mining roads and sheep trails — the open forest of widely spaced old-growth tree trunks — is nowhere in evidence from the tinted windows of the UW caravan. The view from giant tree trunk to giant tree trunk is obscured by hundreds of white fir, a fast growing, opportunistic, invasive tree that would normally have been killed by frequent fire. The white fir competes with the old-growth trees, making them vulnerable to disease and insect infestation. And the white fir carries what would normally be a low intensity fire into the forest crown, killing trees that may have stood for a thousand years or more.

Muir found in Yosemite Valley "beautiful

groves and meadows, their brows in the sky, a thousand flowers leaning confidently against their feet, bathed in floods of water, floods of light." The UW students found the Valley awash in tourists and automobiles ... and flooded with smoke and fire. Yosemite National Park is an innovator in the use of fire as a tool to recreate historic forest conditions. As we watched, teams of firefighters marched through the forested valley floor, using drip torches to set fires that raced through the forest, killing as many as half of the trees in a 180 acre burning unit on the valley floor. Killing hundreds, if not thousands, of trees is part of plans to re-create a more widely spaced forest favoring older ponderosa pines, incense cedar and California and mountain live oaks.

Yosemite plans as much as 7,000 acres of burning in the 760,000-acre park. Thousands more acres are burned by naturally occurring forest fires that are allowed to burn.

Yosemite Valley is at its most scenic and least crowded during the winter months, where the famous sites — El Capitan, Bridal Veil Falls, Cathedral Rocks and Half Dome — can be enjoyed under a deep blanket of snow. During the summer months I suggest driving Highway 20, the only road that traverses the park, to Tioga Pass. Tuolumne Meadows on the east side of the park is your jumping off point for multi-day backpacking adventures on the John Muir Trail or the Pacific Crest Trail. A spectacular but relatively little known day hike by the Tioga Pass entrance is the boot path to the top of 13,000-foot tall Mount Dana, the highest peak in the park. There are spectacular views in all directions, including due east to Mono Lake.

Mono Lake is usually extremely low on water in the summer, impoverished by the demands of the Southern California megatropolises. But that's another story about the Range of Fire that will have to wait for later. **EW**

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