

Spanning the Gap

50 Yeas of Fire Prevention: Smokey Bear celebrates a big birthday



ONLY YOU CAN PREVENT WILDFIRES

In 1944 the first forest fire prevention poster featuring an animal was unveiled: Walt Disney's Bambi. This poster was extremely successful. However, Bambi was only on loan, so a new animal had to be found.

The Advertising Council felt that they needed a large animal that people could readily recognize, one which was commonly found in forests. Someone suggested using a bear as the new national forest fire prevention symbol, and the idea took hold. On August 9, 1944, the "standards" for the new bear were established. To make his appearance fit the job, it was decided that he would wear a stiff-brimmed campaign hat. In 1945, Albert Staehle, a well-known animal illustrator, painted a poster that featured the forest fire prevention bear. This bear was given the name "Smokey Bear," and the poster carried the caption *Smokey says: Care will prevent 9 out of 10 forest fires!*

In 1947, Smokey's famous message: *Only YOU Can Prevent Forest Fires* was created. This fire prevention message is still in use today, and has proven to be one of the most recognizable advertising slogans ever developed.

In 1946, Rudy Wendelin became "Smokey's artist",



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Smokey in person at the recreation area.

(Left) Wildfires are distinguished from prescribed fires, which are deliberately set and controlled as part of forest management. (Web logo courtesy of the USDA National Forest Service).



(Above) A well-worn Smokey Bear sign in the town of

and he is still known by this nickname. In the late 1940s, Smokey's fire prevention message was first broadcasted on national radio. Jackson Weaver, a well-known radio personality in Washington, D.C., served as Smokey's "voice."

In 1950, firefighters found a small black bear cub which had survived a serious wildfire in the Lincoln National Forest near Capitan, New Mexico, with only minor burns. After the bear had been nursed back to health by New Mexico State Game Warden Ray Bell and his family, he was flown to Washington, D.C., where, as a resident of the National Zoo, he became the living symbol of forest fire prevention in the United States.

In 1952, the Junior Forest Ranger program was initiated, and during the first three years of this program more than 500,000 youngsters enrolled. By 1955, Smokey was receiving so much mail that he was assigned his own postal code. With the advent of ZIP codes, his address became Smokey Bear Headquarters, Washington, D.C. 20252. By the mid-1950s Smokey had gained world-wide recognition -- even in Australia, which has no native bears!

The original Smokey retired on May 2, 1975. He died in 1976, and his remains were returned to Capitan and buried in Smokey Bear State Park. After Smokey's retirement, a second bear had assumed his role as America's forest fire prevention symbol. The new Smokey lived at the National Zoo for more than 15 years. When he died in 1990, both he and the idea of a "living symbol" were laid to rest.

1994 is Smokey's 50th Anniversary Year, and numerous events are planned throughout the United States to commemorate Smokey's golden anniversary. The week of August 7, a series of special displays and events will be held in Washington D.C. to help celebrate Smokey's birthday, and on August 9, 1994 there will be a special celebration to help launch the next 50 years of cooperative forest fire prevention.

Delaware Water Gap PA, at the approach to the park from the south on the Pennsylvania side. Note that the well-known original wording *prevent forest fires*. This wording has since evolved to *prevent wild fires*.



Newer Smokeys at work keeping visitors informed in the recreation area Routes 209 and 739 in Dingmans Ferry PA.



An up-to-date Smokey at Worthington State Forest Campground within the recreation area proclaims *Prevent wild fires* as does the modern logo at the top of the page.