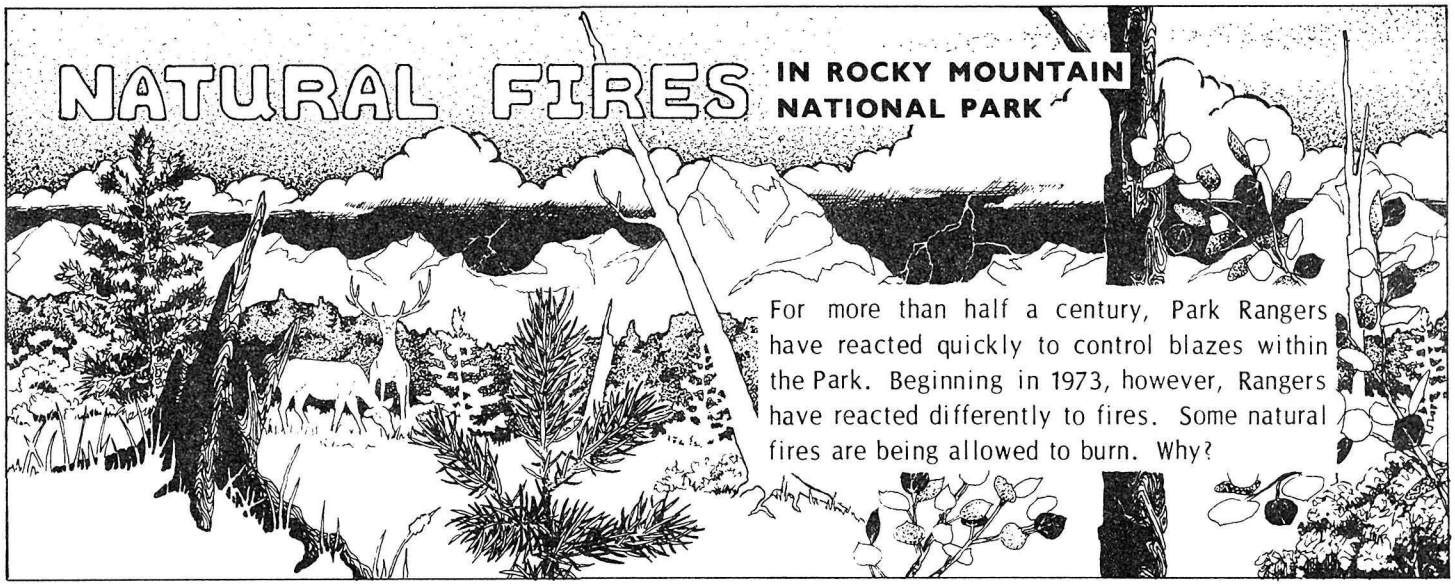

NATURAL FIRES
IN ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK
For more than half a century, Park Rangers have reacted quickly to control blazes within the Park. Beginning in 1973, however, Rangers have reacted differently to fires. Some natural fires are being allowed to burn. Why?

The National Park Service recognizes that the presence or absence of natural fire is one of the ecological factors contributing to the perpetuation of native ecosystems. So, there may be occasions this summer when forest fires started during thunderstorms will be allowed to burn, if certain prescribed conditions are met. Rather than a "let burn" policy, it is one of fire management.

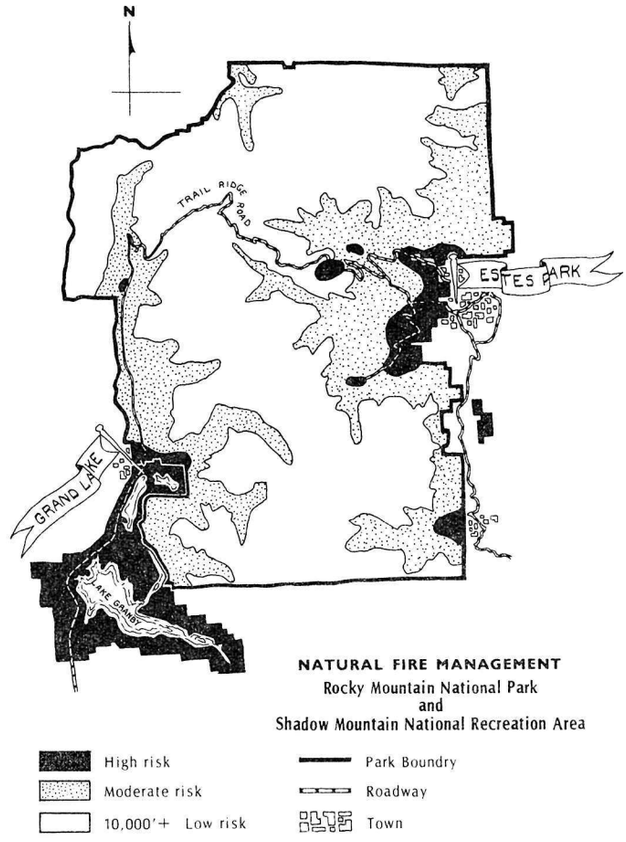
In the subalpine forest ecosystem, spruces and firs mantle the deeper soils, primarily on areas that have long been fire-free. Fire is an infrequent factor within this ecosystem. Periodically, however, fires do occur and drastic changes in composition are brought about. Lodgepole pine replaces the spruce-fir; on some sites, aspen enters the stands.

In the montane forest ecosystem, the vegetation consists of both ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir stands, interspersed with areas of grasslands and sagebrush or bitterbrush stands. Fire has played a much greater role here than in the other ecosystems within the Park. The fires kill off some of the brush species, stimulate sprout growth in others, and, in general influence the overall open park scene and plant composition. The fires of low intensity, such as occur in the montane forest, also help in seedbed preparation for the ponderosa pine stands by exposing mineral soil.

As a result of fire suppression within the park, relatively few young pine stands are found within the montane forests today.

There are seven functions of fire in a mixed-conifer forest that seem particularly significant. Fire (1) prepares a seedbed, (2) cycles nutrients within the system, (3) adjusts the successional pattern in various ways, (4) modifies conditions that favor wildlife, (5) influences the mosaic of age classes and vegetation types, (6) alters numbers of trees susceptible to attack by insects and disease, and (7) both reduces and creates fire hazards. Each of these roles is affected by fire intensity and frequency.

Other National parks and national forests in the Rocky Mountains are following similar policies where similar conditions exist. Fire is no longer considered the traditional enemy of the forest. Smokey, however, still advises to be careful with fire. While there are many beneficial effects of fire when it is carefully and professionally used, there are also forest ecosystems that are not adapted to fire. Fire is a powerful force. Out of place – out of proportion, it could seriously damage valuable resources and endanger lives.



NATURAL FIRE MANAGEMENT
Rocky Mountain National Park
and
Shadow Mountain National Recreation Area

High risk
Moderate risk
10,000'+ Low risk
Park Boundry
Roadway
Town

The map identifies the various natural fire management zones within the park. Three zones are identified:

Low Risk Zone: All naturally caused fires will be allowed to burn at elevations of 10,000 feet and above.

Moderate Risk Zone: Natural fires occurring below 10,000 feet will be allowed to burn only under prescribed burning indices.

High Risk Zone: All natural fires will be extinguished in developed areas or their vicinity.

Man-caused fires will continue to be suppressed throughout the park. There will be certain conditions under which fire, even though it is of natural origin, will be extinguished as soon as possible. These conditions include (1) threatening of human life, (2) threatening of developments, (3) potential escape from park, (4) threatening of rare and endangered species, (5) destruction of an entire ecosystem, (6) erratic fire behavior, and (7) too many fires occurring at one time.

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