

‘When the grass began to green the following year, White Buffalo carefully instructed his assistant in the burning of the prairie. It was necessary, he pointed out, to watch, almost daily, the growth of certain of the grasses. When they became so tall, he indicated on a gnarled forefinger, it was time to burn. Too early, there would be no proper greening. Too late, it would burn poorly and destroy much new growth. Then the buffalo would not come.’ – “Buffalo Medicine” by Don Coldsmith

In pre-European settlement times, early explorers such as Washington Irving and Thomas Nuttall found Native Americans using fire in the area now known as Oklahoma. Native Americans used fire to manage wildlife, a primary food source, and to maintain prairie openings in forested regions. Early settlers followed this example for a while, but gradually stopped burning. As land use changed, particularly to farming annual crops, the land was broken up into small ownerships thus eliminating most fires. In the mid-1900s, media attention focused on wildfires and Smokey the Bear. This information included misleading information about fire and its benefits to humans and the environment.

Fire is an ecosystem driver that facilitates ecosystem processes such as nutrient and water cycling. However, fire seldom affects ecosystems alone instead it works in concert with grazing animals and climate, thus constituting an integral part of ecosystem restoration. Fire is mandatory for the health of prairies, shrublands, and forests throughout Oklahoma and most of the world. Research has shown that although there are many land management tools, **there is no substitute for fire**. It has taken almost 100 years for our contemporary culture to learn what Native American’s have known about fire for thousands of years.

Before the mid-1980s relatively small amounts of land were intentionally burned except in the tallgrass prairie region of northeastern Oklahoma and the forests of southeastern Oklahoma. The increase in the use of prescribed fire can be attributed to public and landowner education from a number of sources.

Unfortunately, most of Oklahoma’s native lands have been degraded as a result of the exclusion of fire. The most obvious example is the invasion of eastern redcedar and Ashe juniper into prairies, shrublands, and forests across Oklahoma. Redcedar invasion is one readily visible ecological indicator of ecosystem dysfunction.

A prescribed fire is conducted with an appropriately trained crew and adequate equipment under a prescribed set of conditions for both safety and vegetation management objectives. Before a landowner engages in burning, strong advisement would be to obtain proper training in the use of fire and fire behavior. Exerts for this article were used from OCES Fact Sheet E-927 “Using Prescribed Fire in Oklahoma”.

Please come by the office or call for more information on the use of prescribed fire for land management practices.

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