



Smokey Bear and the pyropolitics of United States forest governance



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ABSTRACT

Wildfire prevention advertisements featuring Smokey Bear represent the longest-standing and most successful government advertising and branding campaign in U.S. history. As the public face of U.S. fire control policy, Smokey Bear uses mass media to influence the attitudes and behavior of U.S. citizenry in order to accomplish particular outcomes related to wildfire prevention and suppression, forest protection, and resource management. Smokey Bear can therefore be viewed as a governmental instrument that simultaneously targets the behavior of the U.S. public and the biophysical materiality of combustible forests. Examining the evolution of Smokey Bear and related wildfire prevention media, we explore connections between state management of people, territory, and flammable landscapes. Borrowing from Nigel Clark (2011), we use the term *pyropolitics* to describe the resulting more-than-human assemblage of citizenship, fire suppression and forest ecology. Importantly, this pyropolitical assemblage has substantive and recursive impacts on state practice. Through aggressive wildfire prevention and suppression that include and extend beyond Smokey Bear, the U.S. state has transformed fuel loads, species compositions, and ecosystem dynamics across North America. One result is a heightened propensity toward catastrophic wildfire, requiring additional and sustained state intervention to maintain an imposed and unstable equilibrium. Thus even as the economic, social and cultural realities of U.S. civic life have changed over the course of the 20th and early 21st centuries – and even as knowledge of the ecological benefits of fire to ecosystem health has developed over time – the message of Smokey Bear has remained remarkably consistent, communicating an official imperative to prevent anthropogenic ignition.

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1. Introduction

In North America the prevention, suppression, and management of wildfire has played a critical role in historical processes of colonial dispossession and the institutional development, ideological expression and material composition of state power. Beginning in the 19th century a singular rationale came to rule this fire management regime: total fire suppression. Until the 1970s the official attitude was that wildland fire had no inherent ecological benefit and was a destructive force requiring militaristic intervention to suppress and eliminate from the American landscape (Pyne, 2001: 253–254).

The invention of Smokey Bear in 1944 created a unique platform for the U.S. state to channel its fire suppression agenda through influencing the conduct of its citizenry. Smokey Bear symbolizes a

pivot point at which nationwide fire prevention and suppression policies were materialized and communicated through an enormously successful advertising campaign that continues to the present. In the process, Smokey Bear has become the longest-running public advertising campaign in U.S. history, while serving as an avatar, symbol and instrument of fire prevention on U.S. public lands.

In this paper we examine the evolution of Smokey Bear and related wildfire prevention media, exploring connections between state management of people, territory, and flammable landscapes. In the process, we contribute to broader conversations in political geography that attend to the complex more-than-human articulation of state power with the material objects and multiplicities in and through which it acts (Braun & Whatmore, 2010; Dittmer, 2013; Peloquin, 2013; Shaw & Meehan, 2013; Squire, 2015; Sundberg, 2011). Meehan, Shaw, and Marston (2013), for example, unpack the ways that non-human objects translate, mediate, and complicate state surveillance and policing, oftentimes producing or contributing to outcomes wholly unanticipated by

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their protagonists. More recently Boyce (2016) and Clark and Jones (2016) have expanded on this work to explore the ways that non-human multiplicities complicate the territorial composition of state power and its geopolitical expression. In this paper we pursue a dialogue between the literature above and work that is concerned expressly with the emergence of a “state effect” through the prosaic cultivation of desired behaviors and practices of citizenship among a media-consuming public (Mitchell, 1999; Painter, 2006; Rose, 1999). Governance, in this sense, most closely follows Foucault’s definition laid out in *Security, Territory, Population*, which is expressed as “the development of a series of specific governmental apparatuses on the one hand, [and, on the other] to the development of a series of knowledges” (Foucault, 2007: 108–109). This process occurs not merely at the level of institutions or the discourses these circulate, but through the disciplining and rationalization of subjects into self-regulation in service of state goals – a process that Foucault captures through his concept of *governmentality*. According to Garmany (2010), governmentality is a powerful concept for examining the technical expression of state conduct because its logic is intimately associated with internally consistent categories like ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge.’ Government advertising and propaganda, then, is a useful lens for examining the production and dissemination of official ‘truths,’ intended for consumption by a broad public who would thereby internalize particular attitudes and express certain behaviors desired by state actors and agencies. Yet in the case of Smokey Bear, and U.S. wildfire prevention advertising more broadly, the target of government intervention is not individual attitudes and behavior. Rather, these are instrumentalized in order to accomplish a broader set of environmental outcomes related to the United States’ expansive forestlands (and fire-prone wildlands, woodlands and grasslands), including their availability for extractive accumulation.

It is through what we call (borrowing from Nigel Clark [2011]) the “pyropolitics” of fire control that, we contend, citizenship and state power have become entangled with the ecology and composition of forestlands across vast expanses of North America. At the same time, the resulting accumulation of fuel loads and dramatic intensification of fire size and severity have come to put considerable strain on management agencies. The result is a feedback loop in which the physiological transformation of the forest requires further and continuous state intervention to maintain an unstable equilibrium and prevent catastrophic loss. Indeed, forest management agencies have recently seen so much of their budgets devoted to fire suppression and other fire-related tasks that this arguably demonstrates a novel form of agency capture (following Clarke & McCool, 1996) by a demanding constituency: wildfire and its apparatuses.

A considerable literature already exists examining the environmental feedbacks involved in wildfire management and suppression (Pyne, 1982, 1997, 1998, 2001; Collins, 2008; Dods, 2002; Donovan & Brown, 2007; Marlon et al., 2012). Of interest to us here is the degree to which, even as the consequences of total fire suppression have come to be understood, and as U.S. policy has moved haltingly – if decisively – away from this management paradigm, the Smokey Bear campaign continues to penetrate the U.S. media environment with a message about forests and fire use that remains virtually unaltered: framing fire as a perpetual, exogenous and existential threat to U.S. forests and wildlands, but one that is endemic to the citizenry – and asserting that it is therefore the individual responsibility of every citizen to prevent uncontrolled ignition.

On the one hand, the continuity of Smokey Bear’s message is understandable. The U.S. wildfire prevention advertising campaign helped to birth a dramatic transformation of forest dynamics, while the suppression of routine burning combined with demographic

shifts in the country to dramatically alter residential settlement patterns, increasing the vulnerability of critical infrastructure and millions of homes and persons to wildland fire (Radeloff et al., 2005; Gill & Stephens, 2009; Stein et al., 2013; Simon, 2014; 2016). For this reason, a genealogical examination of the Smokey Bear campaign reveals the *temporal* dimension of those more-than-human assemblages that drive, compose and condition state power. In the case of wildfire prevention this process exhibits a kind of path dependency, wherein state decisions and initiatives significantly impact material conditions and the resources and strategies required to manage these many years down the road. Unpacking the temporal dis/continuities of the Smokey Bear campaign reveals how non-human objects and ecosystem dynamics may articulate with state practice not just by driving unexpected outcomes that “disrupt,” “resist” or “unravel” the ambitions and interventions of state actors (Boyce, 2016; Clark & Jones, 2016; Meehan et al., 2013), but also by generating outcomes and conditions that *demand* ongoing state intervention – at least if catastrophic loss is to be avoided.

To expand on this argument, we first discuss the methodology we bring to bear on the U.S. Forest Service’s wildfire prevention advertising archive. We then review the historical background of fire exclusion in North America, in order to contextualize 20th century and contemporary wildfire prevention efforts. We provide an abbreviated description and genealogy of the wildfire prevention campaign, with special focus on the role of Smokey Bear as a powerful and longstanding discursive motif, component of, and shorthand for the state’s wildfire prevention advertising effort. Unpacking a series of Smokey-related images that track the bear’s nearly 80-year sojourn, we explore how Smokey has responded to tremendous changes to the cultural and media landscapes of the United States, while simultaneously mobilizing various symbolic motifs to naturalize contemporary management practices and cultivate “proper” attitudes about fire and forest use. We then consider the accumulated impacts of these attitudes and management practices to explain Smokey’s continued relevance as an instrument and medium of governance. In the process, we return to the problems of “governmentality” and its corresponding “state effect,” including the temporal, as well as spatial, implications of their more-than-human articulation. We conclude by suggesting several areas for future inquiry, including how a pyropolitical research agenda might develop and expand upon the complex articulations of citizenship, fire use and state practice considered below.

2. A note on methodology

In the text that follows we draw on fire science and environmental history to support and contextualize our claims related to Smokey Bear’s unique contributions to the project of fire prevention and control on U.S. public lands. It is not our assertion that Smokey alone explains any specific set of environmental outcomes. Rather, Smokey serves as just one piece of a larger fire control apparatus, whose scientific understanding of forest ecology and the policy prescriptions that follow have been contested and adapted over time. We focus on Smokey as an object of analysis because we believe that this campaign provides a powerful and compelling entrée into the “fiery entanglement” (Edwards & Gill, 2016) of forest governance, citizenship and the territorialization of state power in North America. We are therefore interested in tracing the genealogy of the Smokey campaign, and we understand Smokey himself (through his various incarnations and media appearances) as a non-human actor in the specific Latourian sense of “[modifying] a state of affairs by making a difference” (Latour, 2005: 71).

Toward this end, we employ a critical visual methodology that

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