



The Forests Dialogue

ENGAGE! EXPLORE! CHANGE!

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Fire and Forests Initiative

Concept Note

Introduction

Fire is an inherent part of the earth system. Some ecosystems, such as the boreal forests of Canada and the dry woodlands of Africa, experience periodic natural fire and have evolved to be adapted to and even dependent on fire. In some ecosystems, such as the rainforests of Amazon and the peatlands of Indonesia, fire is rare and has been largely human-induced (IUFRO 2018). The causes and impacts of fire, fire dynamics, and history of fire use vary in different regions of the world. In some cases, fire is a management tool, used to clear and claim forestland, especially for agricultural purposes in the tropical rainforests. Both planned fires, considered 'prescribed' fires, and unplanned fires, considered 'wildfire' or 'bushfire', present challenges and are frequently an arena of contestation and conflict between stakeholder groups with different values and priorities.

In the past decade, we have seen increasing occurrences and severity of wildfires around the world. These fires have major impacts on life, property, and infrastructure. They also severely impact the ecosystem services and the economic and socio-cultural values of forests (WWF & BCG 2020). Expenditure on wildfire suppression is increasing dramatically in many countries, even though studies and experiences have shown that the firefighting efforts remain orders of magnitude below what is needed to suppress extreme wildfires (PROFOR 2020). Not only is wildfire frequency and severity increasing, but the pattern of where fires are taking place is changing. In the last decade, fire has occurred in places that have not typically burned in the past, such as the Arctic and central and northern Europe. In addition, in some places such as the southern Amazon, is on the verge of an "ecological tipping point", where the areas burned in drought years would double in the context of warming temperature and drought brought by climate change (PROFOR 2020).

Some extreme fires even create their own weather systems, such as the storm clouds and lightning created by the Dixie Fire that scorched nearly a million acres in California in the summer of 2021 (Lovett 2021, Popovich et al. 2021). These changes in fire occurrence and behavior further complicate fire management and limit risk reduction and suppression options.

Many factors contribute to changing fire dynamics. Some changes are a result of land use decisions and policy, coupled with warmer temperatures, fewer precipitation, and longer periods of drought. The displacement of Indigenous Peoples from their lands and changes in land use have also altered fire regimes, forest structure and fuel loads. Demographic and land management changes in many rural and forested landscapes lead to less-intensively managed forests that continue to accumulate fuel load and become more fire-prone (e.g. Portugal). Elsewhere, ‘wildland-urban interface’ zones where landscapes transition from wild unoccupied environments to developed human settlements, are expanding. As more people move to naturally fire-prone ecosystems, they face more risks of wildfires in their surrounding landscapes (e.g. western United States).

Stakeholders are experiencing the impacts of changing fire regime in various ways. For example, the forestry sector in many regions experiences economic loss from more frequent wildfire and has limited options for controlling the increasingly severe fire. In particular, fire impacts commercial plantations, where fast-growing, high-density species are highly flammable and favors the development of severe wildfire across large continuous tracts (Gómez-González et al., 2018). Indigenous communities are impacted disproportionately by fires. For example, in the Brazilian Amazon, deforestation and subsequent fires often occur in or near indigenous people’s territories, adversely affecting their health and destroying crops and other wild food sources (IPAM 2020). Other local communities around the world experience economic impacts as homeowners in the wildland-urban interface are confronted with higher fire risks as population density in the zone increases. Additionally, they face higher insurance costs from the damages caused by extreme fires and smoke (RMS 2020). Further economic impacts include decreasing revenues from tourism as was seen following the 2020 bushfires in Australia with actual safety risks and additional cancellations due to fear and negative news surrounding wildfires (ATEC 2020). However, the impact of fire is not limited to the localized area around the fire occurrence. Studies have reported an increase in the number of days with smoke in the air across the U.S., linking it to the frequent extreme fire events where the smoke often spread from the West Coast to the East Coast, posing an increasing risk to public health for people near and far (Radeloff et al. 2018).

There is a need for both a coordinated response across sectors as well as integrated knowledge systems to build emergency readiness and response. Yet, many fire users, impacted communities, and sectors contributing to large-scale fires are rarely engaged in fire management. The failure to engage stakeholders across various sectors and interests means that sectors such as land and municipal/urban planning, agriculture, health, transport, and tourism remain ‘outside the conversation’ and lack opportunities to contribute to building durable solutions. Many are now recognizing the limits of a purely reactive approach to wildfire management that only focuses on fire suppression. Instead, they call for fire-smart approaches across and between actors focused on fire prevention and integrated fire management (PROFOR 2020).

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There are networks on the global level (e.g. International Association of Wildland Fire) and regional level (e.g. European Commission Expert Group on Forest Fires, the North American Forest Commission Fire Management Working Group). However, currently, many of the existing networks engage only a limited scope of stakeholders - mainly government agencies, NGO, and academics. Much of the conversations around fire lack the engagement of the full range of stakeholders, including those that are impacted, affected, interested, and involved. With the urgent challenges from fire and the need for progress in fire management, we need to quickly expand the fire conversation and enable broader engagement required for critical discussion on fire management around the world. The Fire Learning Network and the Indigenous Peoples Burning Network, led by the Nature Conservancy (TNC), are drawing on a broader range of stakeholders than ever before. However, in many parts of the world, such platforms are still lacking.

In addition, there is a need for collaboration across regions and countries as some locations and peoples have more history and experience of addressing wildfires, whereas in other places, large-scale fires are relatively new. Hence, there is a need to share knowledge across regions on what is working well and lessons that can be applied elsewhere. The most recently published Rapid Response Assessment from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) emphasized that “governments and communities need to proactively learn from each other’s experiences, seeking out best practices and inspiring examples from around the world with the sharing of data, information, and analysis to improve forecasting and learning” (UNEP 2022). The increasing risks and impact of fire around the world due to climate change create even greater urgency and motivation to engage and learn from each other in a dialogue process.

The Initiative

The Forests Dialogue’s (TFD) Fire and Forests Initiative seeks to bring together different sectors and knowledge systems, as well as facilitate shared learning at an international and regional level. Through a structured dialogue process of “Engage, Explore, and Change”, TFD has successfully facilitated stakeholder dialogues on various contentious issues related to forests over the past 20 years. The dialogue process is designed to facilitate the exchange of perspectives among sectors, share learning experiences across regions, and build trust that is essential to help design and implement long-term solutions for good fire governance.

Objectives

The objectives of TFD’s Forests and Fire Initiative include:

1. Foster engagement across a full spectrum of sectors and stakeholders on the issues of wildfire risks, risk management and responses;
2. Develop a sound understanding of the short-, medium-, and long-term factors contributing to wildfire risks in different parts of the world in the context of climate change;

3. Identify challenges and lessons for effective actions to reduce fire risk and increase the resilience of forest landscapes and local communities to wildfires under various fire regimes and social and biophysical conditions;
4. Build trust across stakeholder groups and foster collaboration through learnings from one another.

Phase 1: Engage – a series of roundtable dialogues around the world

TTFD's dialogue process usually begins with "Engage", a step where we build trust among dialogue leaders. We identified wildfire as a global and complex challenge, drew on our existing networks and partnership to form a roundtable advisory group, and worked with key local and international partners to create a series of virtual and in person, region-specific roundtables from January to April, 2022. Our roundtables took place in Australia, Brazil, Chile, Lao PDR, Thailand, and Vietnam. The learnings from these roundtables directly feed into our event at the World Forestry Congress in Seoul in May, 2022.

In this roundtable process, TFD and partners engage with different stakeholders across regions in fire dialogues. In particular, TFD has had a wide range of experiences engaging historically excluded or marginalized stakeholders, such as indigenous communities. TFD also has hosted many dialogues that engaged the private sector actors. This initiative is therefore well-positioned to host critically needed dialogues with a wide range of stakeholders, including both institutions historically engaged in fire management and those who are historically excluded or marginalized from such conversations.

Phase 2: Explore – a series of in-depth field dialogues

In Phase 2 "Explore", we seek to host a series of field dialogues where a wide range of stakeholders will share information and perspectives, identify key issues and "fracture lines", analyze conditions underlying key challenges, and identify opportunities for resolving "fracture line" issues. Key points that came up in the roundtable series will help frame the scope and themes of field dialogues.

Phase 3: Change – Collaborative Action

The "Change" phase is designed to facilitate collaborative action. The output from our field dialogues will include a background paper and co-chair's summary for each field dialogue. Additional outputs will be determined in the scoping dialogue but they may include a co-created actionable plan for on-going dialogue and multi-stakeholder engagement in the location.

TFD's multi-stakeholder dialogues on fire can directly contribute to the recommendations arising from UNEP's Rapid Response Assessment , including promoting integrated fire management, empowering communities, promoting gender dimension, and integrating indigenous and contemporary fire management (UNEP 2022).

In addition, the dialogue platform started by our country-specific, field dialogues has the potential to move from national to regional levels where the cultural and fire management context makes sense to address fire across political boundaries. Regional dialogues will allow fire stakeholders from different countries to share best practices but also address common challenges, such as transboundary haze and associated land management issues.

Timeline

January-April 2022: Regional Roundtables

May 2022: World Forestry Congress, Fire Management Forum and TFD's Fire and Forests Initiative roundtable series event

2022-2024: Field Dialogues and Regional/ Global Knowledge Platforms

Initiative Partners

RECOFTC

Diálogo Forestal Nacional (The Chilean Forests Dialogue)

Diálogo Florestal (The Brazilian Forests Dialogue)

The Australian National University

School of Ecosystem and Forest Sciences, University of Melbourne

FAO

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