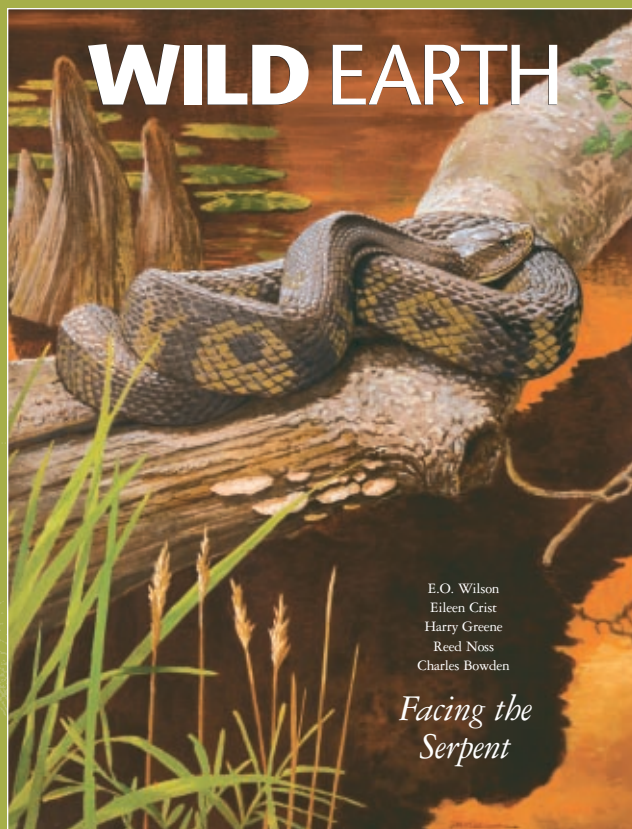


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by Francis E. Putz

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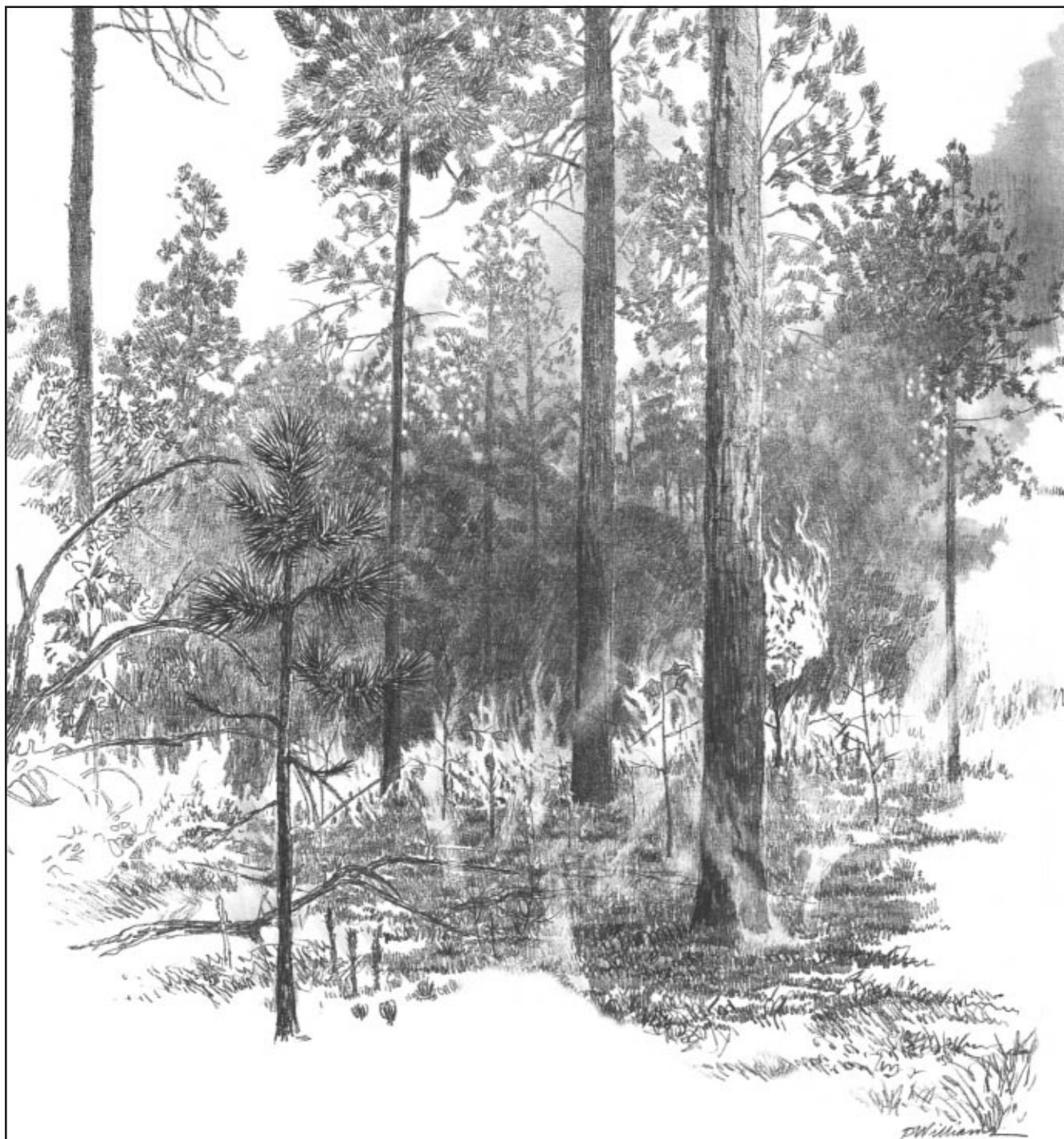
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Are Rednecks the Unsung Heroes of Ecosystem Management?



by Francis E. Putz

IN THE UNITED STATES, correlates with fire suppression and population explosions of game animals appear to me to include the quality of reception of National Public Radio stations as well as local densities of Volvos and other foreign cars. Where fires are frequent and deer are scarce, densities of full-sized, American-made pickups are high, a substantial proportion of adult males lack formal employment, and per capita tofu consumption is below detectable levels. A composite independent variable that captures the essence of these relationships is the local density of what are referred to in American vernacular as “rednecks.” As incendiarists and hunters, the oft-disparaged rednecks play vital but seldom recognized roles as environmental stewards, roles that are currently being only partially filled by officialdom.

Before jumping to the defense of traditional land uses and wildlife management techniques, invocation of the term “redneck” requires some justification, especially given that it can be used pejoratively. More or less equivalent names for this diverse socioeconomic and cultural designation include: English—country bumpkin, briar, hick, yokel, cracker, and hillbilly; French—*bouseaux*; Spanish—*cholo*; Russian—*zblobs*. Many North Americans referred to as rednecks, particularly in the Southern states, are descendents of the Celtic tribes that terrorized but then were overwhelmed and ridiculed by ancient Romans, economically and geographically marginalized to the hinterlands of Scotland, Ireland, and Wales by the Anglo Saxons, and shipped to the New World and Australia as prisoners and indentured servants by the English in the eighteenth century (McWhiney 1988). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term “redneck” was first used in the seventeenth century in the north of England in reference to dissenters against the Anglican Church. Before the mid-twentieth century in the United States, rednecks were

often referred to as “poor whites.” Recently, several redneck defenders have quite forcefully pointed out that while stereotyping people on the basis of their race, gender, religion, ethnic affiliation, or sexual orientation is frowned upon in polite society, slurring people on the basis of their socio-economic status is generally accepted (Goard 1997). On the other hand, self-effacing humor is characteristic of many people who self-identify with rednecks (e.g., Wilde 1984, Foxworthy 1989).

Among the multitude of environmental problems confronting suburbanites and ecosystem managers throughout the developed world, fire (too few and therefore too intensive) and overpopulations of deer and a number of other “weedy” wildlife species figure prominently. Fire is a particularly serious problem where houses have encroached into ecosystems that historically were maintained by frequent, low-intensity fires. To protect the houses, fires are suppressed, which results in loss of fire-dependent native species (e.g., most pines, fox squirrels, badgers, bobolinks, tortoises, quail, and red-cockaded woodpeckers), massive fuel accumulation, and wildfires that are difficult to control when they do occur. Similarly, elimination of large predators and reduced human hunting pressure have allowed populations of raccoons, foxes, opossums, and other “meso-predators” to expand, to the detriment of the many songbird species on which they prey. Finally, suburbanization and the decreased hunting with which it is associated often result in deer populations that expand to the point that regeneration of many native plant species is impeded, gardening is futile, Lyme disease goes rampant, giardia is chronic, and driving is hazardous. To address these problems, governmental employees and their contractors thin dense stands, conduct prescribed burns and, where public sentiments and budgets allow, cull populations of deer and what were formerly “game” animals but are now considered

“varmints” (e.g., opossums and raccoons). Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons including lack of funds, legal restrictions, and bureaucratic impediments, official managers of game and ecosystems are not always successful at maintaining any semblance of natural balance.

Defending the “traditional” landscape and wildlife management practices of rednecks as a partial answer to these woes is challenging for several reasons. First of all, the same traditions for which I will provide selective defenses resulted in the near or complete local extirpation of a number of noteworthy species (e.g., beavers, wolves, moose, turkeys, and bears) from much of North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as well as continuing losses of tortoises, rattlesnakes, and other target species. Secondly, many redneck traditions, such as frequent burning, sometimes at night, and without elaborate precautions, are no longer tenable given suburbanization, exurbanization, and other forms of landscape fragmentation. Finally, the fondness of many rednecks for off-road vehicles is unquestionably problematic.

Rednecks as fire ecologists

In the glare of the conflagrations that consume forests and kill fire-fighters in western and far northern North America every fire season, special care is required when trying to present fire in a positive light. Even for ecosystems that depend on frequent, low-intensity fires for their maintenance, such as prairies and savannas, it is often politically challenging to make the case that lack of fire is a problem. Urbanization of human populations compounds the problems because opportunities for first-hand experience with open fires of any sort are diminishing. Few people in the United States, for example, still use wood fuels for cooking or kerosene lamps for lighting. It is even more challenging to defend the pyrophily of “veteran woods burners,” a group profiled in a U.S. Forest Service study (Doolittle and Lightsey 1979) as a “disadvantaged culture group with antisocial tendencies.”

Before presenting a qualified defense of fire use by rednecks, I should clarify that as a scientist and landowner, I use fire in a highly sophisticated manner as an ecosystem management tool. But to be honest, I must admit to having on occasion burned more than I “planned,” sometimes substantially more, and more than occasionally without official permits.

Defenses of fire abound in the ecological literature, so I will not expound upon them at length. At least in ecosystems where fires have historically occurred at frequent intervals, prescribed fires are recommended to reduce fuel loads and

thus reduce the likelihood of uncontrollable cataclysmic fires. For plant and animal species that evolved with fire, which includes most taxa in my home state of Florida, fire is often required for reproduction and to reduce competition with more fire sensitive, invasive species. Enlightened managers of fire-maintained ecosystems therefore generally both advocate “let burn” policies and use prescribed burns to mimic historical fire regimes.

Rednecks are among a dwindling group of individuals outside of officialdom who conduct landscape-scale controlled (or somewhat controlled) burns, but their motivation for burning sometimes differs from that of certified and otherwise officially sanctioned burners. Note that here I am considering neither recklessly set fires nor the vengeful fires of arsonists, but instead focus on fires set according to traditions that may be as old as the species assemblages being burned. Some rednecks burn out of concern for ecosystem integrity, but more burn to improve hunting, to kill ticks, because the mower won’t start, to expose snakes, and for fun. Of all the reasons why people burn, the recreational nature of fire has received little attention from serious researchers, perhaps because they are themselves so serious. Whatever the motivation, when



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cultural differences are surmounted, veteran burners have much to teach the Nomex-garbed newcomers to the field.

Fires endanger houses, especially wooden ones, but rednecks have burned fewer of their own houses than might be expected because they traditionally kept their yards free of grass and other combustibles. In fact, prior to the advent of chemlawns, carefully swept yards devoid of plant material, living or dead, were considered *de rigueur* throughout the South. Yard-sweeping is now only occasionally observed in the U.S., but is still commonplace in many developing countries. As a method for protecting houses from fires, this approach is far superior to the “firewise” landscaping techniques currently being promoted by various governmental agencies. Furthermore, yard sweeping is effective for keeping mosquitoes, tsetse flies, snakes, and other varmints at bay as well as for tracking crepuscular encroachers of the human and non-human varieties.

Regardless of whether polite society accepts woods burning as a legitimate form of recreation, it is hard to deny that fire can be fun. From the montane savannas of New Guinea, to the pampas of Argentina, and to the savannas of Africa, local people traditionally burned early and often, whatever they could get to burn, often for no better or at least more apparent reason than that it would burn. Paleontologists, palynologists, and other sorts of experts on pre-history tell us that evidence of this approach to ecosystem management goes back as far as their records of pollen, charcoal, and phytoliths (Pyne 1995). Unfortunately for many fire-dependent species of now encroached savannas and prairies, this ancient legacy is fading fast among rednecks all over the world.

I doubt that anyone knows how many thousands of acres of pineywoods and other pyrogenic ecosystems rednecks traditionally burned every year in the Southeastern Coastal Plain Province of the U.S. before Smokey Bear burst on the scene, but I am confident that the area was far larger than that which is currently being burned by the highly trained forces of all the burn-permit granting agencies combined. That rednecks typically have burned during the winter when fires are not “natural” (according to the experts) may not turn out to be such a problem as evidence accumulates for the importance of human-ignited fires in pre-history. I doubt that the Native American predecessors of rednecks, for example, hesitated to ignite winter burns if they were cold, tired of tripping over catbrier vines, looking for fallen hickory nuts, or just for the heck of it. Furthermore, it seems to me that for hardwood-beleaguered savannas in the South, any fire is better than no fire.

More significant as constraints on redneck pyrophily than employment, education, and acculturation are the combined threats of fence laws, landscape fragmentation, industrialization of agriculture, television-induced cultural homogenization, intensification of forestry, and ecologically perverse tax incentives. As wealthy people move out into the countryside, land prices go up and so do taxes as residents of the new communities demand urban-quality services in formerly rural areas. Furthermore, as the products of mechanized industrial agriculture increasingly dominate vegetable markets, labor-intensive row crop agriculture is becoming less and less lucrative and opportunities for even seasonal employment are diminishing in many rural areas. Similarly, the fire-friendly long-rotation forestry operations for which rednecks were natural managers are being replaced by densely planted short-rotation pulpwood plantations for which fire is a menace and rednecks are superfluous. Tax laws, particularly stringent definitions of for-profit agriculture and looming threats of estate taxes, make owning land particularly onerous for economically challenged rednecks who typically use low capital and low intensity approaches to land management. And as homes crop up in ecosystems formerly maintained by frequent fires, carrying out either recreational or management burns becomes increasingly problematic.

Rednecks as wildlife managers

The “deer problem” confronted by many ecosystem managers and suburbanites in the wealthy portions of the world is usually that there are too many deer. It is ironic that up until a few decades ago, and to this date in most of the poorer countries of the world, the “deer problem” was and is quite the opposite—too few deer, too many unsuccessful hunts, and too many protein-scarce days. Other species that are becoming all too familiar in backyard vegetable gardens and on BMW bumpers include wild hogs, turkeys, raccoons, and bears; some gardens are now only suited for rice or cranberries, thanks to the industrious engineering of beavers.

Populations of white-tailed deer are particularly problematic in suburban communities where they often reach densities of greater than 100 per square kilometer, some 20 times that which biologists consider “natural” (Rooney and Dress 1997). To put the gravity of the situation in perspective, several communities have hired sharpshooters to cull their deer herds at costs of up to \$100 per head (<http://www.attra.org/attra-pub/deercontrol.html>). It is hard to imagine any community with a functioning participatory

democracy agreeing to hire professional hunters armed with high-powered rifles, spotlights, and silencers to shoot deer off baits in their backyards, but it occurs frequently in some of the more affluent and politically liberal parts of the United States. These sorts of culling operations are by no means “sporting,” but they are apparently very effective. Along similar lines, you can now hire packs of trained “goose buster” dogs to keep Canada geese off the greens of your golf course.

The impacts of meso-predators, like foxes and raccoons, on songbird and amphibian populations are widely lamented, but the control of these predators by coon-hunting, possum-shooting, and armadillo-smoking rednecks is not held in high regard. Suburban populations of these predators can reach astounding densities, as any early morning drive will reveal. A surprisingly high proportion of bird watchers do not even recognize that raccoons, opossums, and armadillos are edible and that these animals eat vast numbers of birds and bird eggs. Unfortunately, the knowledge of how to hunt or trap and then prepare the meats and pelts of these animals is fast disappearing. And like so many traditional redneck activities, hunting these voracious predators of birds, reptiles, and amphibians is socially shunned (or at least I am not aware of any possum hunting clothes and accessories being sold by high-end mail-order houses in Maine). Instead of being controlled by native carnivores or human hunters, populations of these meso-predators are reduced by frequent rabies epidemics, a fate that I would not wish on the peskiest possum.

Most rednecks hunt, or at least hunted before their lifestyles suffered under the combined forces of crowding and gentrification. Where there are still ample numbers of gun-toting rednecks, over-populations of deer and other game species are unlikely to develop. And if rednecks sometimes stretched the rules of hunting, at least as dictated by the sporting class, their exploits seem mild when the alternative of culling by contract hunting or poisoning are considered. While not condoning rattlesnake roundups or raptor shooting, it seems only fair to recognize the ecological benefits of the traditions of hunting of what rapidly become nuisance species after suburbanization and gentrification of rednecks.

Conclusions

Human populations densities, fence laws, house prices, and zoning regulations may be too high to allow rednecks the freedom to continue their traditions of burning and hunting, but this historically important group of ecosystem managers should not be entirely shunned. While recognizing some of

the more unsavory characteristics of stereotypic rednecks, I would like to acknowledge them for literally “taking up the torch” of the indigenous people whom they replaced in many parts of the world. And even people who do not hunt must acknowledge that a shot deer in the back of a pickup is one that they are not going to see between their headlights or munching in their garden.

Similarly, anyone who has had the pleasure of leaning on a rake while a grass fire swept gently through a pine savanna on a cold winter day (or night) is unlikely to condemn the practice of woods burning and is equally likely to acknowledge the recreational nature of fire. As the results of fire suppression become more evident and the costs of labor increase, properly controlled recreational burning may still have a role to play in ecosystem management. Perhaps I am being overly nostalgic or atavistic, but it seems a pity that the only experiences many people have with open fires are either bad or involve burning things that come with ignition instructions on the packaging. Even charcoal lighting fluid no longer flares up!

I am not suggesting that woods-burners or coon-hunters get conservation awards, but I have noticed that when rednecks are gainfully employed, educated, law-abiding, and otherwise gentrified, fuels accumulate and game animal populations explode to the point that they pose serious environmental problems. And although I do not condone destructive or anti-social activities, I hope that rednecks are recognized for the ecosystem management services that they have traditionally supplied, even if they were having fun in the process. ☾

Francis Putz is a professor of botany and forestry at the University of Florida as well as the owner and manager of 100 acres of former pine savanna and swamp. His research focuses on tropical forest conservation through sustainable use, but he also studies fire ecology and ecosystem management in the South.

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