

After the fire



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

Mother Nature has a strange way of dealing with the environment she supervises. First, she gives you a drought that puts a stranglehold on ev-

ery living thing. Second, she causes all the flora and fauna to die from lack of water, all the while giving all the wildlife a ferocious beating. Lastly, she sends a massive wildfire along to clean out everything she previously harmed or destroyed.

There is an area I used to frequent in Everglades National Park, near Flamingo on the Florida Bay side. One of the rivers that dumped in the bay had a growth of very rare black mangrove trees. These trees were nearing 200 years old and stood witness to a time in the everglades long before man was there. Mangrove trees only grow in saltwater. The area was called “The Black Forest.”

A severe hurricane blew through, killing the several-miles-long stand of black mangroves, leaving broken and mangled limbs, with no survivors. Three years later, during a severe drought, a fire swept through the area, wiping out any trace those rare trees. The old bat made the mess and then cleaned it up. In a generation, nobody will even remember those trees were once there.

Here on the Western Slope, we have endured a drought of biblical proportions, and hope to never see a repeat performance. I need not remind you that the 2018 wildfire season was one of the worst in Colorado history. Hundreds of thousands of acres, many homes and much personal property were destroyed by wildfires across the state, pushing people and resources to the limit.

One of the major impacts a fire has, is the destruction of the landscape. The fire removes all the vegetative cover, leaving the ground unprotected and vulnerable to severe flooding and erosion. This impact will not only affect folks living in the burned-over area, but also those living downstream.

Wildfires alter the properties of the soil through extreme heating. In many cases, the soil will actually repel water, increasing run-off. An increased run-off leads to even more soil erosion as well as sediment carried downstream and deposited into our reservoirs.

In the short term, wildfires are devastating to wildlife. Aside from immediate death from the fire, there will be a lack of shelter and food sources for those who survive.

Most animals have an instinct for survival from fire. Some flee, while others burrow themselves in the ground.

The tender growth that emerges shortly after a fire will cause the wildlife to return to the burned-over area. Some species, especially in the west, have evolved with fires, and actually require it for their long-term survival.

We all watched the story of the orphaned bear cub that was badly burned during the 416 fire north of Durango. She was brought into the Colorado Parks and Wildlife facility in Del Norte with severe burns to her paws. She is expected to make a full recovery and will be released back into the wild over the winter. Sadly, for every one we save, many more perish.

Wildfires seem to be impacting homes and communities with more frequency in recent years. As people move away from the urban areas and into the wild land, this will be an ongoing problem. Fire mitigation is becoming more important to property owners than ever before.

The social and economic impacts to a community after a wildfire (or any disaster) are devastating, complex and very long lasting. Take it from a guy who has seen his town destroyed by a hurricane, several times, and had to rebuild and start over. The mental anguish can last the rest of your life.

Aside from the obvious economic loss from destruction of homes and business, there are more long-lasting problems. Consider the lost sales tax and revenues from the interruption of “business as usual.” For Colorado, we see a reduction in revenue from reduced recreation and tourism due to a reduced access to public lands.

If that is not enough, Mother Nature may have even more tricks up her sleeve. There could be more disasters following the fire, such as catastrophic mudslides. All it takes is a solid rain on that burned-over area to wreak more havoc to the area, and raging waters and mudslides follow. More fun for those trying to rebuild.

One of the things often done after a fire is the removal of the dead and dying trees. Salvage logging is one tactic landowners use to regenerate a burned over area. Trees decay very soon after a fire and lose all their value for lumber and other wood products. In order to retain any value from burned trees, salvage logging must begin immediately after a fire.

Once the dead trees are removed, a mix of natural seeding and planting can occur. As the canopy from the newly regenerated forest begins to close, the undergrowth and habitat will begin to return but this process is slow.

The Bucktail fire burned thousands of



(Top) I took this photo at the sight of a wildfire near Craig, Colorado. The fire ran through here about three months before this was taken. The picture shows why heavy rains can cause serious flooding problems as there is nothing left but dirt. (Above) The fire just burned through this area a few hours ago. The scene looks like something from a Twilight Zone episode. Taken on the Grammar Fire. (Submitted photos/ Mark Rackay)

acres in the Uncompahgre National Forest, about 8 miles northeast of Nucla in 2002. The fire was started by lightning and burned through mostly ponderosa pine and oak brush. Crews numbering more than 400 people fought the blaze.

I visit the area every year to monitor the recovery of the forestation and wildlife. Sixteen years later, the burn scar over the top of the mountain is still very evident.

There are those who say, “Let the fires burn” because it is part of the natural process. People and wildfires are becoming more entwined as we move further into the wild lands around our urban areas.

Fires are part of the natural ecosystem process, and with the projected climate change, they are forecasted to become even more prevalent. We must learn to live with

fire. There are many programs available, on the state and national level that help with mitigation of property, that help create a more resilient landscape so we can coexist with wildfires.

Personally, I would rather have the Black Forest of mangroves back. I miss seeing them, but Ma Nature thought otherwise. Let’s hope she sends us a much wetter winter season so we don’t have to deal with the effects of those devastating wildfires.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press and avid hunter who travels across North and South America in search of adventure and serves as a Director for the Montrose County Sheriff’s Posse. For information about the Posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org.

Still numero uno

When the cottonwood trees along the western rivers begin to take on their fall colors, it’s a signal to local mountain bikers to make the trek to Moab, Utah. Despite the ever-increasing riding options available to mountain bikers around the country, Moab still draws many cyclists. It is rated the No. 1 mountain bike venue in the U.S.A.

Moab’s reputation got its start back in the mid-1980s when mountain bikers discovered its beautiful fall weather and fantastic scenery. Moab didn’t have that



Outdoors

By Bill Harris

much singletrack, but it had a plethora of two tracks that penetrated the surrounding red rock country. The unique Slickrock Trail and 100-mile long White Rim Trail were huge draws. The drop-dead gorgeous red rock canyon views are pretty much non-stop.

I got my first taste of Moab riding in 1988 when Dan Paradis and I attended the third annual Canyonlands Fat Tire Festival. We participated in several guided rides that included a ride down the Colorado River. The flat-bottomed boat dropped us off near Shafer

Basin. We then rode our bikes over Hurrah Pass, back to Moab. In those days, mountain bikes didn’t have suspension, so the only thing that absorbed the bumps was our legs and arms.

This past October I returned to Moab to try out all the new trails I’ve been reading about. It had been nine years since I had visited Moab to ride. Alan Reed, Joe Rusk and I rode Sovereign, the Intrepid Trails at Dead Horse Point State Park and the MOAB Brand Trails on that trip.

Those singletrack trail systems were the wave of the future. With the ever-increasing demand for singletrack, the powers that be in Moab realized that was the one thing they didn’t have. If they wanted to

compete with the other popular mountain biking hotspots, they needed to build more singletrack.

This October, I joined a loose-knit group of friends who have been getting together to ride since 2000. The gathering is called “Sand Camp.” Over the years, participants have come and gone, but Rick Corbin, Jim Flynn, Rick Walker and Brad Junge have been stalwarts. Sand Camp has moved around to various venues over the years, but regularly returns to its roots in Moab.

The day we arrived we rode the Intrepid Trail system. Several miles of trail had been added since 2009. The views from the park’s rimrock vantage points are stunning. The riding surface is a mix of hard-packed and loose sand, rock benches and slickrock. It felt good to get back into the flow of canyon country riding.

We set up base camp at the Horsethief Campground out on Highway 133, northwest of Moab. Around the campfire that first evening we recounted Sand Camp’s many great rides, quirky circumstances and downright nasty experiences. We paid our respects to Sand Campers, who for one reason or another, couldn’t be with us.

On day two I joined the two Ricks and another fellow named RC for a ride on the Navaho Rocks trails. We did a 9-mile loop that was non-stop fun, alternating between steep slickrock, twisting, flowing descents and technical, rocky climbs. It was one of the most enjoyable, hardest rides I have ever done in recent memory. The other Sand Campers did a 20-mile ride — I wouldn’t have survived that death march.

At dusk the last night in camp, we silently watched the western horizon above the distant Henry Mountains explode with a thousand shades of pink, orange, yellow and purple. Later that evening, as I headed for my tent, I caught a glimpse of an orange moon as it broke the eastern horizon. I stared straight up at the Milky Way as a meteorite streaked across night sky. I didn’t make a wish — I didn’t need to; it had already been granted with my return to Moab.

Bill Harris is a long-time resident of western Colorado and author of “Bicycling the Uncompahgre Plateau.”



There’s plenty of slickrock on the Navaho rocks Trails. (Special to the Montrose Daily Press/ Bill Harris)