

SOCIETY**● Fires in Yellowstone**

What happens when a fire breaks out in a national park? You might expect all available firefighters to rush to the scene. However, since 1972 the policy of the National Park Service has been to manage the national parks as naturally as possible. Since fire is a natural force in forest ecosystems, this policy includes allowing most fires caused by lightning to burn. The only lightning-caused fires that are put out are those that threaten lives, property, uniquely scenic areas, or endangered species. All human-caused fires are put out.

Between 1972 and 1987, more than 200 naturally caused fires burned in Yellowstone National Park. None of the fires grew excessively large, and all of them went out by themselves. The fire policy of the National Park Service was not really put to the test until the summer of 1988.

Conditions in Yellowstone during the summer of 1988 were unusual because very little rain had fallen during the normally wet summer months. In fact, that summer turned out to be the driest on record, and several of the previous winters had also been drier than normal. All that was needed to set the dry forest ablaze was a few sparks, which were provided that summer by lightning.

By mid-July, Yellowstone had several fires that had been blazing for nearly a month and 11 others that had come and gone. At this time, the National Park Service began fighting the fires. Several days later in another part of the park, careless humans complicated the control efforts by starting what turned out to be the largest fire of all. Even more fires sprang up around the park in the passing weeks. Some of them persisted through the fall months, and a few were still burning in the winter.

About 25,000 firefighters controlled the fires and managed to protect major tourist sites from significant damage, but the price tag on the firefighting efforts came to \$120 million. Final surveys showed that about 35 percent of the park's total land area had been blackened by the fires.

Some politicians and journalists criticized the National Park Service for allowing such widespread destruction. They claimed that the service's policy on fires was irresponsible and dangerous.

Two commissions of experts scrutinized the fire policy. They concluded that the policy was sound, but they recommended stricter limits on when and how long such fires should be allowed to burn. These recommendations were incorporated into Yellowstone's revised fire management plan and approved in April of 1992.

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● **Fires in Yellowstone** *continued*

Thinking Critically

1. **Understanding Processes** Use what you have learned in this chapter about succession and fire-maintained communities to explain why the National Park Service might allow a naturally occurring fire to burn in Yellowstone.
2. **Expressing Viewpoints** Based on what you have read in this Case Study, do you think that the National Park Service's policy for controlling fires adequately protects humans and their property? Explain.