

Two Sides of the Same Coin: Wildfire vs Forest Fire

The smell of burnt wood drifted through Dash's open window. He quickly shut and locked it tight. *It's not fire season. Why are we having so many wildfires? Sigh. Maybe I can ask Mr. Caleb before we work on our second California Defensible Space Law model today. This time, I'm going to create a fire line that will protect the house so it won't burn down like the last wildfire experiment. I wonder if the haze is coming from further up in Northern California. Maybe one of the homeowners didn't build his house far enough from the fire line and caused a gas explosion?*

Dash wondered why humans built into historically high fire zones. As he got into the car for school, plumes of dark smoke drifted into the city, covering California's blue skies.

"Hey Dad, can we listen to Josh today?" Dash loved current events. He was what his parents jokingly called a "news junkie" as he would spend hours and hours watching the weekend news.

"Sure, son." Like his twelve year old, Dash's father shared the same love for radio talk shows during their morning commute. His own parents had been journalists for the New York Times, and he loved nothing more than lively discussions.

"Welcome to *The Candid Talk*, with me, Josh Goldridge. Today's topic is something that's on a lot of people's minds: wildfire or forest fire?" Dash's ears perked up as Josh's familiar voice came through the radio.

"Before we get started, let's welcome our guests, Daniel, our local baker, Matthew, an architect, Fire, Soil, and Theodore the Kirtland Warbler to the episode "*Two Sides of the Same Coin: Wildfire or Forest Fire?*" Thank you very much for joining us this smoke filled morning. As you all know, many of our listeners have voiced concerns over the fires that rampaged our communities in the past five years. What are your thoughts, and how have these fires impacted you?"

"So, Daniel, why don't we start with you. What do you think, wildfire or forest fire?" Daniel escaped raging fires in the past, but his home was burned to the ground in the recent fire six months ago. He is now contemplating on uprooting his family for good.

"Is that really a question? Of course it's a wildfire! According to an article I read from the National Interagency Fire Center, those fires have burned a total of 8.5 million acres across the entire country. This adds up to a total of nearly 56,000 wildfires! This was only in 2018. Think about how many fires have broken out in all those other years. Those wildfires are monsters! They destroy everything in their paths. My family home was burned to the

ground! My grandparents built that house with their own hands!” Daniel, who was usually calm and soft-spoken, was flushed and angry.

“Thank you, Daniel. What do you have to say for yourself, Fire?” Josh was opening up the floor for discussion.

“For starters, we prefer to be called forest fires. Forest fires have been around way before humans even existed. We are a part of nature. It is the humans who are the true monsters. They encroach on the forests, and when a fire starts, the humans try to contain us. If they can’t, then they blame us for burning down *their* forests. Humans call us monsters when in reality they don’t understand the risks of expanding into high fire zones. Or maybe they do, but choose to invade into our natural habitat anyway.”

“So you mean humans are actually the root of the problem?” Dash could hear that even Josh, a seasoned interviewer known for his investigative research was intrigued.

“Yes, humans are part of the problem.” Fire replied affirmatively.

Dash took a quick glance at his watch. He sent a silent prayer to the universe, *Oh, please, please, please. Let there be lots of traffic! I want to hear every word! This is exactly what Mr. Caleb was teaching us in class!*

“Thank you, Fire, now let’s hear from Matthew.” Josh peered outside the studio window as the smokey air blanketed the skies.

“Good morning, Josh, thanks for having me! My name is Matthew Peterson, and I own Peterson Construction. For the past few years, my company has been specializing in repairing fire damaged homes and helping homeowners fireproof their houses. California has always had seasonal fires, but homeowners and land developers have been pushing into the fire zones. Basically these are places that have seen many forest fires. The problem is that homeowners look for the most affordable ways to build a house. This generally means that they don’t use fireproof building materials. From my experience, metal or tin roofing is better than wood shingles; surrounding the property with cement paving is better than woodchips, and likewise, installing metal fences instead of wooden fences offer better protection. These materials will increase the chances of a home surviving a fire.” Matthew shared his knowledge confidently.

“Thank you, Matthew. Thank you for sharing with us what kinds of materials to use. My house was burned to the ground in the Paradise Fire.” Josh replied somberly as he remembered the blaze burned at a rate of eighty football fields per minute. “Moving on to you, Soil.”

“Yeah, of course Josh. You see, what happens is we’ve always relied on forest fires to burn dried up and clumping vegetation. I know it sounds crazy, but these ashes are food for us. They’re natural fertilizer for many plants. And it’s not only beneficial for us and all the vegetations. Ask Theodore the Kirtland Warbler. Forest fires helped bring their species back from near extinction.”

“Thank you for the insights, Soil. What are your thoughts, Theodore?”

“I’m so grateful to be here today to support our friend, Fire. Hello, my name is Theodore, and I’m from Grayling, Michigan. My family and I have had quite a tragic story. We were experiencing a decline in Jack Pine trees where my family and others loved to nest. We are a very unique species, and throughout generations of experimentation, we found nesting in Jack Pine trees gave us the best chances of survival. Ever since the number of Jack Pine declined, as you can imagine, our population also suffered dramatically which ultimately led to our endangered species status. The Jack Pine relies on forest fires to heat up their cones which let the seedlings fall out onto the ground, but the U.S. national policy was to put out fires as soon as they started. When these fires didn’t last long enough, the seedlings were never able to fall out. Soon enough, we experienced a 60% population decline. When the U.S. Forest Fire policy changed in 1968 allowing forest fires to burn instead of immediately putting them out, the Jack Pine population increased, and soon enough, our population has grown 30 times from our lowest point.”

“Thank you, Theodore. Any final comments for our listeners?” The program was coming to an end, and Dash was nearly at school.

“Yes,” Fire was very eager for another turn to speak. “According to the National Park Service, 85% of these forest fires are actually caused by humans. The many causes include arson, campfires, downed power lines, and fireworks.”

“Also looking at Indigenous peoples, they learned how to cooperate with forest fires. They didn’t put them out immediately. They learned how to harness the power of fire for the benefit of the ecosystem. They carry out controlled burns to clear fields for crops, to manage land, and to increase grazing land for animals that would later be hunted for their food.” Theodore chimed in.

“Thank you all for opening my eyes to see the benefits of these forest fires. I always thought that the problem was the fire itself, not the cause of the fire. Although I saw on the news that the fire that burned down my home was actually started by a campfire that wasn’t put out properly, I was too angry to think clearly. Sorry for putting the blame on you so quickly.” Daniel apologized.

“I’m sorry for what happened to your family. We can co-exist as long as we’re respectful of each other’s boundaries. I hope Matthew can help you build a new house far from the fire zone soon.” said Fire.

“Thank you very much Daniel, Fire, Matthew, Soil, and Theodore. To all of you wonderful listeners, now that we have a better understanding of forest fires, let’s move forward and treat forest fires as a natural ally that we can cooperate with. And please, respect our forestland and refrain from encroaching into areas where forest fires often occur. And remember, don’t play with fire.” The car pulled up to the drop-off zone as the program wrapped up. Dash unbuckled his seatbelt and flashed his dad a grateful smile. *Oh boy, I’ve so much to tell Mr. Caleb!*

As he watched his son disappear into the school building, Dash’s father turned his attention back to the radio. “Please join me tomorrow at the same time for “Hurricanes and Cyclones Bring More Than Devastations”. Dash’s father smiled; he knew Dash would enjoy another one of Josh’s unconventional discussions so he made a mental note to turn on the radio tomorrow.