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The disaster that brought us to Dixie



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In this Wednesday, Aug. 4, 2021, file photo, the Way Station Bar burns as the Dixie Fire tears through the Greenville community of Plumas County, Calif. California has already surpassed the acreage burned at this point last year, which ended up setting the record. Now it's entering a period when powerful winds have often driven the deadliest blazes. AP Photo by Noah Berger.

IN SUMMARY

The Dixie and Caldor fires may have dealt the burning blows, but these towns are the victims of misplaced corporate priorities, agency arrogance and a fundamental misunderstanding of the role of fire in the forests of the Sierra Nevada.

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On the afternoon of Aug. 4, a 40,000-foot pyro-cumulus cloud built over the mountains south of Lake Almanor, collapsing into a storm of red-hot embers. Carried by 40 mile-an-hour winds, flames roared down North Canyon west of Greenville in a torrent of torched trees. Within hours, the Plumas County town of 1,129 residents was a smoldering mass of charred cars, twisted metal roofing and the haunting, brick-walled remains of the Masonic Lodge.

Greenville is gone.

Gone, too, are parts of Grizzly Flat in El Dorado County and Janesville in Lassen County. More than 40,000 residents in [eight counties](#) have fled the flames of wildfires and remain evacuated.

The Dixie and Caldor fires may have dealt the burning blows, but these towns are the victims of misplaced corporate priorities, agency arrogance and a fundamental misunderstanding of the role of fire in the forests of the Sierra Nevada.

Greenville, my adopted home of 40-plus years, is a gritty working-class community birthed in blasts of raw earth detonated by the hydraulic miners who came to these mountains seeking wealth. Ranchers

supported the burgeoning pioneer village and have stabilized it through boom-and-bust waves of logging and dam building.

Despite diminishing odds, the town has retained a tenacious hold on survival. I have watched it shrink from five bars to one, three grocery stores and two hardware stores to one each, and to where a cooperatively managed thrift store is the only place to buy clothes.

Before the fire, we were a contentiously compatible social mishmash.

Ever-optimistic merchants solicited tourists to take in the Old West-style false fronts of a downtown graced by tarnished Gold Rush charm. We were retirees, rednecks, deadbeats and a handful of aging hippies drawn by the land and held together by the fundamental decency of the men and women who work it.

In our scrabble for survival, we all should have paid more attention to what our founding fathers discovered when they arrived.

The Mountain Maidu understood fire in a way that even those of us who appreciate its powers cannot. They have occupied these Feather River headwaters for millennia, cultivating the plants that nourished and healed them, sharing the land with the animals on which they depended.

When Maidu men went out to hunt, they tossed burning sticks along their path to keep it clear of the brush and young trees that can carry flames to the crowns of towering pines and firs. They burned brush and grasses around villages.

When Maidu women smelled smoke, they felt safe, knowing fire had created a protective ring around their homes.

Those of us who came later into these well-tended woods saw only the destructive side of fire. We did not appreciate its cleansing powers — the influx of beetles that attract black-backed woodpeckers, the flushes of nutrients that support mushrooms, the bursts of sunlight that allow new plants to grow.

In its zeal to harvest trees for lumber, the U.S. Forest Service declared war on fire, mandating that all forest blazes be extinguished by 10 the following morning. The service's mascot, Smokey Bear, took up the cause, admonishing generations of wide-eyed children that "only you can prevent wildfire." The result is a century-old buildup of forest fuels ripe for a lightning strike, an errant campfire or a faulty Pacific Gas & Electric Co. transformer.

As climate change exacerbates this instability, even well-managed forests are vulnerable to historically dry conditions and relative humidity stuck in single digits. Veterans of fire management are flummoxed by Dixie's erratic behavior as winds constantly change direction.

We all are. This is the horrific new reality scientists have been predicting.

As counterintuitive as it may seem, Sierra Nevada forests need fire.

CalFire, which is managing the Dixie Fire, and the U.S. Forest Service, which owns most of the land burning, have endorsed the role of natural fire in maintaining forest resilience. Yet they have consistently

failed to keep their commitments to increase the acreage of intentional burns and allow natural fire starts to do their work away from human communities. On Aug. 2, Randy Moore, the newly appointed chief of the Forest Service, further limited beneficial fire by declaring it [“a strategy we will not use.”](#)

PG&E, one of the region’s major landowners, [likely started the Dixie Fire](#). Company officials have reported that a tree fell onto a power line near its Cresta power plant where the fire began. But they have yet to publicly connect this fire — or the 2018 Camp Fire, the 2019 Kincade Fire or the 2020 Zogg Fire — to their self-serving penchant for rewarding corporate executives and enriching stockholders over maintaining their electrical infrastructure.

Dixie is not simply a natural disaster. It and others were sparked by corporate greed, fueled by the illusion of dominion over nature and our profound, collective misunderstanding of fire. These failings stick in our craws like the smoke that clogs our lungs. They are the bile that gags us as we face the reality, as we name the names of the many who have lost their homes to a century of failed land management.

Greenville is gone. Village Drug can no longer dispense medications from its wooden counter that includes an array of homemade jams and jellies. Hunter Hardware can no longer supply nuts and bolts from its dimly lit space with a live rattlesnake in the display window. I can no longer write from the office at the top of the stairs of the town’s oldest building.

How Greenville responds will depend on whether we can muster the vision, cooperation and stubborn resilience to rebuild our community physically, socially and spiritually.

How corporations, agencies and government officials respond will determine the survival of other rural communities and, indeed, the future of the Sierra Nevada and the West.

Jane Braxton Little has previously written about [California condors](#), conserving [Tejon Ranch](#) and reclaimed homelands of [California tribes](#).