

FIRE

& FEAR

AMANDA MONTHEI
ON WILDFIRE

ON THE

MIDDLE FORK

The first thing you learn about fighting fire in the Salmon River breaks — the steep, rocky, wind-buffed slopes above the waterway and its many forks — is to fear them. The term “river breaks” is particularly apt here: these canyons are nothing if not humbling.

When I was hired for my second season of working wildfires, the old fire guys warned me when they heard where I'd be located: those breaks are dangerous, they said, before reeling off a list of fire shelter deployments or firefighter deaths along the Salmon, somehow memorized. I chose North Fork, Idaho for its proximity to flyfishing and hot springs. But this was feeling like more than I bargained for.

THERE AREN'T MANY MEMORIES from my second season of wildland firefighting that aren't laced with the warnings these older firefighters instilled in me. From flying in helicopters for the first time to seeing fast-moving fire up close, I spent the summer wide-eyed and fully gripped — happy for the experience but nonetheless scared shitless by the exposure necessary to get it.

In the summer of 2017, I was a member of a 10-person fire crew based in the Salmon-Challis National Forest. That August, we got the call that most wildland firefighters pine for: a 14-day assignment on the Middle Fork Salmon in Idaho's Frank Church—River of No Return Wilderness to work on a small wilderness fire.

There are myriad reasons this is the fire assignment of everyone's dreams: for one, the remote location almost always necessitates a helicopter ride and/or a complimentary float to gain access to the fire.

Second, the federal designation of wilderness is significant when it comes to how we fight fire. The Wilderness Act of 1964 prohibits mechanized use in wilderness. This applies to planes, motor vehicles of any sort, and in our case, the use of chainsaws to fight fire.

When it came down to brass tacks, our crew needed permission from Washington, D.C. to run chainsaws, and we never got that approval. Our resupplies arrived by pack-string to avoid dealing with the red tape of “mechanized” resupply flights. We left no trace, just as rafters on the Middle Fork are instructed to do, and that translated into our means of fighting fire as well — we largely let it do what it wanted, whether it was consuming stands of conifers or backing down drainages. Our job was to watch, to wait and to not impress too much influence over the way the fire shaped the land.

When the fire moved into a drainage above a campsite popular with rafters — lined by robust, wind-and-fire-hardened ponderosa pines — we employed our one simple defense: more fire. That night, the crew used lighters and flares to ignite bone-dry grass, sage and mahogany at the bottom of the drainage, an act that felt as equally sinful as it did intoxicating.

Faces glowed golden as we watched our man-made fire reach the blaze we were fighting. The idea was to snuff it out by stealing the vegetation sustaining it. When the two fires met, I expected the sound of a freight train.

Words by AMANDA MONTHEI

Photos by GLORIA GOÑI

I was wrong. It was more akin to a giant vacuum — the sound of two massive bodies of energy fighting for what little fuel remained before finally converging and succumbing to themselves. As this collision played out in front of me, I felt myself reacting as if I were in the ocean, feeling the unrelenting power of the waves and undertow. With widened eyes and quickened breath, it was clear that something evolutionary was happening — a reckoning with something so humbling it was all I could do to not fight it.

Instead, I leaned into the feeling, the intense sensation of witnessing the very power I'd been told to fear.

Five summers later, I found myself back on the Middle Fork of the Salmon River on a guided raft trip. I was ready to experience the river in a new way.

In late August of 2022, from 2,000 feet above the Frank Church Wilderness in the rear seat of a rumbling Britten-Norman Islander, I caught the glister of the Middle Fork far below me, once again in a smoke-dampened morning sun.





The water was not the cerulean I remembered as we approached the dirt airstrip at Indian Creek, but a deep brown with post-fire mudflow debris from a higher, unseen stretch of the river. This wasn't the first sign of fire on our flight, either; smoke from the 96,000-acre Moose Fire, just to our east, had infiltrated the cabin of our tiny plane early in the flight and lingered on distant ridgelines as we flew. The smoke caused a brief moment of anxiety before I found a certain familiarity, comfort even, in the distinct smell of central Idaho fire, of burning sage and ponderosa, of that summer that taught me just how little I knew about wildfire.

Once we landed and loaded the rafts, we began the 75-mile journey to the confluence of the Middle Fork Salmon and the Main Salmon rivers. It was immediately clear that wildfires past and present would not be a fleeting presence on this trip. From the first river bend below the

airstrip, wildfire shapes the Middle Fork. One old burn area fades into the next, and each one is indistinguishable from the last. Ponderosa pines along the river hold bark blackened by centuries of the soft lap of flames, and for the entirety of our trip, the river remained stained with the remnants of upstream debris.

A fire from the previous year had scarred a drainage upstream of our put-in at Indian Creek, causing widespread erosion on the now-naked environment. Fire-scarred land is fertile ground for mudslides, and this one had flowed into the river only weeks before with the help of some unseasonable summer rains. The slide pushed enough mud and wood into the river to effectively clog it for normal use by boaters.

In spite of the dangers, the Middle Fork remains one of those rare places where the public can get an intimate experience of fire as it exists in the wilderness.

ABOVE

First glimpses of the ash-stained Middle Fork Salmon through a smoky sunrise.

RIGHT

Morning sun streams through a light haze from the nearby Moose Fire on yet another smoke-stained morning on the Middle Fork Salmon.



Many people who float the river regularly know the feeling of a building haze and of waking up with a sore throat. It's not uncommon to raft alongside a fire burning at the river's edge.

"It's sad in many ways," my river guide said on day one, his oars clanking in their stanchions as we moved through a soft section of water. "I know it's natural, but it is devastating. And at the same time, people come to us for a wilderness experience and, well, this is as wilderness as it gets."

His sentiment applied to both the muddied water below us and the fire scar above us. He kept his hands on the oars while nodding toward the burn on the east side of the river where a fire had raged back in 2008. His eyes wandered to the blackened remains of ponderosas peppering a sea of flourishing shrubs and new growth.

As we rounded the next bend of the river, the ponderosas appeared to come

back to life; their canopies remained intact, though many of their bases had the telltale evidence of fire lapping at them.

One drainage, scorched. The next, hardly affected.

Despite the torched drainages — and despite what the old guys will tell you — the fire history in the greater Salmon River watershed is hardly one of tragedy.

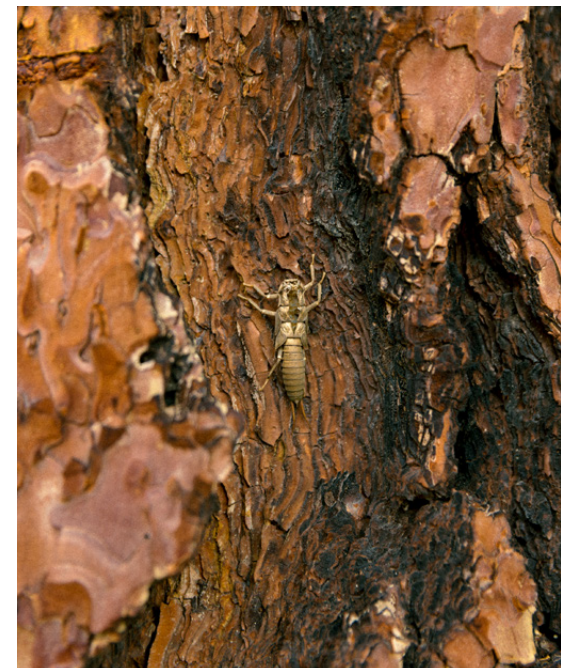
On the contrary, the Middle Fork is a preeminent modern example of allowing fire to impact a landscape naturally. This is a unique way to fight fire, especially as our suppression of fire in the United States has been relentless for the last 120 years.

For most of that time, wildfires were expected to be extinguished by 10 a.m. the morning after they were discovered. This policy arose in the wake of the 1910 fires that

killed 86 people and burned three million acres across Idaho, Montana and Washington. You can hardly blame land managers in the face of that singular devastation, but this removal of fire from the landscape was just the first of many oversights that crafted the conditions for modern wildfires.

In the decades since, the extensive buildup of vegetation from decades of fire exclusion has caused wildfires to burn hotter and more intensely than they would have had the policy been less hardlined. Frankly, removing fire was a poor management plan in most of the ecosystems that make up the West.

Still, without the knowledge of fire ecology we now have, the actions of many land managers in the early 1900s were seemingly justified, if only on an economic level: timber built the burgeoning, colonized West, and protecting valuable lumber — and the communities built with and within



Fire history across the West is invariably wrapped up in human history, and removing human fire in these places calls to question what wilderness actually means. The essential truth is this: fire belongs in these landscapes.

LEFT

Amanda Monthei stands above the Middle Fork Salmon while working on the Tappen Fire in August 2017.
Photo: Amanda Monthei

ABOVE

(Left) Amanda fishes in Camas Creek just below the burn scar for the 2017 Tappen Fire.

(Right) Fire scars and fish food. A stonefly exoskeleton is contrasted by fire-blackened ponderosa pine bark.

it — was of utmost importance to early Euro-American land managers.

But as our understanding of fire ecology continues to grow, our approach to suppressing wildfires has not. Suppression remains king. Today, places like the Frank Church offer a rare glimpse of fires as they've always burned, lapping up hillsides and backing into canyons and acting in all manner of ways that remain unimagined by the uninitiated.

This was a revelation for me during my summer of fighting fire in these river breaks: Learning to see fire as a fundamental part of the landscape and not as something to be fought.

The thing about wilderness like the Frank Church is that, for all its perceived wildness, it's still inextricably shaped by human history.

The human history of the Middle Fork River began with the Mountain Shoshone or Tukudika people — otherwise known as the Sheepeaters — who made seasonal homes along the river, often on flat benches above gravel bars where salmon could be most easily procured.

Evidence of their presence is found in the rock-lined wells of their former pithouses, and even in the modern trails and camps that line the river and its tributaries. Pictographs remain, too — elk, bighorn sheep and hunters scrawled in deep red ink on walls along the river.

While less obvious, human influence is also visible in the structure and density of the ponderosa and Douglas fir forests that blanket the steep, rocky walls of the Middle Fork Canyons, especially in the higher reaches of the ravine.

The Shoshone Tribe — along with the neighboring Nez Perce Tribe — periodically lit fires to encourage the growth of camas,

We dam rivers and we suppress fires, and yet we pine for moments in places like the Middle Fork where wilderness is allowed to express itself. Is it possible to reconsider wilderness, to redefine it entirely so that it includes the ways we're invariably tied to it? Is it possible to not fear but coexist with these natural processes?

blackberry, and other edible and medicinal plants, especially in the upper reaches of the Clearwater and Salmon River drainages. This consistent use of fire improved deer and elk habitat and cleaned seasonal campsites that were often burned when vacated. The Frank Church, like most North American forests, would have seen fire, whether caused by lightning or humans, more frequently prior to Euro-American arrival. These fires regularly removed underbrush, revitalized the soil and encouraged movement of large game.

While decades of suppression in the early-to-mid-20th century shaped this particular landscape in many ways, a 1980 wilderness designation allowed the Frank Church to remain largely untouched by miners, loggers, firefighters and the indigenous tribes that had stewarded it for millennia. Still, a stunted frequency of wildfires is a consequence of suppression and a century-long manifestation of removing tribes from their land.

Fire history across the West is invariably wrapped up in human history, and removing human fire in these places calls to question what wilderness actually means.

The essential truth is this: fire belongs in these landscapes.

I waited for Tappan Canyon to come into view through the haze of the nearby Moose Fire, searching distant ridgelines for some sense of familiarity in their silhouettes or rock faces.

Finally, I noticed the bench above the river where we'd first been dropped off by helicopter back in 2017. Below the bench was the stretch of river we walked every morning and evening; we'd hike to and from the fire at sunrise and sunset before bedding down for the night amongst the grass and

sage overlooking a bend of the river above Tappan Falls. We eventually moved camp to a spot above a deep, emerald pool, the bank crowded by towering ponderosas.

I was surprised by how much faster river miles move on a raft. A hike that took over an hour and a half every morning took half that time by water; and I desperately looked to the bank above us for signs of the trail's presence, for any lingering familiarity I could glean from this new perspective on the water.

Eventually, the confluence of Camas Creek came into view, and with it all the nostalgia I thought had been flushed out of my system. I immediately noticed the grass on the bench above the campsite, which had been black the last time I was here.

Now the grass was long, ethereal, waving in a soft breeze. I tried to remember the fire on the ridge above Camas Creek, but I could barely piece together where it had burned and where it hadn't. To be sure, hardly any evidence remained of the fire I'd spent 14 days watching and working.

The next morning, I walked the two miles from the mouth of Camas Creek to a drainage I'd ignited five years prior. I recalled the moment as I walked, of lighting the brush and watching it burn, of holding my breath in awe before it all ended as quickly as it started.

For a moment, I couldn't quite tell where we'd worked that night, but I soon recognized a familiar rock wall on the northern edge of the drainage. Some charred mountain mahogany remained. They were skeletons among the regrowth, and really the only indication that I'd been there at all. I scanned the immense drainage fanning out above me, remembering how we couldn't see more than a few feet into the thick brush before burning it.

The regrowth buzzed in the early morning sun. Pollen floated on a light breeze off the river, catching the rays of light while chukkar and grouse skittered through the sage and birds swooped in and out of the grass. I watched the ridge as the sun rose over it and considered the privilege of seeing the way a landscape can bend and shift and realizing I was a part of that — even if it was just a blink in the grand scheme of history. Looking up the drainage, I finally understood that what I was experiencing was more profound than I'd anticipated; here I was, looking up at a landscape I had a hand in changing.

We dam rivers and we suppress fires, and yet we pine for moments in places like the Middle Fork where wilderness is allowed to express itself. Is it possible to reconsider wilderness, to redefine it entirely so that it includes the ways we're invariably tied to it? Is it possible to not fear but coexist with these natural processes?

My relationship with fire — like my relationship with those river breaks, with pounding shorebreak, with any moment of feeling nature's raw power — began with fear, traversed humility, and finally landed me somewhere near admiration. How powerful would it be if we rejoiced not only in how much these processes shape the land, but in how much they shape us?

I walked back down the game trail that had served as our fireline five summers ago, kicking at the loose, dry soil and remembering that moment of collision once again — the instant ignition of natural power like I'd never experienced and the audible peace that followed so quickly after. I drew myself back to the present moment, to the peace of the rising sun on healing land, and was left once again with only the sound of the river carving its path below. 🌿

Firefighters keep an eye on fire behavior while performing a burnout on a drainage just downstream of Camas Creek on the Middle Fork Salmon; Tappan Fire, 2017. Photo: Amanda Monthei

