

SUMMARY: Learning to Live With Fire: Beneficial Fire in B.C. – An Exploration of How Fire Can Contribute to Wildfire Resilience

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For more info, visit poliswildfireproject.org

The term beneficial fire is increasingly used to describe fires that are desired on the landscape to promote ecological or community values. This reflects a growing awareness that fire is a healthy and essential part of many landscapes and that society needs to learn to live with fire. Promoting beneficial fire is one strategy to help build wildfire resilience.

Prescribed and cultural fires are intended to be beneficial; they are carefully planned to maximize their ecological, cultural, and community benefits, and minimize their negative effects. In addition to prescribed and cultural fire, wildfires can be beneficial.

Not all fires are beneficial; some have negative consequences for ecosystems, for communities, or both. Those fires are detrimental. Sometimes wildfires or wildfire seasons with significant negative effects are called catastrophic.



Photo: C̓ik̓ilax̓wn cultural burn, West Chopaka Creek by Jesse Zeman, BC Wildlife Federation (2025).

The POLIS Wildfire Resilience Project proposes a working definition of beneficial fire:

Beneficial fire is planned or unplanned wildland fire that has positive effects on ecosystem processes and functions and has acceptable risk to human communities. Beneficial fire typically includes cultural fire, prescribed fire, and managed wildfire.

To promote wildfire resilience, society can increase the amount of beneficial fire and reduce the amount of detrimental fire. This report explores the concept of beneficial fire and proposes a simple framework that integrates ecological and community dimensions to determine if fires are beneficial. It then explores how place-based assessments help us understand the kind of fires that existed historically, exist today, and are expected in the future. These assessments allow communities and managers to better assess risks and trade-offs and to better grasp the effects that fire has, and may have, on ecosystems, communities, and ecosystem services. This diagnosis can then inform planning and decision-making to take actions that increase beneficial fire and reduce detrimental fire.

This report includes key insights about how we assess, think about, and manage for beneficial fire. It concludes with opportunities for action to advance beneficial fire as part of a whole-of-society strategy to promote wildfire resilience.

THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION ARE:

Opportunity 1: Accelerate Fire Regime Assessments and Improve Information and Public Understanding

Opportunity 2: Socialize Society and Decision-Makers to the Idea of Beneficial Fire

Opportunity 3: Improve Community Safety and Preparedness

Opportunity 4: Expand Beneficial Fire Through Place-Based Planning

1. For this paper, we use the term “community” to refer to human communities: “The people with common interests living in a particular area.” This can include Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

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About the POLIS Wildfire Project:

The POLIS Wildfire Resilience Project offers practical solutions to advance wildfire resilience in British Columbia. As part of an international network, we focus on the nexus of resilience and governance, working with all levels of government, Indigenous nations, local communities, industry, experts, researchers, and civil society to offer new perspectives, innovative ideas, and practical solutions. The goal of the Wildfire Resilience Project is to create a more secure future for communities and ecosystems by promoting a wildfire regime that lies within nature's limits and reduces catastrophic wildfires. Our work is rooted in the principles of ecological governance and resilience with a firm goal of strengthening watershed security. Over the coming years, we will imagine and promote a new B.C. wildfire management and governance regime that helps position B.C. as a leader in wildfire resilience.

www.poliswildfireproject.org

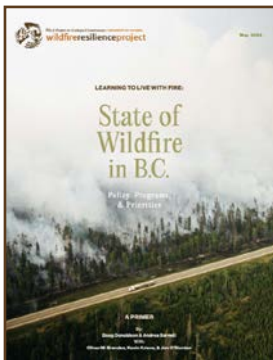
About the POLIS Project on Ecological Governance:

The POLIS Project on Ecological Governance is a hub for collaborative and action-oriented research, policy, practice, and education, and is an integral part of the Centre for Global Studies at the University of Victoria. Since being founded in 2000, the work of POLIS has encompassed a number of initiatives, each embodying the principles of ecological governance and working towards a responsible present that supports a sustainable future. Current POLIS initiatives include the POLIS Water Sustainability Project, the POLIS Wildfire Resilience Project, and the POLIS Biocultural Ethics initiative.

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Further Readings:

Check out our other publications, including other instalments in our Lightning Explainer and Learning to Live With Fire series. And, if you'd like to stay on the pulse of wildfire in B.C. (and beyond), sign up to receive the special Igniting Change e-news! This regular compendium of wildfire news, events, research, and more is curated by the POLIS Wildfire Resilience Project team and includes leading international examples and updates from the broader wildfire community.



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