

Success Stories

How the SWFSC and JFSP bring professionals together to improve outcomes



**SOUTHWEST
FIRE SCIENCE
CONSORTIUM**



Fires of Change: Communicating Fire Science through Art

THE SOUTHWEST FIRE SCIENCE CONSORTIUM (SWFSC) IS SUCCESSFULLY BRINGING TOGETHER FIRE MANAGERS, PRACTITIONERS, AND SCIENTISTS to assure the best science is used to address the most pressing fire management challenges. One way they are meeting this challenge is by communicating fire science through art.

- » Wildfire is a significant and growing societal challenge, with profound and lasting impacts to communities and ecosystems worldwide. Yet, the public does not often have sufficient understanding of wildfire to address their relationship with it on a personal or community level.
- » Artists have a unique way of communicating that can allow us to understand complex societal challenges and examine our own relationship to them.
- » In 2013, the SWFSC and their partners produced Fires of Change, an art exhibit dedicated to the subject of wildland fire, which traveled to three cities and had nearly 12,000 attendees.
- » The exhibit was effective in changing the public's perception of wildfire. Over 75% of attendees who responded to a survey increased their knowledge of wildfire and were more likely to support management strategies that reduce wildfire risk because of exposure to the art exhibit.

The goal of the SWFSC is to accelerate the awareness, understanding, adoption, and implementation of readily available wildland fire science throughout the southwestern U.S. by providing a forum for managers, scientists, policy makers, and the public to interact and share science. The SWFSC is part of the Joint Fire Science Program Fire Science Exchange Network, a national collaboration of 15 regional fire science exchanges.

“The point of this show is getting people to rethink their relationship with fire. It is a conversation that we have to have if we are going to live in a fire-prone landscape.”

—Bryan David Griffith, *Artist*

Read the story . . .



Fifteen regional Fire Science Exchanges are funded by the Joint Fire Science Program.



Urban Interface, by Jennifer Gunlock, explores the role of humans in land management historically and into the future.

Image: Urban Interface, by Jennifer Gunlock

“The artists are taking the factual information from the scientists and interpreting it in a way that a larger audience might be able to approach.”

—Julie Comnick, *Artist*

With increasing wildfire frequency and intensity and communities expanding into fire-prone landscapes, wildland fire is having more lasting and profound impacts to society and wildland fire management is becoming increasingly complex. Addressing the wildfire challenge requires collective action among scientists, managers, and the public. Ideally, scientists and managers work together to develop science-based land management strategies that reduce wildfire risk and a well-informed public supports those strategies and takes action within their communities to reduce potential damages from wildfire.

In order for this collective action to take place, it is critical that the public has a good understanding of the complex nature of wildland fire science and management. Yet, members of public often have limited knowledge of common strategies to reduce wildfire risk and the science that informs those strategies. Instead, their perception of wildland fire may be shaped primarily by dramatic media coverage of the most massive and destructive wildfire events.

Scientists and managers are not always well equipped to share their knowledge with the public in ways that are accessible and compelling. As researcher Angela Connelly and her colleagues state, “facts and figures are important to the debates but can often fail to win the hearts and minds of the people.”¹

In 2013, the Southwest Fire Science Consortium (SWFSC), together with the Landscape Conservation Initiative, embarked on an innovative approach to share fire science with the public. In collaboration with several artists, they produced *Fires of Change*, an art exhibit about wildland fire science attended by nearly 12,000 people in three southwestern cities.

Prior to the exhibit, the SWFSC organized a “boot camp” for scientists, managers, and artists, which provided an opportunity for artists to learn about fire science and management directly from experts in a natural setting. Several participating artists noted that this experience changed their perception of wildland fire and their personal relationship to it. They then incorporated their changed perception into newly commissioned works of art that would be displayed in *Fires of Change*.

The participating artists were able to convey their perception of wildfire in a way that spoke to exhibit attendees and indeed changed their perception of wildfire. Of the visitors who responded to a post-exhibit survey, 77% said the exhibit increased their knowledge of wildland fire science and management and 78% said they were now more likely to support common management designed to reduce wildfire risk. As one survey respondent said, “this exhibition is remarkable and in addition to being educational, is wonderfully creative, artistic, and moving. It has opened my mind to understanding fire in a new way.” 🌱

1. Connelly, Angela, Simon C. Guy, Edward Wainwright, Wolfgang Weileder, and Marianne Wilde. 2016. Catalyst: reimagining sustainability with and through fine art. *Ecology and Society* 41(4):21.