

Facing Megafires: Forests as Commons

An interview with Benjamin Joyeux, Joëlle Zask

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From the Amazon to California, from Siberia to the Congo Basin, from Portugal and Greece to Australia, fires on an unprecedented scale – megafires – are spreading dangerously across the globe. Devastating everything in their path these megafires, Dantean symbols of a natural world that is more imperilled than ever, are still strangely absent from political thinking at this time of climate crisis. Some scientists have now started using the term “Pyrocene” rather than Anthropocene to describe our geological epoch.

Benjamin Joyeux: How did you become interested in fires and megafires?

Joëlle Zask: I once saw a forest that had just burnt down, and its disappearance made me think about what the landscape means to people. The loss of a landscape produces a sort of helplessness: the landscape is not just a backdrop we gaze at but is an integral part of ourselves. Fire destroys slices of history that never come back. This irreversibility is what causes the distress felt by fire victims. I was also astonished that a phenomenon as impactful as forest fires has not been sufficiently debated, both among environmental scientists and environmentalists, and in public opinion.

Are fires a political issue?

They are more indications of the dysfunction in representation, of which the consequences are very political. Fires can only be controlled or prevented by a change in this respect. There are huge social and political questions to consider surrounding forest fires today. Yet, we still talk about them as though they are ordinary news items. Why? I think that in our minds lies a fear, a reticence. There have been catastrophic fires in the past, such as the great fire of Lisbon, which destroyed the city in 1755. Today’s fires are “catastrophic” and “political” in that they reveal the state of planetary imbalance and the huge role of humanity in this, a responsibility that must of course be clear and detailed because not everybody is equally responsible. This responsibility is symbolised by the fact that to start a fire, all it takes is to strike a match. Just as we cannot stop a tsunami or earthquake, neither can we stop a huge forest fire. In Australia in early 2020, just as in California and Siberia in 2019, we see the impotence of stakeholders on the ground in the face of these megafires.

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What’s the difference between fires and megafires, and why can’t we stop them?

There is no standard definition of megafires. They are recent phenomena that take many forms and are

characterised by the fact that we cannot stop them. We should distinguish them from seasonal fires and controlled burns, which are relatively easy to manage. Megafires are clearly related to global warming and are becoming increasingly intense and frequent as temperatures rise and periods of drought last longer. For there to be fire, there needs to be fuel, a very dry environment, and wind. These three conditions are today combining in frightening proportions. Fire seasons that used to last two to three months can last for up to six months today. This was the case in California and the northern Mediterranean – Portugal, Spain, Greece, and the south of France – during the summer of 2017.

What is humanity’s role in the growing number and intensity of megafires?

In addition to global warming, the destruction of forests is connected to rural exodus and the disappearance of traditional forestry skills. Forests are being destroyed by new inhabitants who, not understanding them, run amok and do not manage them well.

Forests are not managed and deadwood – which is very flammable – builds up, making them vulnerable to fires. With rising temperatures come new pests that kill trees and further increase the amount of dry material. Then there is forest clearing, and industrial forests that are forests in name only. They are sprayed with phytosanitary products and are particularly fragile. The more forests are uniform and planted with non-native trees, the more they burn. For example, 70 per cent of the forest in Sweden – where fires burned fiercely in the summer of 2018 – is industrial. The trees chosen, the space between them, and the lack of diversity make forests particularly flammable.

Forest fires illustrate how issues today are intertwined, and show how ecosystems are disrupted and destroyed.

We have seen more debate about megafires since the global spate of fires in 2019 and 2020, but it is still discussed little in relation to the climate crisis as a whole. How do you explain this paradox?

The megafire phenomenon has yet to establish itself in people’s minds, even though experts are seeing it spread and boreal forests (in colder areas) are now burning too. NASA has released spine-chilling scenarios which, in the medium term, envisage blazes on every landmass.

What is also striking is its suddenness: environmental scientists know how to spot relatively slow or medium-term climate developments. But how does a sudden phenomenon like this fit into the longer timescale of general climate progression?

This phenomenon has emerged sooner than predicted. The megafire has now become a physical reality: a total and non-compartmental phenomenon. It inverts relationships with nature because it is a natural phenomenon but caused by man. What is also striking is its suddenness: environmental scientists know how to spot relatively slow or medium-term climate developments. But how does a sudden phenomenon like this fit into the longer timescale of general climate progression? Even the Anthropocene is thought of on a relatively long timescale. Yet nothing moves faster than a megafire: it destroys millions of hectares in a matter of days. All these factors explain why we have not yet managed to identify megafires as a phenomenon related to the environmental crisis.

Do you think that the narrative on fires has changed in recent years?

When I first became interested in the topic, there was a green narrative in favour of forest fires, because these fires

are seasonal, natural, and therefore part of the forest's equilibrium. But this narrative has also led to blindness. Fires can destroy forests irreversibly, as in 60 per cent of megafire cases. We are just starting to realise that the enormous fires destroying swathes of Australia, California, Portugal, and Greece are not at all beneficial for forests. That particular green narrative is outdated in this regard.

When we imagine the end of the world, like in Hollywood disaster movies, it often involves earthquakes and tsunamis but not many fires. Forest fires are rarely associated with the end of the world in the collective imagination.

This is also because fire is synonymous with home, the hearth, and wellbeing. There is a whole paradoxical imagination around fire, at once the great destroyer and the essence of life. The biological history of humanity and its evolution are linked to the use of fire, to its domestication. It is therefore difficult to think that fire, a condition for humanisation, might conflict with the chances of humankind's survival on the planet.

What do these phenomena tell us about ourselves and our relationship with nature?

We need to take care of nature, both in an interested and disinterested way. This position conflicts with extractivism, the idea that nature is made for us and that we must exploit it as much as we can to get all we can from it. But it also conflicts with the idea that nature is naturally good and that to respect it we must step back so as not to harm or disfigure it. The preservationist narratives that argue that nature would get along very well without humans are bad for nature too. When we talk about nature, we should talk about a nature that we value, that we can make use of, whose configuration – be it aesthetic, philosophical or material – resonates with us. I do not know of a nature that is independent of the human species. What interests me are human-nature relationships where action is possible, even as this balance evolves all the time. An anthropocentric vision of nature is inevitable. So the idea of taking care of nature and stewardship is fundamental.

Our interhuman relationships would be much more democratic if we made room for the non-human world, whether you want to call this ecology or nature. Who am I as a person in a society that eats animals?

The link between animal rights and the climate crisis is gaining ground in environmentalism and is forcing us to re-imagine our relationship with non-human creatures. Should we do the same with trees and forests?

It is a good analogy because when human beings have relationships between them that take into account the non-human, animals, trees and so on, their relationships are not the same. Our interhuman relationships would be much more democratic if we made room for the non-human world, whether you want to call this ecology or nature. Who am I as a person in a society that eats animals? On the other hand, I do not personally have any wish to connect with trees or animals or to grant them a status equivalent to humans. I find that absurd.

But, in response to this megafire problem, shouldn't we consider trees as subjects in law?

I don't think so. Megafires are not beings but consequences, like the animals we raise to eat are. First, we must consider the interhuman framing of the issue. I don't adhere to the Gaia hypothesis, but rather think like Noah, who didn't give animals rights but did put them in his arc and did what God told him to do. I have my doubts about granting the status of subject to beings who do not consider themselves as such. It risks taking us back to this same idea which fools us: that in order to respect all beings and connect with them, we need to consider them equal and

identical. Rather, this plurality should be incorporated into our relationships: which is what I said in *La démocratie aux champs* (*Democracy in the Fields*). Giving earthworms rights is absurd. Cultivating the soil means listening to nature, taking care of it, observing it without destroying it, and ensuring the conditions for its survival. We can do all of this without turning to the law.

What is the main message of your book?

I argue that it is by valuing, understanding, and identifying means of taking care of nature that we will save the forests. This as well as prohibiting the activities that contribute to global warming and that destroy forests and make them vulnerable. In short, limiting the activities of multinational corporations. We should also question our romantic and contemplative vision of nature. An important political message is to stop thinking that solutions will come from the top and that an expert class is needed to advise decision makers. The idea of expertise has cut off people on the ground and prevented them from having a voice. For years, small farmers have been considered bumpkins and nobodies. We are realising that, like in Australia today, the people that have been looked down on are best placed to find the right solutions. The belated discovery of ancient forestry knowledge is politically important: it is there that reside local solutions suited to the area. Fire is a global phenomenon but solutions will be local. The book starts from this relocated relationship – on the ground, between human and forest – and turns it into a framework, a paradigm for the right way to inhabit the planet. And the right way to distribute the work around the forest.

This will require a common political vision: could we not also envisage a forestry policy at European Union level?

Europe has a fundamental role to play when it comes to tackling the main drivers of global warming – like rising greenhouse gas emissions – which are almost impossible to address individually or as a group of individuals. In France, the National Forests Office and the agencies that manage forests report to the Ministry of Agriculture. This is a real problem because the Ministry of Agriculture is by no means a pioneer when it comes to the green transition. Forests should be switched to the Ministry of the Environment. What happened in the Amazon is interesting. Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro considers the forest as his own. It was the same thing with President Suharto in Indonesia, who sold “his” forest in Sumatra to the South Korean company Daewoo. These more or less neo-fascist heads of state consider themselves the owners of their countries and sell them off to the highest bidders.

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A European policy that recognises forests as a common good to be preserved is essential. There should also be a policy for protecting forests against unsuitable plantation. For example a large plantation of Douglas firs is planned in the forest of Fontainebleau near Paris, due to National Forests Office policy. Under the pretext of fighting climate change, they are going to cut down oak and ash trees to replace them with Douglas firs. Yet the Douglas fir is just biomass; it is not forest. States, who are supposed to protect the public interest, should follow the thinking of Elinor Ostrom and begin to see forests as common goods.



Benjamin Joyeux is a lawyer, ecologist, libertarian, and anti-globalisation activist. He was a communications advisor to the French speaking delegation of Green members of the European Parliament; and is the co-author, with Edouard Gaudot, of *l'Europe C'est Nous* (Les Petits Matins, April 2014).



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