Opinion: Eastern Sierra needs fire regeneration

By Char Miller

Sometimes it’s the small things that can best tell big stories.

Like the Marina Fire, which has burned a modest 654 acres to the north of Lee Vining, threatened but not burned any structures, and whose greatest disruption was periodically to shut down Highway 395. It hardly seems worth much attention.

Such minor fires in the Eastern Sierra have routinely received little note. Historian Robert Cermak has dubbed the region, home to the Inyo and Humboldt national forests, an “asbestos” terrain. It’s so fireproof that Stephen Pyne, in “California: A Fire Survey” (2016), pays it no mind.

This disregard, along with the Marina Fire’s diminutive size—and lack of headline-grabbing ferocity—is precisely why we should focus it and the lessons it conveys about the critical role fire can play in the Sierra.

The Marina Fire has blackened a swath of land bordering Highway 395. Photo Copyright 2016 Carolyn E. Wright

Start with the reality that many of the Eastern Sierra habitats which the Marina fire slowly worked through—in the official language it was characterized by "smoldering of heavy down fuels"— are similar to the more iconic pine forests on the western slope: fire can fuel their regeneration.

This biological process is also one that humans have helped shape. Ethnobotanist M. Kat Anderson argues in "Tending the Wild" (2005) that California's first people used fire so routinely and for so long that they created "a carefully tended 'garden' that was a result of thousands of years of selective harvesting, tilling, pruning, burning, sowing, weeding, and transplanting." The vegetation growing on the steep slopes rising above Highway 395 as it curves between the Sierra and Mono Lake may not be quite as "natural" as we assume.

That reality is also why the Marina Fire's charring force was

not destructive but custodial—a clearing away and a cleaning up. Aspen, one of the Eastern Sierra's signature trees, thrives after fire chews through litter and competing species. The pinyon pine may have a fire-return interval of up to hundreds of years, but one way its younger trees can succeed the older is via fire. It can open the canopy, a flame-driven opportunity that makes the whole forest more vigorous.

Animals can be just as opportunistic. The speedy, post-fire resprouting of sagebrush, rabbit brush, and grass is manna to antelope, deer, sheep and other wildlife that range through the Eastern Sierra. Like domesticated livestock, they are drawn to these tasty greens, a biotic rejuvenation and nutritional boon.

These ecological benefits guided how firefighters have been managing the Marina Fire; which as of today is 95 percent contained. They have established control lines on its northern, southern, and eastern margins to protect communities, structures and Highway 395. Yet they have not suppressed it with fire-retardants because however insignificant the Marina Fire may seem, they know its import. They are stewarding it so that it can steward the land.

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