

The war against wildfire

By George Wuerthner, Earth Island Journal

Chad Hanson lopes over to a patch of young conifers and waves an arm at me. “Come over here, he says excitedly, pointing to dozens of 1- to 3-foot-tall saplings. “Look at pines and firs growing under these snags. See how healthy they are? And here, see these holes in the blackened bark? Those were made by black-backed woodpeckers. They are seeking the grubs of beetles that burrow into the dead trees after fires. Can you imagine how much energy it takes to drill these holes?” he says, his voice a mix of amazement and admiration.

We are walking through Stanislaus National Forest, about a mile from the border of Yosemite National Park, in a patch of woodland that the Rim Fire swept through back in the summer and fall of 2013. It’s a pleasant summer afternoon. A faint breeze offsets the bright glare of the sun high overhead in the cloudless blue sky. The blackened trunks of the pines Hanson is standing amidst cast linear shadows on the ground. Patches of tender green shrubs and pine and fir seedlings cover the forest floor. Three years after the Rim Fire, this patch of forest is clearly regenerating itself.

Hanson, a tall, lanky figure dressed in khakis, is a forest ecologist who specializes in wildfires. He is also the director of the John Muir Project of the Earth Island Institute, a nonprofit that uses science and legal means to push for ecological management of forestlands, especially ones that have been severely degraded and damaged by decades of commercial logging and fire suppression measures. A California native, Hanson began studying the aftereffects of the Rim Fire – the third largest wildfire in California since the early twentieth century – almost as soon as the smoke cleared. As we walk through the charred trees, he can barely hide his enthusiasm, constantly pointing out signs of new life

sprouting up amid the dead stands. "To me this habitat is fascinating. Every time I go out to a burn area I learn something new," he says.

Read the whole story