

THE UPSIDE OF WILDFIRES

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"Throughout human civilization, we've had a very powerful connection with fire," say John Cathro, a professional forester based in Kaslo. "You don't have to be spiritual or into black magic to think of fire as a really magical element. Fire is essential for ecosystem health and ecosystem resilience."

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"Fires are an integral part of forest ecology. Fires are what renew the forests under natural conditions," says Rachel Holt, a conservation biologist based in Nelson. "They take, usually a mature forest, and burn it back, to a lesser or greater degree, to an early successional state."

Over countless centuries, wildfires have shaped the Kootenay landscape into vibrant forest ecosystems that house a wide variety of plant species of differing

ages and a diverse spectrum of insects, mammals and birds.

"We have the most diverse forest types in British Columbia here in the Kootenays," says Holt.

Wildfires do several positive things for our forests, including opening up the canopy to allow for greater penetration of sunlight and rainfall and reducing trees and other plants to mineral-laden ash that provides valuable nutrients to the soil. Both of these things result in the germination and growth of new plants. Assuming, of course, that the fire doesn't burn too hot.

Extremely hot fires, known as 'stand replacing fires' are destructive, eliminating all of the organic matter in an area and potentially altering the chemistry and structure of the soil to a point where it's ill equipped to absorb water or maintain life. Lower intensity fires, known as 'stand maintaining fires', on the other hand, can be quite beneficial.

