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# Initiating Research on Igniting Fires in the Blue Ridge Mountains During the Autumn 2016 Conflagration

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## Presentation: Starting Research on Starting Fires in the Blue Ridge Mountains during the Autumn 2016 Conflagration

Presenter: Cynthia Fowler

Session: Engaging communities: The Process of Initiating Ethnobiological Fieldwork

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### Abstract

An unprecedented moment in the fire ecology of the Blue Ridge Mountains occurred in Autumn 2016 when fuel accumulation, severe drought, frequent anthropogenic ignitions, and seasonality in disturbed deciduous forests fueled widespread burning. As the wildfires burned, wildland firefighters from around the U.S. temporarily moved into the region to assist local land managers. As wildfire risks increased and air quality decreased, local residents became increasingly interested in fire ecology. The community shifted continuously as wildfires were extinguished, wildland firefighters returned home, and local residents disengaged. In conducting research during the conflagration, obtaining prior informed consent from community members varied depending on whether or not I had previously worked with and taken the “first steps” towards establishing ethical relationships with individual community members. In this presentation I discuss how best ethics practices fluctuate relative to shifts in the composition of human communities and the character of human-forest interactions.

### Ethics as Social Interaction

Social interactions generate ethics (Keane 2015). Our research ethics – including the ethics of informed consent – emerge in the practice of interacting with our research associates, both those with whom we interact through our professional societies as well as the people we encounter during our research.

[SLIDE] “Informed consent” appears in three locations in the shared ISE-SoE Code of Ethics.<sup>i</sup> One of the three instances is under the “Principle of Full Disclosure” where the code states: “Indigenous peoples, traditional societies and local communities are entitled to be fully informed about the nature, scope and ultimate purpose of the proposed research (including objective, methodology, data collection, and the dissemination and application of results). This information is to be given in forms that are understood and useful at a local level and in a manner that takes into consideration the body of knowledge, cultural preferences and modes of transmission of these peoples and communities” (ISE 2006 under Principle of Full Disclosure).

[SLIDE] Collier and Ong (2005, 8) write: “Ethical reflection may relate to questions of value or morality. . . [and] to reflection on the problem of how one should live” (Collier and Ong 2005, 8).

[SLIDE] In an exercise of critical self-reflection about “how a [researcher] should live or the kind of [researcher] they should be” (Weiss 2017, 4), I will employ wildfires as a means for describing the ethics

of informed consent from people who are interacting in open social gatherings (for a which I will also talk about as the ‘public domain’ and the ‘collective’) in my work.

[SLIDE] The ISE-SoE Code of Ethics protects the collective under “Principle of Educated Prior Informed Consent:” “Educated Prior Informed Consent must be established before any research is undertaken at individual and collective levels, as determined by community governance structures. Prior informed consent is recognized as an ongoing process that is based on relationships and maintained through all phases of research (ISE 2006, under Principle of Educated Prior Informed Consent).

[SLIDE] The implications of the collective or public domain for informed consent are taken up in critical analyses of anthropological and ethnohistorical ethics (Bell 2014; Berlin and Berlin 2002; Hardison 2000). Analysts grapple with the question, is informed consent necessary to obtain from the people who express their ideas in open social gatherings? Ideas expressed in open social gatherings are in the public domain because they are among the materials together with [SLIDE] “the air we breathe, sunlight, rain, space, life, creations, thoughts, feelings. . . words, numbers” listed by Patterson and Lindberg (1991, 50) as “not subject to private ownership.”

In the public domain, people circulate information in open social gatherings in contrast to information people share within closed groups. The people who provide this public domain information attend open social gatherings voluntarily and they share their thoughts with the intention of others hearing them, including others who they already know (which is the situation with me relative to some people in my wildfire research) and others who they have not yet met (which is the case for for some people with regard to me/the ethnohistorian). The ideas people express in social gatherings would not have the same form or modality of expression if they were constructed outside of the group. Ideas expressed in open social gatherings are defined by conversations and are generated by the group. Moreover, my own research ethics are constructed within the social interactions that take place in group settings.

In researching wildfires in the Southern Blue Ridge, I face many dilemma related to research ethics generally and informed consent specifically. For this research project – unlike others that I have done in Indonesia, Hawaii, and Vietnam – the boundaries between researcher and community member are fuzzy enough to blur the distinction between my identities as anthropologist and neighbor, researcher and stakeholder, scholar and resident. Not only do I blend in well in Southern Appalachian communities but I had already established relationships with some but not other of my interlocutors before the first fire (the Dick’s Creek Fire) started and thus prior to the collection of data on the Autumn Conflagration. The process of obtaining informed consent during the Autumn Conflagration project has been somewhat ‘softer’ than if I were working in a community where I am not an insider.

[SLIDE] In the “Practical Guidelines” section of the ISE-SoE Code of Ethics the text mentions issues related to doing research ‘at home’: “Indigenous, traditional or local peoples conducting research within their own communities, for their own uses, may need to comply with their own cultural protocols and practices. In the event of inconsistency between such local requirements and these guidelines, all parties involved will commit to work collaboratively to develop appropriate practices.” (ISE 2006, under Practical Guidelines).

The information produced in open, group fora transcend any single individual in the group, and thus can be considered to belong to the public domain or to the collective. So, the question is, because the interlocutors’ intentions are to listen to others and express their ideas relative to others, are their expressions available for ethnographers who have not obtained prior informed consent from every individual person in the social collective? My research on the human dimensions of fire in the Southern Blue Ridge raises this and additional serious questions related to informed consent in the public domain and provides reasons for critical self-reflection.

## The Autumn Conflagration

[SLIDE] The most recent fire research work I have done revolves around the “Autumn Conflagration:”

- October 16 through December 15
- Twenty fires and fire complexes (i.e., multiple fires grouped together so wildland firefighters could manage them through one Incident Command Team). The most significant fire complex was the Nantahala Complex that included the Dick’s Creek, Boteler, Tellico, Maple Springs, Camp Branch, and numerous other fires in the Tusquitee, Cheoah, and Nantahala Ranger Districts of the Nantahala National Forest. At the height of the conflagration, the Southern Area 1 ICT managed the Nantahala Complex.
- Acres burned in Western North Carolina equals 99,811.
- Fifty-three out of a total of 60 days (88%) of increased air pollution between October 16 and December 15
- Fourteen of the Autumn 2016 fires were human-caused. The causes of six are “unknown” (InciWeb 2017). Lightning ignited one of the fires –the Rough Ridge fire in hardwood and pine litter on October 16, 2016 (InciWeb 2017). Lightning may also have ignited the Boteler fire on October 25, 2016 in hardwood litter and rhododendron and laurel shrubs, but the cause is uncertain. According to Hendershot (2017) lightning ignited the Boteler fire, but InciWeb (2017) identifies the cause as “unknown.”
  - The “Autumn Conflagration” began on October 16, 2016 when lightning ignited the Rough Ridge fire in the Cohutta Wilderness of Georgia’s Chattahoochee National Forest.
  - In the western Carolinas, the first Autumn incident occurred when a person lit the dry grassy and hardwood litter fuels in the Dick’s Creek Drainage, two miles northwest of Sylva, NC on October 23, 2016.
  - December 15, 2016 was the containment date for the latest burning one—the Rock Mountain Fire—which a serial arsonist ignited on November 9, 2016 in the Tallulah River Road area in northeast Georgia.

Wildfires generate collectives by causing social groups to gather, and wildfires cause social groups to develop new messaging and redefine their action plans to achieve their organizations’ goals. Findings about wildfires’ agency in human social and ethical lives are discoverable through interpreting a combination of information from the public domain and one-on-one interviewing. The material gathered from interlocutors in open social gatherings the community meetings resides in the collective – in the public domain. Let me illustrate with two examples: a community meeting organized by a federal Incident Command Team that managed the Boteler wildfire and a hike organized by an environmental nongovernmental organization.

## Expressing Values via Wildfires

Wildfires engage communities and give people means for expressing their values. Wildfires caused rural, multigenerational Southerners – who tend towards autonomy and who are wary of outsiders to show up for community meetings – meetings called by federal government agencies no less. Here I refer to the [SLIDE] the “community meetings” organized by the Incident Command Teams of the Boteler, Clear Creek, Pinnacle, Party Rock, and Nantahala Branch wildfires that occurred in local gathering places while the fires were ongoing. During the community meetings with the Incident Command Teams, local residents extended a genuine form of Southern hospitality towards the wildland

firefighters who temporarily occupied and protected their territory. [SLIDE] The outpouring of gratitude came in the form of letters from schoolchildren; large thank you signs and banners attached to churches, businesses, and community centers; volunteer hours in mess halls; donations to fire departments; kind words; friendly waves; and so forth.

[SLIDE] In the November 13 community meeting for the Boteler Fire, the first question from the audience was, “How can we support you?” Another local resident said, “We have been praying for you.” The Incident Commander responded, “Your prayers and support are felt.” Another local retorted to his comment, “This is the mountains,” meaning ‘of course we support you because it is part of our culture to be here for each other and for you.’ The firefighters were emotionally affected by the response. Later, after the Boteler Fire Public Meeting concluded, a seasoned firefighter from the U.S. Southwest who was assigned to the Boteler Fire said, “I’ve fought fires all over the country for several decades now, and I’ve never felt this kind of community support anywhere. Southern hospitality is really coming through.” [SLIDE]

### Wildfires as a Means for Expressing Land Management Ethics

The Autumn Conflagration provoked people to express their values related to other humans as well as nonhumans. Environmental nongovernmental organizations in the Southern Blue Ridge (for example the Sanctuary Guild<sup>ii</sup>) have, in the wake of the flames, folded fire into their activism and messaging like never before. Variations exist in fire politics across environmental NGOs that coincide with their land management politics. Within their ranks, variations exist in the fire politics of staff and supporters of the NGOs.

This winter and spring several nongovernmental environmental and conservation organizations organized totally new events focusing on fire and/or have integrated fire into ongoing annual events. For the sake of time, I want to mention merely one of these events to illustrate the way people are using fire to symbolize their values and display them in public fora related to land management and nonhuman species: the “Plant Responses in the Post-Fire Sanctuary” hike organized by the Sanctuary Guild on April 19, 2017. [SLIDE] The hike traversed a section of the Appalachian Trail from the Deep Gap trailhead, into the Southern Nantahala Wilderness, up to the summit of Standing Indian Mountain. The Sanctuary Guild’s two hike leaders – Franklin and Brook – approached the burned Southern Nantahala Wilderness with the hypothesis that fire is detrimental to Appalachian acidic cove ecosystems. [SLIDE] The Sanctuary Guild’s model is an alternative to the federal and state Forest Service’s and is a critical assessment of, in Franklin’s words, the “narrative that prescribed fire is good” for these forests. Whether wildfire or prescribed fire, Franklin said, “There are more questions than answers. . . We just don’t know what the effects will be.” Then, to launch the hike, the Franklin said, “Let’s go see what we find.”

[SLIDE] Franklin and Brook found evidence to support their hypothesis in the form of signs of soil erosion, fewer ephemerals than they expected, stunted and deformed ephemerals (e.g., *Trillium grandifolium*); reduced density of certain species (*Houstonia* sp., bluets); stripped lower cambiums (in e.g., *Rhododendrum calendulaceum*, flame azalea), holes in the duff, and scorched tree trunks leading, according to Brook, to “probable mortality” in, for example, *Acer rubrum*, red maple.

Part way into the hike, the group paused near a fragmented stretch of bluets to listen to the Brook’s interpretations of this population of spring ephemerals. [SLIDE] Brook said, “This bluet population is affected. Bluets usually grow in big mats. Here in the burn, they only appear in areas where the moss didn’t burn. This is definitely because of the fire effects.”

One of the hikers responded to the Brook’s comment by saying, “the [Rock Mountain] fire was coming [towards my house] from both directions. That is what was so upsetting.” This plant enthusiast

associated her feelings with the sparseness of the bluets to the emotions she felt when the fires were burning. She projected her emotions into the botanical world, and projected her fears for her own wellbeing onto the wildflowers. The hike leaders' and hikers' fears of the negative effects of fire were confirmed.

## Conclusion

So these two stories are examples of how I might write about the agency of wildfire in biosocial worlds, where the dialogue between the wildland firefighters and mountaineers' prayers at the Boteler Fire Public Meeting and the dialogue between Sanctuary Guild hike leaders and hikers is shared with the world. We can think again about the question of whether or not exceptions to informed consent can be made when information is collected from people who voluntarily share their ideas or perform acts when they appear in larger, open social gatherings. What kinds of informed consent are necessary or acceptable? Under what conditions is waiving informed consent an option? When the researcher is not seeking to represent others' ideas as her own? When the ethnographer's reporting does not expose interlocutors to harm? When the reporting is respectful?

Informed consent is mostly always feasible (though not without complications and not unproblematic) when an ethnographer speaks one-on-one with an individual or even in small focus groups, especially where individuals are named and/or ideas or actions can be linked back to specific individuals. Otherwise, informed consent is not always feasible when researchers gather information from interlocutors who speak and/or act within the public domain. So, what then? Is informed consent still indispensable to moving forward with research? Can we ever do ethnobiology in the public domain? How can we be ethical ethnobiologists in the public domain?

[SLIDE] Perhaps some ethical alternatives exist for obtaining prior informed consent among people communicating and acting in open gatherings: 1) obtain informed consent retroactively, 2) generalize beyond the individual to the organizational level, community level, public domain, or collective, 3) treat the public domain as sites for preparatory work towards seeking informed consent, which may or may not lead to 4) forego informed consent.

[SLIDE] Mindfulness is another alternative. Mindfulness, in fact, is the overarching guiding principle in the SoE-ISE Code of Ethics where it is defined as "an obligation to be fully aware of one's knowing and unknowing, doing and undoing, action and inaction" (ISE 2006 under Preamble). Mindfulness is "a continual willingness to evaluate one's own understandings, actions, and responsibilities to others" (ISE 2006 under Executive Summary), says the SoE-ISE Code of Ethics.

One more alternative I would like to mention here – though we could develop many more than 6 – to develop further abstractions from various human thoughts and behaviors related to fire in the Southern Blue Ridge. This might move us away from the most grounded versions of ethnography but it could move us toward the formation of an *ethical life* (Keane2015 ) through communicative actions within local lay communities as well as globalized, professional fire technoscience. Increasing abstractivity in our ethnobiological work might lead us towards studying communicative practices in which people generate and circulate information about fire. Or we might analyze the biosocial relationships among people, and between people and the landscape, nonhuman species, and fire that influence understandings of fire. Or, we might evaluate the character of the social interactions that construct the ethics, values, and morals of wildfire. . . or ethnobiology.

[SLIDE] Taking this analytical turn returns us to Keane's social interactionism. Whilst investigating the biosocial relationships between people and fire, we are also evaluating "how one should live and what kind of person one should be" (Keane 2015, 20 quoted in Weiss 2017, 2). When we convene in our annual meeting, we are drawing on our [SLIDE] "ethical affordances:" all those "aspects of people's experiences and perceptions that they might draw on in the process of making ethical

evaluations and decisions, whether consciously or not” (Keane 2015, 27 quoted in Weiss 2017, 2). When we talk about our work and lives with one another in the informal and formal settings of conferences, we compose and revise our ethical life in the context of our social interactions. Perhaps this is part of why these SoE meetings are so incredibly meaningful for us. As Weiss (2017, 4) writes about Keane’s understanding of *Ethical Life*: “acts and processes of evaluation, conscious and unconscious, saturate human interactions. . . and are deeply necessary. . . for participants in order to feel that they are participating in coherent and essentially comprehensible social worlds.”

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<sup>i</sup> I use the title "ISE-SoE Code of Ethics" because the Society of Ethnobiology (SoE) elected to adopt the International Society of Ethnobiology's Code of Ethics in 2010 when the SOE Ethics Task Force led by Justin Nolan from SoE and the ISE Ethics Committee led by Kelly Bannister met in Tofino, British Columbia, Canada.

<sup>ii</sup> All names for organizations, individuals, and events are pseudonyms.