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FOUR FISH: THE FUTURE OF THE LAST WILD FOOD

By PAUL GREENBERG

ON SALE

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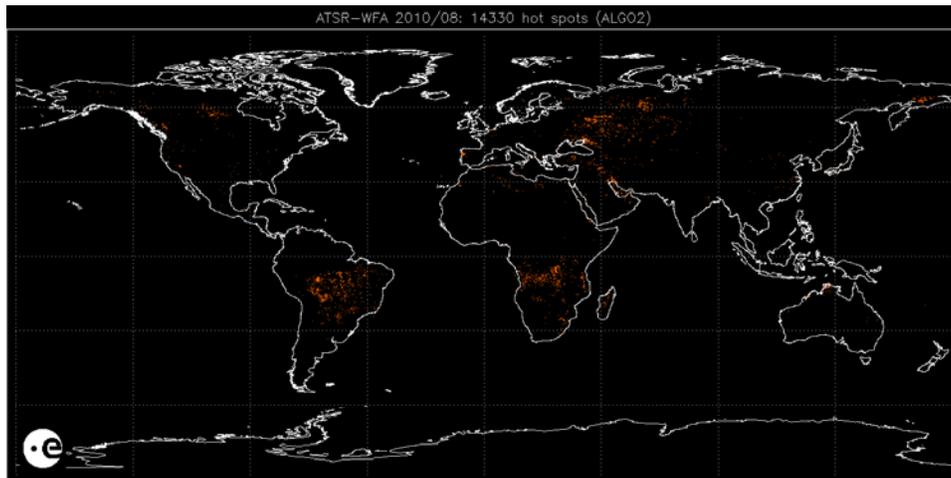
DOT EARTH

Nine Billion People. One Planet.

August 11, 2010, 8:24 am

Tracking Fire Trends from Space

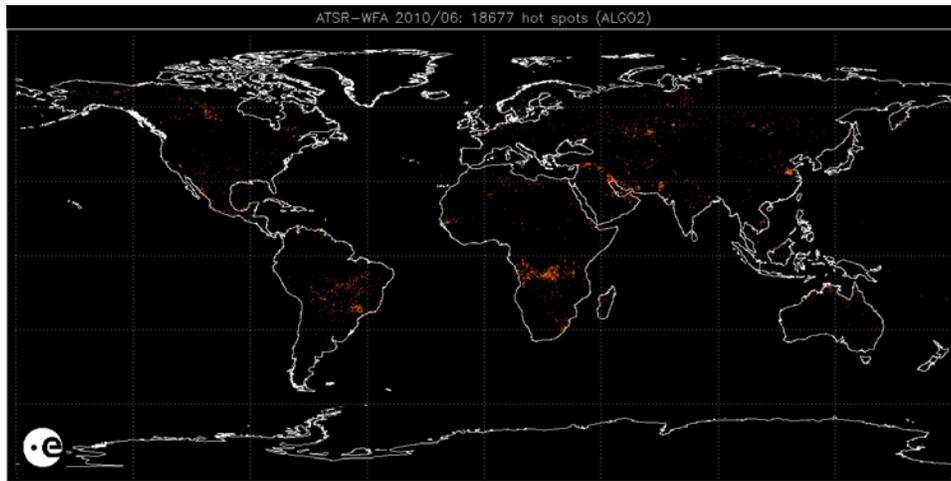
By [ANDREW C. REVKIN](#)



8:59 p.m. | Updated

As [I wrote the other day](#), the technological ingenuity that has made humanity a planet-scale influence in a handful of generations is also explosively increasing our ability to [track and study environmental conditions](#) and events at planetary scale. A prime example is the ability to monitor fires from space day by day. **[12:21 p.m. | Updated** Click here for a reality check on [risks from fires around the Chernobyl disaster zone](#).] [NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory has released an animation showing [the hemisphere-wide spread of pollution](#) released by the Russian fires.]

Here, thanks to [the European Space Agency](#), you can see why Russian wildfires have become such [an enormous story in the last couple of weeks](#). The image above shows the blossoming of fires around Moscow and the relatively populous western part of the country in the last 10 days. The image below shows wildfires through the month of June. There were plenty burning in Russia, but mainly in sparsely inhabited eastern expanses. Click on the images to enlarge them. Once you register, you can sift through years of data. Another great resource is the [Global Fire Monitoring Center](#).



Here's a [North American closeup of fires](#), via the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Satellite and Information Service. If you like how the view of the home planet from space helps track problems like fires, drought, weather and the like, make sure your elected representatives in Congress provide the Obama administration [what it has requested for such programs](#).

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1.

[Chris Dudley](#)

Maryland

August 11th, 2010

6:14 am

I suspect some of those fires, particularly south of the equator, may be from cane field burning rather than wildfires.

[Recommend](#) Recommended by 8 Readers

☺

[Andy Revkin](#)

Dot Earth blogger

August 11th, 2010

6:14 am

Not to mention other kinds of fires that are intentionally set. Thanks. Will fix the post.

2.

[PondHawk](#)

Londonderry, NH

August 11th, 2010

6:16 am

The fires are in an area where the temperature shifted by 12C or 25F. NASA has a map of the temperature the last week in July

<http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov...>

It has to be seen how much of Russia, mostly south of Moscow, has been enveloped in heat. But to balance northern Russia has been 25F degrees below normal.

The Russians have archived severe weather events for 1000 years; this is the first time the weather has behaved this way.

NASA also has a map of carbon monoxide gas over Russia; 6 times safe levels for humans (due to fires). Space data provides an amazing ring seat to the degradations of the our planet. Nobody does anything.

[Recommend](#) Recommended by 8 Readers

3.

Ilan Kelman

Oslo

August 11th, 2010

8:17 am

The Global Fire Monitoring Center <http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de> does impressive work on exactly this topic. See <http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de...> for a list of reports about the Russian situation as well as other ongoing fires.

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4.

Lou Gold

Brazil

August 11th, 2010

8:20 am

Andy,

I'm not so sure that the fires shown for South America are from cane burning (the primary cane growing areas are not showing as "hot") but the point is well taken. The fact is that in regions such as Amazonia there are no natural fires. All fires are human-set, primarily for agricultural or forest clearing. As you noted in the title of a well-known book, it's "The Burning Season" in Brazil.

lou

<http://lougold.blogspot.com>

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[5.](#)

[Susan Anderson](#)

Boston

August 11th, 2010

8:20 am

Thanks for this. It is always helpful to see the patterns. And thanks for the comment about intentional fires. I like visuals and got excited about (I think it was Bolivia) during a look at the Russian fire pix (those satellite images are wonderful) but realized as I read that it was just that, intentional.

When I was young (rather too long ago) we lived next to a gorgeous field (which we christened Baldback or Baalbek depending on whether you like odd references) which was burned over every year. This practice has largely been discontinued and sometimes it is not such a good idea in terms of long-term fire practice to let all that underbrush make worse fires more likely in the long term.

Other readers may know I am a "warmer" because I've worked hard and long at observation and studying the science, but sometimes our environmentalist good intentions get in the way of doing what has worked for centuries, or is just practical. I'm sure everyone knows of examples of this in one way or another.

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[6.](#)

[Spalding Craft](#)

North Carolina

August 11th, 2010

8:21 am

Cool post. Thanks.

[Recommend](#) Recommended by 0 Readers

[7.](#)

[Mike Roddy](#)

Yucca Valley, Ca.

August 11th, 2010

8:21 am

Good resource, thanks.

The timber industry is going to pitch "cut them before they burn, so the CO2 doesn't go into the atmosphere". Actually, it's the opposite. Around 80% of site carbon is released during and immediately after clearcut logging. The reverse ratio applies when there is a forest fire- much of the carbon goes into the soil or becomes biochar.

We should get used to letting them burn, painful as it is (you can't stop them anyway most of the time). It's nature's way of resetting the ecosystem, which is often more diverse immediately after a fire in

mature forests. Some forests won't come back, due to reduced soil moisture and a hotter climate- but this is due to global warming and ecosystems that have been ravaged by man, not the fires themselves.

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8.

melty

West Orange, NJ

August 11th, 2010

8:59 am

"Here, thanks to the European Space Agency, you can see why Russian wildfires have become such an enormous story in the last couple of weeks"

You've heard of the [MODIS Rapid Response System](#), right? Click and scroll down to see US fire map products, including global 10-day fire maps. The "Global Fire Monitoring Center" also uses MODIS data from NASA's Earth Observing System Terra and Aqua satellites. The NESDIS map server is good.

So: what do these fire data tell us Andy? Any trends? Are any scientists looking at these data, or are they just provided for the amusement of surfers: a passing call to curiosity and opportunity for distraction, like lolcats, or blogs, or American Idle?

I appreciate the call for adequate funding of Earth Observation; this applies to NASA as well as NOAA. It requires effort and expertise to interpret the data from these sensors. Unfortunately, in spite of the timely increase in the NASA Earth Science budget in 2011, most of the funds will go to launching satellites we should have already launched during the Bush-let's-go-to-Mars-oh-wait-that's-expensive-and-rich-people-need-more-money-and-I-have-a couple-of-pointless-wars-to-run-and-an-economy-to-sink years. Wow, I can make a political post out of anything. Seriously though: it was political and it was [Interference](#). Thank god that obnoxious, ignorant ego [Griffin has gone](#).

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9.

Mac

UK

August 11th, 2010

9:00 am

Quote, Andy Revkin, "Here, thanks to the European Space Agency, you can see why Russian wildfires have become such an enormous story in the last couple of weeks."

That wouldn't have anything to do with the fact that you have been denied an environmental disaster in the Gulf of Mexico?

Andy you are being less than honest in offering up scary stories on a weekly basis, making simplified and dramatic statements in the process for only to drop these stories when it becomes obvious that they are more hype than substance.

Some reasoned reporting and factual analysis would be welcome from time to time.

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10.

Lou Gold

Brazil

August 11th, 2010

9:01 am

for Mike Roddy #7

I agree that fire is a natural event in the northern temperate forests but not so in the tropics. There are no natural fires in the Amazon, only those accidentally or intentionally set by humans. "Let it Burn" is not the best choice where I am in Brazil but the fact is that once they get started they are not easy to control. Therefore there are frequent public service announcements on TV and local monitoring. I don't have precise info yet but it seems that the efforts in Acre state are helping to reduce the local fire frequency. The smoke we are seeing may be arriving from other regions to our east.

There was some interesting and creative learning that emerged from the terrible 2005 season that caused fire to be understood more as a civil defense issue. Of course, it is also a conservation issue but the move toward civil defense seems to have been useful in reaching the politicians and general public with a strong message.

Here is a NASA link about the satellite monitoring work of Foster Brown and colleagues in 2005:

<http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov...>

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[11.](#)

Yukel

Los Angeles

August 11th, 2010

9:01 am

What's up with all these red dots in the Persian gulf?!!

[Recommend](#) Recommended by 0 Readers

[12.](#)

Karl S Schwartz

CocoCreek, Florida

August 11th, 2010

12:42 pm

We hear that hundreds of 40,000 year old permafrost lakes have disappeared in Russia due to global warming. As a result methane is coming up in the areas that were once frozen.

So I wonder if there has been a saturation of methane in the mosses. Coupled with high temperatures perhaps this is also fueling these fires. Perhaps it is just a one year burn-off that will last until the next methane buildup if there is to be one.

When the Indians lived in Eastern N America they would burn off the forest floors every year. This would allow for a better regrowth and make it easier for the animals to roam and to eat. These Indians were more hunters than farmers so tending to the forests this way helped them with their supply of meat.

These days people don't know what they are doing in terms of this type forest management. But also the trees were much bigger and not likely to catch fire with only a small fire on the forest floor.

I drove from S Florida to Vermont in 1998. There had been big fires in N Central Florida a few weeks before. While driving by I noticed that the brush was about 5 feet high and thick where the fires had been stopped. Where they burned the palmettos were coming back, sprouting from their tops, and the real small pines were burnt but the larger (and not so large at that) pines were OK.

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[13.](#)

RC East

South Shore

August 11th, 2010

12:42 pm

I've been hearing that in the western US the trend is for fires to burn to higher elevations where historically it didn't go. Also that low plant growth which provided a natural fire break in the past now burns more readily. This was from some firefighters who have spent a large portion of their adult lives battling forest fires.

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[14.](#)

John D.

Out West

August 11th, 2010

12:43 pm

I agree with Mike R's comment about fire being nature's way of resetting an ecosystem.

A case in point: I used to be a resident of Alaska, where for many years, the 'dean' of foresters, Glenn Juday, was predicting that much of interior Alaska/Yukon Territory would morph from spruce forest to aspen parkland, similar to interior/northern Alberta, as warming proceeded. (Not even Republicans in Alaska deny GW, well, except for that Mooselini person from Wasilla.) I had a hard time picturing how that might happen, and assumed it would be many, many years before it did so.

But I watched as an immense spruce-forested territory on the AK/Yukon boundary, where I traveled frequently, fell victim to hot, dry conditions and the bark beetle. I had no idea there was much in the way of aspen there, but once the spruce needles were gone, there they were - in pockets in hollows and slumps and such. All it will take is a fire, and whoosh, voila, it will be aspen parkland, in the comparative blink of an eye.

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[15.](#)

James

Northern Nevada

August 11th, 2010

12:44 pm

Humm... After following that "North American closeup of fires" link, and seeing nothing but a blank where the map is supposed to be, I think that if I do write my Congresscritters (I'm not entirely sure they can read, but they must have someone on staff for the, surely?), it'll be to suggest hiring some competent web site programmers.

[Recommend](#) Recommended by 0 Readers

[16.](#)

[steveowinlow](#)

Houston

August 11th, 2010

12:44 pm

Hot spots in the Persian Gulf area are probably gas flares related to oil production.

[Recommend](#) Recommended by 2 Readers

[17.](#)

[Chris Dudley](#)

Maryland

August 11th, 2010

12:44 pm

Yukel (#11)

Some may be natural gas flaring from oil wells.

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[18.](#)

[Bob](#)

NYC

August 11th, 2010

5:16 pm

#9 "That wouldn't have anything to do with the fact that you have been denied an environmental disaster in the Gulf of Mexico?"

ROTFLMAO

I can understand reporters going for the scary stories. A story about a school bus arriving safely is not interesting. A school bus getting hit by an eighteen wheeler with many casualties, now there is a story.

In other cases it is "get me the story, I'll get you the war". Like it is done with AGW.

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[19.](#)

Wang Suya

Japan

August 11th, 2010

5:20 pm

From Wang Suya

I heard that Russia forest fire, the important issue is not forest burning, it is their grand, the grands are covered by easy burning coal. Even you stop the forest burning, but the grands burning are more hard to stop.

[Recommend](#) Recommended by 1 Readers

[20.](#)

Wang Suya

Japan

August 12th, 2010

5:16 am

From Wang Suya

correct my #19 comment, I want to say ground but mistake to wrote grand, sorry for this.

[Recommend](#) Recommended by 0 Readers

[21.](#)

Asteroid Miner

Illinois

August 12th, 2010

5:20 am

These fires are as predicted by climate science. We have waited too long to take action on Global Warming and now the action must be more drastic if we are to survive.

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