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2 **Fire in the Earth System – bridging data and modelling research**

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General BAMS Information Box

30 Title bar: Paleofire: Data-Model Comparisons for the Past Millennium

32 What: Fire researchers from eleven countries, with expertise ranging from millennial-scale fire-proxy
34 records to present-day biomass burning to multiple scales of fire modeling, examined how diverse fire
36 datasets and fire modeling approaches could be used together to advance fire science. The workshop
38 aimed to develop testable hypotheses about fire, climate, vegetation, and human interactions by
40 leveraging the confluence of proxy, observational, and model data related to decadal to millennial scale
fire activity on our planet. New research directions focused on broad interdisciplinary approaches to
highlight how knowledge about past fire activity could provide a more complete understanding of the
predictive capacity of fire models and inform fire policy in the face of our changing climate. The
workshop was supported by the PAGES Global Paleofire Working Group (www.gpwg.paleofire.org) and
the National Science Foundation Geography and Spatial Sciences program.

When: 27 September to 1 October 2015

42 Where: Harvard Forest, Massachusetts, USA

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Introduction

46 Significant changes in wildfire occurrence, extent, and severity in areas such as western North America
and Indonesia in 2015, have made the issue of fire increasingly salient in both the public and scientific
48 spheres. Biomass combustion rapidly transforms land cover, smoke pours into the atmosphere, radiative
heat from fires initiates dramatic pyrocumulus clouds, and the repeated ecological and atmospheric effects
50 of fire can even impact regional and global climate. Furthermore, fires have a significant impact on
human health, livelihoods, and social and economic systems.

52 Modeling and data based methods to understand fire have rapidly co-evolved over the past decade.
Satellite and ground-based data about present-day fire are widely available for applications in research
54 and fire management. Fire modeling has developed in part because of the evolution in vegetation and
Earth system modeling efforts, but parameterizations and validation are largely focused on the present
56 day due to the availability of satellite data. Charcoal deposits in sediment cores have emerged as a
powerful method to evaluate trends in biomass burning extending back to the Last Glacial Maximum and
58 beyond, and these records provide a context for present-day fire. The Global Charcoal Database version 3
compiled about 700 charcoal records and more than 1000 records are expected for the future version 4.
60 Together, these advances offer a pathway to explore how the strengths of fire data and fire modeling
could address the weaknesses in the overall understanding of human-climate-fire linkages.

62 A community of researchers studying fire in the Earth system with individual expertise that included
paleoecology, paleoclimatology, modern ecology, archaeology, climate and Earth system modeling,
64 statistics, geography, biogeochemistry, and atmospheric science, met at an intensive workshop in
Massachusetts, USA, to explore new research directions and initiate new collaborations. Research themes,
66 which emerged from the workshop participants via pre-workshop surveys, focused on addressing the
following questions: What are the climatic, ecological, and human drivers of fire regimes, both past and
68 future? What is the role of humans in shaping historical fire regimes? How does fire ecology affect land

cover changes, biodiversity, carbon storage, and human land uses? What are the historical fire trends and
70 their impacts across biomes? Are their impacts local and/or regional? Are the fire trends in the last two
decades unprecedented from a historical perspective?

72 The participants discussed the current status of paleofire reconstructions focusing on charcoal records,
present-day fire data, and the state of global fire modeling. This foundation helped focus the diverse
74 expertise of workshop participants into working groups that independently developed ideas to address the
research themes. The overarching objective that connected all working group discussions was to
76 determine how fire data and fire models could be used together to promote advances in the understanding
of fire in the Earth system. Research projects from working group discussions were related to paleofire
78 proxy calibration, modeling human-fire-climate interactions, and understanding fire ecology. The
workshop program and presentations are available online¹.

80 **Methods to Calibrate Paleofire Proxies**

Charcoal records collected from lacustrine, bog, peat and marine sites around the world and available in
82 the Global Charcoal Database (GCD, www.paleofire.org) capture relative changes and trends in past fire
occurrence and have advanced our understanding of the controls and impacts of fire in the Earth system
84 on a wide range of spatial and temporal scales. However, due to the diversity of charcoal analysis
procedures and the complexity of charcoal production, transportation, and deposition, current paleofire
86 records in the GCD do not quantify biomass burning using physical units such as burned area or fuel
consumed. A high priority research area identified by workshop participants is to calibrate the amount of
88 charcoal found in sediments to a physical quantity of the fire regime.

One method focuses on transportation and deposition of charcoal. A statistical process model is being
90 developed to connect charcoal accumulation rates to burned area, while separating process and

¹ <http://www.gpwg.paleofire.org/paleofire-data-model-comparisons-for-the-past-millennium/>

measurement errors. This approach requires abundant, high-resolution time series for the calibration and
92 is therefore currently being developed for only a few locations.

Another approach will reconstruct biomass burning during the past few centuries where there is a high
94 density of sediment samples in the GCD that capture the most recent 200 years. These trends will be
iteratively evaluated against published historical records of fire activity that are tied to present-day burned
96 area data sets (e.g. satellite-derived fire information). Each dataset has specific uncertainties that may
limit the comparison in some regions, but studying how fire has or has not changed since the year 1750 is
98 a critical component of nearly every climate modeling experiment that focuses on the evolution of the
climate system since the pre-industrial era. These comparisons will require specific knowledge of the data
100 sets in question to evaluate strengths and weaknesses in every attempt to merge metrics of fire activity
from the recent past.

102 Finally, the past few decades are perhaps the least studied period of the paleofire proxy data in the GCD,
but a new initiative from this workshop called the “modern Global Charcoal Database” (mGCD)², will
104 address this gap. The mGCD will begin by developing a global fire proxy surface sample dataset that can
be used to analyze the relationships between burned area estimates from satellite and historical data and
106 charcoal in many different environments. A core component of the mGCD will be a standardized
sampling protocol to collect surface sediment samples from terrestrial and marine sites around the world.
108 The protocol will allow researchers with and without direct expertise in sediment collection to participate
in the mGCD development via a “citizen science” or “crowd-sourcing” approach. The protocol also
110 establishes a common physical unit to quantify charcoal in sediment. Results from this initiative could
transform fire research by linking charcoal accumulated in sediments to prolific present-day data on fire
112 activity, which in turn is the connection that is needed to link present-day fire data to paleofire data.

Interactions among Climate, Ecology, Humans, and Fire

² <http://www.gpwg.paleofire.org/crosscutting-initiatives1/>

114 Understanding the interactions between all drivers of global fire occurrence is required to project fire
occurrence under future conditions. Vegetation variability, land use, and fire management are important
116 determinants of fire dynamics and future-risk estimate, but some studies limit fire projections to changes
in climate only. A firm understanding of the baseline relationships between fire ecology and vegetation,
118 fire risk and fire management, as well as fire and biodiversity conservation is necessary for making
accurate projections about changing regional fire regimes.

120 While fire activity over millennial timescales is mainly driven by climate, archaeological, historical, and
contemporary evidence suggest that human societies have likely modified fire regimes during the
122 Holocene and certainly during the last millennium. Human behaviors that alter ignition frequency and
seasonal timing or change landscape flammability can modulate the strength and amplitude of the
124 relationship between a fire regime and weather conditions. To date, efforts to quantify the human
contribution to historical fire regimes at global to regional levels have used limited proxies for human
126 behaviors. Active debate surrounds efforts to parameterize the human influence on fire activity within fire
models, specifically with regards to simulating human ignition patterns.

128 Fire management by different societies has varied in time following socioeconomic and technological
change, and in space due to differences in climate and the structure of fuels. In a changing world, where
130 increasing fire activity constitutes a pending unknown in the global carbon cycle and a potential threat to
ecosystem services, fire management based on interdisciplinary knowledge represents a challenge. Fire is
132 an important determinant of forest structure and species composition, but its role in long-term biodiversity
changes is largely unknown. Baseline information from paleofire data is particularly needed for
134 restoration programs in many biodiversity hotspots, including for instance alpine meadows,
Mediterranean maquis shrubland, and tropical ecosystems.

136 Another priority identified by workshop participants is to account changes in land use/land management
over time when developing empirical human-fire relationships. Key research identified by workshop

138 participants included how to scale human-related parameterizations in fire models, analysis of the
charcoal records for signals indicative of human influence on fire regimes, and combining fire models
140 with the charcoal database to design and test hypotheses about the spatial and temporal magnitude of the
climate and human influences on fire regimes. One outcome of the workshop discussions concerned the
142 need to move beyond univariate representations of humans in fire models (i.e. population density), and to
embrace complexity in the human relationship with fire. For example, spatially explicit models of land
144 use or resource procurement strategies may provide more accurate estimations of human effects on fire
frequency and spread through changes in ignition timing and through the alteration of fuel type and
146 structure.

Finally, while much research focuses on overall burned area, extreme fire events or megafires – severe
148 fire episodes that cause catastrophic damage in terms of ecological or economic losses, or both – are
driven by critical weather conditions, which induce a concentration of numerous large fires in time and
150 space. Climate change might impact the frequency of such extreme fire events, hence present-day records
might already be biased to this increased frequency. The group discussed about how to identify and
152 characterize extreme fire events both in fire models and in charcoal observations for the last millennium.
The combination of charcoal observations and fire models can help identify mechanisms that lead to
154 changes in the frequency of extreme events related to climate or ecological thresholds. Furthermore, fire
models that capture extreme fire events could inform the spatial gaps in the GCD where data has not been
156 collected to better capture the interconnections among climate, ecology, humans, and fire.

Summary

158 Modeling and data based methods to study fire have rapidly co-evolved over the past decade. Currently,
however, very few initiatives link these important data types. The goal during the recent paleofire-themed
160 workshop was to outline methods to link paleofire datasets with fire modeling to increase our
understanding of variability in the global fire regime. The workshop facilitated advances in efforts to

162 calibrate relative trends of biomass burning determined from charcoal accumulated in sediments to
physical fire metrics, such as burned area or fuel consumption. Our discussions advanced linking data and
164 modeling to study interactions between climate, ecology, humans, and fire, with a focus on the effect of
humans on biomass burning at regional to global scales. This workshop highlighted how interdisciplinary
166 discussions among scientists can initiate advances that disciplinary research in fire science cannot
accomplish.

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