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Related Links - The Global Palaeofire Working Group

Researchers trace earth's history through fire

September 22nd, 2008 @ 4:16pm By Ed Yeates

Two thousand years of forest and wildfires now reveal a diary that could shed light on how humans and climate change affect everything that grows around us.

Researchers were able to go back some 2,000 years because what happened in that time is embedded in charcoal, literally engraved in the earth's core samples.

Dr. Mitchell Power, the new curator of the Garrett Herbarium at the Utah Museum of Natural History, was one of nine scientists who looked back thousands of years.

Fires used to burn naturally with no intervention. Even in 1910, mostly in areas with no houses. He said, "In just western Montana and Idaho, I came up with a figure of over 10-million acres, so about 10,250,000 acres burned."



Power says we stopped fires from burning after that with consequences. "It creates old snags for birds." He says. "It creates tree falls for bugs, so we really need to get back to that. By putting them all out, we create an artificial condition where everything becomes the same age and the same species."

More research to follow the charcoal studies may show some other red flags as well. More humans moving into wilderness areas, combined with greenhouse gases and climate change, may be affecting plant species. Power says, "Never have we seen the combined effect of increasing CO2, fertilizing the plants, growing more vegetation and combining that with human ignition."



Power will be looking for traces of specific plants, comparing what he finds in the past two decades with samples 2,000 years ago.

The museum has an enviable collection with about a 130,000 specimens of plants, some dating back to the 1850s.

Power's colleagues are already documenting changes. Larch, a conifer plant, is migrating to Yellowstone Park. And the Alpine shrub that hugs the ground has been moving to higher ground. He says, "As global temperatures warm, those plants have no place to go. They've been climbing up the mountain in retreat of these warming temperatures."

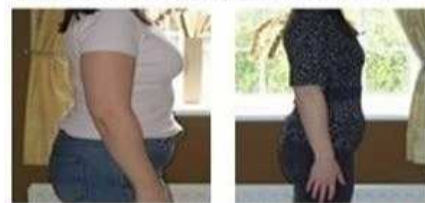
Scientists involved in this research are funded by the U.S. National Science Foundation and the U.K. Natural Environmental Research Council.

To learn more about the Global Paleofire Working Group, as it's called, click on the related link to the right of the story.

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