


More fires are burning along American River Parkway. How can we save our local treasure?

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Firefighters from the Sacramento Fire Department work to put out a two-alarm fire in Discovery Park in March near the Sacramento River.

Subscriber exclusive: The fires are only going to get more dangerous as California enters one of the driest fire seasons in modern history.

A dead baby possum with charred flesh had been half-eaten by a predator. Nearby, a young jackrabbit lay in the soot, breathing heavily, its tiny lungs filled with smoke. On the side of a scorched levee, a small hole where a turtle had dug its nest was filled with the blackened broken shells of its now-dead young.

 This story is a subscriber exclusive

Michelle Stevens, a [Sacramento State associate professor](#), cried when she surveyed the carnage as she walked through the charred [Bushy Lake Restoration Project](#) outside Cal Expo not long after it burned earlier this month. The 130-acre fire started at one of the American River Parkway's many homeless camps, firefighters said.

Her tears weren't just for the burned wildlife. She mourned the thousands of dollars in grants and donations that went to restore the site. She cried for the hundreds of hours she and her students spent over the years transplanting native plants, hauling water to them and tallying the hundreds of animals — the butterflies, turtles, coyotes, rabbits, hawks and snakes — that live inside the wildlife sanctuary.

"One hundred percent of what I have done on this site is destroyed and burned up," Stevens said, her boots crunching in the charred grass.

The fire at Bushy Lake points to a troubling rise in fires caused by homeless people in the parkway. [The fires associated with homeless camps](#) are a growing [statewide problem](#) that firefighters warn is only going to get more dangerous as California and the Sacramento region enter one of the driest fire seasons in modern history.

Just a few weeks into fire season, park rangers say close to 60 fires have started in the parkway this year. That's more than half the number of fires that started in the parkway all of last year, a season that already saw an alarming rise in the number of parkway fires.

Almost all of this year's fires ignited in or around homeless camps.

"We are already seeing moisture levels in our fuels that normally we would see ... around August and September," said Capt. Keith Wade of the Sacramento Fire Department.

The worry is that a fire could start in the parkway and burn into adjacent Sacramento neighborhoods. Powerful winds could also push a fire through encampments, with little time for the homeless people living there to flee.

"On any big, wind-driven day, we could quickly suffer a tragedy," Wade said.

The threat of a fire jumping from the parkway into adjacent neighborhoods is very much on the mind of Joe Balestreri, whose mother, Jeannie Little, lives in a home that borders the parkway at Sutter's Landing. Her back fence has burned twice from fires in recent years.

Balestreri's mother uses a wheelchair, and he's terrified about her having to evacuate from her cul-de-sac.

"I woke up one day two or three weeks ago looking at headlines about (how) this may be the worst fire year ever," Balestreri said. "It all added up to, 'Oh my God.' My mom is disabled, physically. If there's a fast-moving fire, we're afraid she'd be out of luck. All her neighbors would be."

Homeless camps rise in the Parkway

The American River Parkway is a 23-mile strip of greenbelt along the American River that stretches from below Nimbus Dam to where the American flows into the Sacramento River just north of downtown.

Managed by Sacramento County, the parkway attracts [millions of cyclists, swimmers, runners, boaters, hikers and anglers annually](#).

It's also become a haven for Sacramento County's growing homeless population. Parkway rangers estimate that as many as 2,000 people could be living along the levees, beside the river and between the patches of willows, blackberry bushes, poison oak and dry grass.

Camping and open flames are illegal in the parkway outside of designated sites such as picnic areas, but homeless campers regularly smoke, run gasoline-powered generators, build cooking and warming fires, and use charcoal and gas grills and stoves.

As California entered a drought last year and [with more people becoming homeless during the pandemic](#), the number of fires along the American River Parkway jumped sharply, rising to levels even higher than those seen during the worst of the last drought, according to a Sacramento Bee analysis of county and city fire-start data.

Sacramento city firefighters responded to 62 fires on the parkway in 2020, up from 22 in 2019. The last time that many fires occurred was from 2014 through 2016, when between 50 and 55 fires occurred each year.

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Firefighters work to put out a two-alarm fire near Discovery Park on the American River Parkway in March. The slow-spreading fire was in a difficult area to access. Jason Pierce Sacramento Bee file

Separately, Sacramento Metropolitan Fire District firefighters responded to 51 fires last year on their portions of the parkway, up from 21 in 2019. Metro Fire did not provide statistics before 2019.

So far, no one has been hurt in the fires, and the flames haven't jumped the parkway's levees into neighborhoods. But officials fear it's only a matter of time as fires in encampments are consistently lit in and around dry brush and grass.

"They're (homeless campers) making very poor decisions," said Wade, the fire department spokesman. "And they're having very real impacts to themselves, their neighbors who are unhoused living out there, as well as the community in general."

As an example, Wade described a small parkway fire in June that started from a homeless man burning napkins in heavy winds. He was trying to warm a pizza.

The man wasn't cited for starting the fire, but he was arrested on outstanding warrants, Wade said.

American River Parkway

A recent fire burned turtle habitat near Bushy Lake. There have been 62 fires on the portion of the parkway protected by Sacramento Fire Department this year.



Map: The Sacramento Bee

Causes of Parkway fires

There are other fire risks, too. Large piles of trash at many of the camps sometimes spontaneously combust as the garbage gets hot while it decays, said Leonard Orman, Sacramento County's chief park ranger.

And then there are those that are deliberately set.

"We have had multiple fires that we believe are arsons based on where they started, how they started and the fact that whoever was doing it is moving around and starting fires," Orman said.

However, no arrests have been made for those fires.

A man living on a levee near downtown Sacramento said Monday that he suspects someone started a fire about three weeks ago at his complex of tents made out of plastic tarps.

He said the arsonist probably targeted him over a dispute that stemmed from what he described as homeless camp “politics.”

“I think it was somebody who didn’t like us,” said the man who would only give his camp name, “TB,” short for “Town Business.” “They were trying to chase me away from this spot.”

However it started, the fire got so hot it melted some of the car batteries, inverters and generators that he uses to power his camp, he said. He described green camp stove propane bottles shooting into the air “like bottle rockets.”

Eric Benson, 50, walked Monday below the Highway 160 overpass along a bike path back to his camp, a lit cigarette between his fingers. Benson said he lived in the parkway for four years, and he’s “definitely worried” about fires this summer. He’s already seen several pop up.

“Summer hasn’t even started yet,” he said.

As he spoke, a portable gasoline generator could be heard humming nearby from inside a camp made up of heavily tarped tents. A large stainless steel propane barbecue sat outside the tents, its top open from a recent cookout.

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A fire in early June 2020 damaged the habitat of the imperiled western pond turtle at Bushy Lake in Sacramento’s American River Parkway, photographed Monday, June 14, 2021 in Sacramento. Paul Kitagaki Jr. pkitagaki@sacbee.com

How to prevent American River Parkway fires

Parkway rangers will occasionally issue citations for illegal fires, but they say it’s done little to stop people from starting them at their campsites.

“The reality is that there are lots of fires going on all the time because we have so many people living in that parkway, many of which are using fire to cook this time of year, which is a horrible idea,” said Orman, the chief park ranger.

At the same time, county officials have largely been blocked from removing homeless people from the parkway due to [federal court rulings that prohibit officials from ousting campers from public property](#) if a municipality doesn’t have enough shelter space to house them. During the pandemic, health officials also have advised local governments to leave camps alone to avoid spreading the coronavirus.

But there’s been one recent exception. Citing fire risks to the people living there, the county has announced officials are going to be clearing out at least one major encampment in Discovery Park where Orman said close to 100 people live.

“Depending on which way the wind is blowing, and where the fire started, there’s no way to escape,” Orman said. “Essentially, there’s really no way for (the fire department) to get in there at all with trucks.”

Rather than kicking people out of their camps or issuing citations, homeless advocates such as Bob Erlenbusch, executive director of the Sacramento Regional Coalition to End Homelessness, said they would prefer local leaders give fire extinguishers to campers and host fire-safety training sessions for those who are homeless.

Erlenbusch said homeless people would benefit from a briefing where fire officials tell them, “‘Here’s the correct way to build a fire that’s safe, so you can cook your food, or during the winter, stay warm, especially if you don’t have access to a fire pit.’ And then, ‘Here’s the correct way to put it out.’”

Sacramento Mayor Darrell Steinberg considered passing out fire extinguishers to homeless campers in the parkway this year, but was advised against it by the fire chief over concerns they’d be turned into weapons and would encourage people to start fires when they shouldn’t.

Instead, after The Bee approached the mayor’s office for this story, the fire department and Steinberg’s staff came up with a plan to hand out buckets that could be filled with sand or water to douse fires. The buckets also would contain fire-safety information pamphlets and a fire-suppressing blanket that could be used to smother a fire. The blanket also could be used for warmth.

Steinberg acknowledged that those temporary solutions are little more than “a Band-Aid for a gaping wound” as people live “in squalid and disparate tent encampments on the river, under the freeway, the River District — all over the city.”

Steinberg said that by next month, he hopes the City Council will be able to move forward with a citywide enforceable plan to “bring people off the river into either safe ground or indoor shelter housing.”

“Do we accept this as the way it is, or do we do everything we can to say, ‘This is a dystopian nightmare, and it must end?’ ” he said.

A wildlife sanctuary scorched by fire

“Dystopian” is an apt word to describe the charred wildlife sanctuary at the parkway’s Bushy Lake earlier this month.

Melted bike tires and singed empty beer and spray paint cans sat on the ground between the skeletons of burned trees. A sign urging people to stay out of the “Sensitive Habitat Area” was burned off at the base and barely readable amid the scorch marks. Nearby, at least eight used propane tanks sat beside two huge dumpsters filled with trash.

“Those are all bombs waiting to go off,” said Stevens, the Sacramento State associate professor.

It’s not the first time a large fire has burned through the Bushy Lake area. In 2014, a fire burned 160 acres. [The fire prompted Sacramento State and parkway advocates](#) to restore the area into a “fire resilient” landscape filled with native plants — where species like the imperiled Western pond turtle could thrive.

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Sacramento State professor Michelle Stevens and her students walk through fire damaged grassland as they look for turtle nests on the American Parkway near Bushy Lake in Sacramento on Monday, June 14, 2021. Paul Kitagaki Jr. pkitagaki@sacbee.com

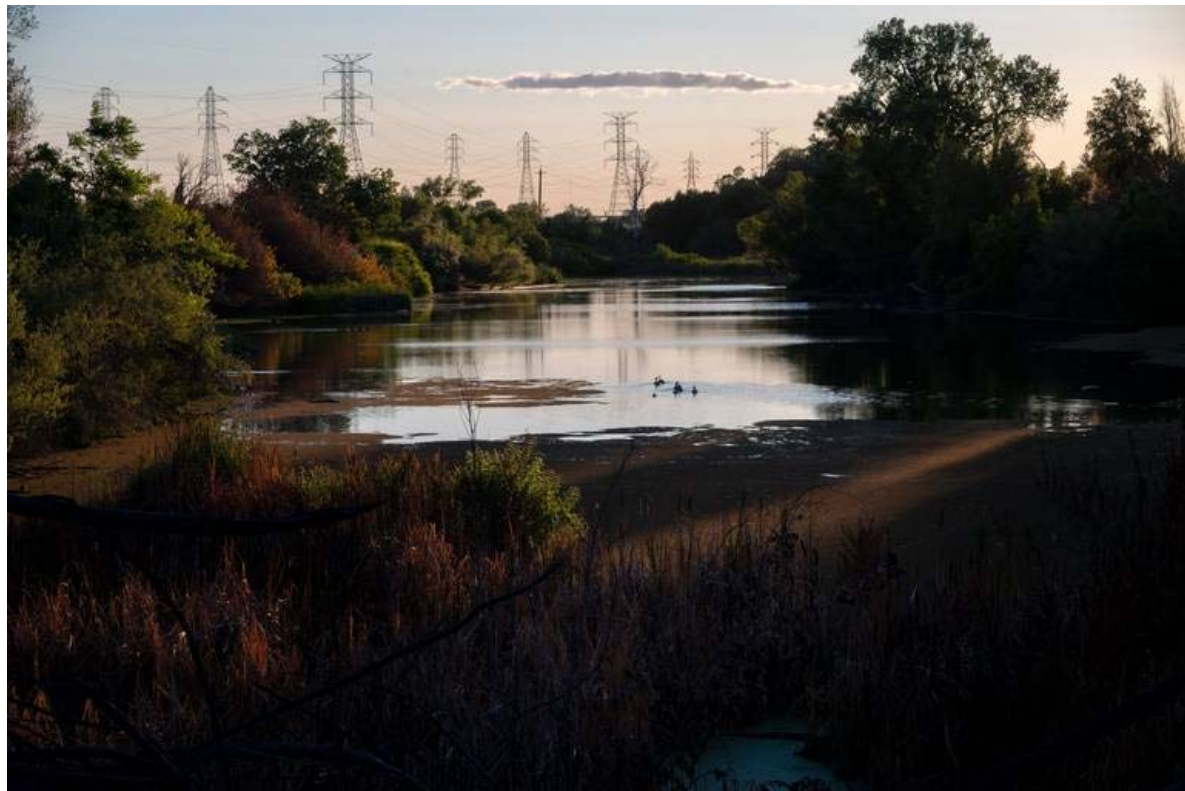
But there’s only so much they can do when homeless people camp in and around the habitat, defecate around the sanctuary and use their bikes to cut through the paths where snakes and turtles wander out of the wetlands to nest. Parkway advocates have urged the county to force the campers out.

“We were ignored,” said Stephen Green, president of the Save the American River Association.

The fire couldn’t have come at a worse time for the turtles that had just wandered out of Bushy Lake to build nests in the dry ground around the pond. Stevens and her students worry the hatchlings didn’t survive.

For Rio Lininger, one of Stevens’ research assistants, it was especially frustrating knowing that all the work that went into restoring the sanctuary went up in flames because of human carelessness.

“And it’s bound to happen again,” she said, “if we don’t do something about it.”





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Sacramento State students look for the nests of the western pond turtle and non-native red-eared turtle on Monday, June 14, 2021, after a recent grass fire at Bushy Lake on on the American River Parkway in Sacramento. Paul Kitagaki Jr. pkitagaki@sacbee.com