

Emily K. Gibson
Western Kentucky University

Smokey the Bear: The Evolution of an Environmental Icon

In 1950, shortly after Albert Staehle created the image of Smokey the Bear for the Cooperative Forest Fire Prevention Program advertising campaign, a chance event breathed life into Staehle's vision. After a spring fire broke out in Lincoln National Forest, New Mexico, a group of fire fighters battling the blaze spotted a bear cub clinging to a burnt tree. Once rescued and doctored, news of the bear's plight spread quickly capturing American sympathy. The outpouring was so strong that on June 9, 1955, after initial hesitation, the United States Forest Service accepted the cub as the official living symbol of Smokey the Bear, and the newly dubbed "Smokey" was dedicated to the forest service and to a life of representing the need for fire prevention.¹ The immense popularity of little Smokey added a new facet to Staehle's original creation and began giving birth to the longest-running public-service campaign in U.S. history.² Serving as a link between the human world and nature, Smokey became the spokesperson of the forest for the American public. Because of his central role in society the changing message and appearance of Smokey the Bear throughout history reflects larger societal shifts in environmental awareness and views on fire prevention and management.

Even before Smokey's creation, the U.S. Forest Service's fire prevention campaign was deeply rooted in the view that fire was an evil force that threatened the safety of timber throughout the nation. This principle existed in 1921 when US Forest Service Chief William Greely held the Mather Field Conference, the first national assembly of foresters. The conference deeply probed issues of fire prevention and left "no aspect of fire protection unregarded."³ Greely went on to develop the 1924 Clarke-

McNary Act, which provided major governmental funding to states for fire protection under the oversight of the United States Forest Service.⁴ The events of December 7, 1941 compounded the deep-seated notions from earlier decades and exacerbated the urgency of protecting forests. In the wake of the Pearl Harbor bombing, Americans immediately shifted focus to providing support for burgeoning military activity. With the nation using enough lumber to construct an estimated 9,500,000 average-size houses for war purposes, timber resources were an integral part of the military effort during World War II. Americans increasingly viewed forest protection as a necessary means to increase the quantity of lumber for the war, rather than viewing forest protection as inspired by the intrinsic value of a natural ecosystem. In early 1942, when a Japanese submarine off the coast of California fired shells that exploded and nearly missed the Los Padres National Forest, fear turned to paranoia. With many fire fighters and other trained volunteers engaged in the war, people began to realize the impending threat of large-scale fires and the necessity for a new approach to fire prevention. The lack of available trained personnel to combat fires necessitated a new system of fire prevention emphasizing individual, everyday preventative measures that citizens could participate in. In response the USDA Forest Service created the Cooperative Forest Fire Prevention Program (CFFP) with the intent of engaging average citizens in daily fire prevention by appealing to patriotic duties for the war effort.⁵

While the first advertisements of the CFFP did not feature Smokey the Bear, they nonetheless provide interesting commentary on the environmental awareness of the 1940's and the mindset that led to Smokey's creation. Early CFFP advertisements strongly reflected the centrality of forest protection to the war effort. One such 1943

poster featured the faces of Hitler and a Japanese soldier sneering over a blazing forest. The caption read “Our Carelessness, Their Secret Weapon. Prevent Forest Fires.” This poster, obviously calling people to prevent fires in order to aid in a war victory, also indirectly labeled those who didn’t practice fire prevention as traitors who collaborated with the enemy.⁶ (Figure 1) While wartime posters did elevate fire prevention to the level of patriotic duty, overall their harsh message steeped in fear did not effectively inspire widespread awareness. By 1944 the CFFP program recognized the need to make war time advertisements more appealing to the public and began the search for an animal representative. Enter Smokey the Bear. The program decided on the image of a bear for its visible strength and control. Artist Albert Staehle was given the task of putting together the image of a loveable yet respected character to relate to the public. His first Smokey the Bear poster, created in 1944, displayed a slightly domesticated bear with pants and shoes but no shirt pouring water over a smoldering campfire. The poster featured the assuring message “Smokey Says- Care *will* prevent 9 out of 10 forest fires!”⁷ As necessitated by wartime restrictions, Smokey’s advisory reinforced the significance of average citizens engaging in care and fire prevention through simple precautionary actions on a daily basis. Smokey also mirrored the staunch anti-fire view of the 1940’s, highlighting the vilification of fire by the Forest Service as well as the American public.

Because of the wartime campaign’s success the CFFP program continued using Smokey in fire prevention messages after the war. Lacking the immediate threat of war as a rallying cause, however, they instead began to focus on the marketing and emotional appeal of Smokey’s message. Although the period lacked major policy changes, during the 1950’s and 60’s Smokey’s message became primarily intertwined with two things:

commodification and its specific relation to children as well as the growing spiritual and idealistic ties to nature. This transitional phase between antiquated forestry and the relatively modern science of ecology resulted in changing perceptions of nature that laid the groundwork for future policy changes. During this transition ecologists began to criticize efforts made by the US Forest Service to completely eliminate fires in national parks and forests. They argued that controlled burning was an integral part of natural forest growth and that through eliminating excessive undergrowth burning was effective in preempting the break out of larger fires. Because of the pioneering nature of their research, however, the US Forest Service largely ignored their views. Some inroads were made however, and by 1968 the Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks began flirting with the practice of controlled burning by letting selected lightning fires burn without suppression.⁸ Despite efforts to alter the system of fire prevention, the US Forest Service remained steadfast in their abhorrence of fire.

Although the decade lacked radical forestry policy changes, the 1950's nonetheless marked an explosion in the popularity of Smokey the Bear and his advertising campaign. Smokey quickly became emerged in the insatiable consumerism characteristic of the decade. In 1955 his immense popularity inspired Congress to copyright the bear's image for use in fire prevention advertisements and on an array of other products. Also during this period marketers targeted Smokey's new primary audience: droves of children who begged their parents for new Smokey the Bear lunchboxes, coloring books, and comics. The creation of the Junior Forest Ranger program in 1952 illustrates the specific marketing schemes aimed at this consumer block. Ideal Toys marked the beginning of the program when they manufactured the first

Smokey the Bear stuffed animal. Along with the doll the toy company included an application for membership to the Junior Rangers. Children rushed to become an official member of Smokey the Bear's fire fighting crew, which naturally increased toy sales in the process. The Program was so successful that by 1955, nearly half a million children were Junior Ranger Members dedicated to fire prevention.⁹ Upon receiving a "Smokey the Bear Kit" a child acquired a personalized message from Smokey himself accepting the fledgling fire fighter into the rangers. This interaction fostered a personalized relationship with the character. If corresponding by letter with Smokey wasn't enough, children could also go visit him, or his living symbol at least at the nation's capital. On June 27, 1950 little Smokey the Bear was taken to the National Zoo in Washington, D.C. for safekeeping until his death on November 10, 1976.¹⁰ While at the zoo, children inundated Smokey with letters and as a result he became the only individual to ever obtain his own zip code: 20252.¹¹ While the opportunity to visit and correspond with Smokey stimulated awareness among children and programs such as the Junior Rangers provided an important role in educating children, overall they both primarily reinforced the commodification of Smokey's image, which reflected the superficial concern with the environment.

As Smokey the Bear began to be marketed more to the younger consumer driven generation of the baby boom, his advertising message began to shift accordingly. Smokey the Bear ads were replete with direct appeals to children. A 1951 US Forest Service poster displayed a beaming Girl and Boy Scout at Smokey's side with a caption that read "They Help...Do You? Please Prevent Forest Fires!"¹² (Figure 3) Using a somewhat guilt-provoking message, Smokey encouraged children to rise to the level of

their traditionally morally superior counterparts in scouting and aid in the fight against fire. These messages directed specifically at children extended well into the 1960's. Advertisements from 1963¹³ (Figure 4), 1964¹⁴ (Figure 5), and 1966¹⁵ (Figure 6) all featured the new "ABC's" slogan: "Always break matches in two, Be sure fires are out cold, and Crush all smokes dead." The 1964 Advertisement featured a somewhat younger version of Smokey sans hat sitting on the ground playing with ABC blocks that were inscribed with the new slogan, accompanied by an imploring "PLEASE!" at the bottom of the poster. Both in content and imagery, Smokey the Bear advertisements pointedly addressed its newfound juvenile market.

A second theme in advertisements originating in the '50's and '60's were appeals to idealism and spirituality. Likely as part of larger pressures in the context of the emerging Cold War, ads began to emphasize individual responsibility to uphold moral and spiritual values. One such advertisement from 1953 essentially places Smokey in the position of Pope, serving as intercessor between the people and God. The poster displays Smokey in the foreground, hat over heart, pleading with the sky, "*Please... help people be more careful!*" The background displays two forest animals in the midst of a charred forest kneeling over a mound of dirt presumably covering a dead animal, with a cross protruding from the top.¹⁶ (Figure 7) A second "holy" image of Smokey from 1959 shows the bear, again with his hat off in respect, surrounded by friendly forest creatures with a heavenly beam of light shining down on him. Next to his side a large tablet stands erect with "Smokey's Commandments" chiseled as the heading.¹⁷ (Figure 8) These obvious Biblical images have one thing in common: the threat of moral condemnation. Both advertisements present the choice of protecting the forest as a moral obligation.

Scare tactics used to elicit public participation in national security during the war, therefore, simply morphed into threats of an eternal judgment. The growing spiritual and ethical concern with forest protection present in Smokey's images reflects a growing trend in environmental awareness emphasizing a personal obligation to nature preservation.

By the 1970's, after three decades of fire prevention and suppression techniques implemented by the US Forest Department, the costs of protecting national forests had become massive. Indeed fire prevention costs had increased by 8 percent annually since the program began during WWII. The growing financial burden led the federal Office of Management and Budget to encourage land management officials to seek more cost-effective means of dealing with fire threats. Financial pressures coupled with the re-emergence of ecological studies that had been marginalized during the 1950's facilitated a shift in US Forestry policy from "fire control" to "fire management." The much more inclusive mission of fire management involved "reducing forest fuels, using prescribed fire, limit[ing] suppression of some wildfires, and [using] traditional suppression for others."¹⁸ This increasingly innovative forestry policy, however, met with public distrust and reticence and forced another refocusing of Smokey the Bear. Many aged Junior Rangers adhering to the credo of their youth were reluctant to challenge the authority of their dear friend Smokey the Bear. The disconnect between forestry policy and public opinion further widened in 1988 when a fire blazed out of control in Yellowstone National Park. The fire, which resulted from lightning, had been allowed to burn under the new fire management mandates. Region wide windstorms, however, caused the fire to rapidly spread and burn beyond designated safe boundaries. Vast media coverage of

the fires greatly hurt the blossoming credibility of the program and increased public skepticism.¹⁹ Today, after years of rebuilding the image of the program and also a growing recognition of the necessity for scientific analysis in forestry policy, fire management techniques are widely respected among ecologists and environmental groups. Even more unconventional environmental groups such as EarthFirst! emphasize the necessity for fire in a balanced ecosystem, and ridicule those still believing in fire prevention by mocking Smokey's long time slogan by presenting their own "Only you can prevent lightning!"²⁰

In conjunction with growing scientific and environmental awareness between 1970 and today, the message of Smokey's advertisements increasingly shifted from kids to adults while shying away from anti-fire messages and the use of the image of Smokey himself. A new advertising theme introduced in the 1980's for example, emphasized "thinking" rather than blindly vilifying fires. One 1982 ad displayed Smokey's head in the foreground with the word "think" written repeatedly in the background.²¹ (Figure 9) Another from 1983 presented an enlarged match with the face of Smokey on the head and the instructions "Think before you strike."²² (Figure 10) Smokey's message keenly reflected current forest policy by encouraging thoughtful fire rather than condemning it. By the year 2000, advertisements had experienced such a dramatic departure from his original message that Smokey the Bear no longer even occupied a central role in the design. One ad from 2001 featured an updated 1980's message illustrated with computer graphics rather than cartoon style drawings. The poster displayed a book of matches filled with pine trees rather than actual matches and the message "Think before you strike." Instead of incorporating Smokey's famous visage front and center, the small

emblem was located at the very bottom of the poster as an afterthought.²³ (Figure 11)

Also in recognition that adults have a more direct impact on fire practices, as they are primarily the ones who visit forests, recent television ads have targeted adults. A 2001 PSA created by the Ad Council and US Forest Service presents a group of young adults roasting marshmallows around a fire. Instead of properly extinguishing the fire they merely douse it with water and the fire soon flames up again. The screen cuts to an image of a chalk outline of a deer with a voice saying “Every year thousands are senselessly killed by people with no criminal record at all. People like you.”²⁴ The ad clearly acknowledges that children are rarely in the woods without parental supervision and traditionally reckless young adults who venture into the woods for recreation pose a greater threat. Overall the shift in target audience as well as the reconsideration of the advertising message itself reflects a deeper ecological understanding than in previous years.

Since his conception, therefore, Smokey has represented many phases in forest ecology while playing various roles in shaping American environmental awareness: wartime hero, consumer fodder, and promoter of thoughtful burning. As evidenced by shifting motives of forest protection campaigns throughout history, Smokey the Bear has occupied a very complex role in society beyond just serving as “Guardian of the Forest.” Since current scientific research shows that controlled burnings and other fire management practices are healthier than banning fire completely, the decline in use of Smokey’s image reflects the decreasing necessity for an anti-fire spokesperson. Unless Smokey is able to undergo a public face-lift and become more adaptable to messages of

forest ecology, his lovable image may become forever relegated to the realm of antique toy stores and the environmental naiveté of a bygone era.

Endnotes

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- ¹ Ellen E. Morrison. *Guardian of the Forest: A History of Smokey Bear and the Cooperative Forest Fire Prevention Program*. Virginia: Morielle Press, 1995. 8, 26-27.
- ² Donna Marco. "Smokey Bear advertising campaign marks 60th year." *Knight Ridder Tribune Business News*, Aug. 9, 2004: 1.
- ³ Stephen Pyne. *Fire in America: A Cultural History of Wildland and Rural Fire*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982. 268.
- ⁴ Armo, Stephen, and Steven Allison-Bunnell. *Flames in Our Forest: Disaster or Renewal?* Washington, DC: Island Press, 2002. 19-20.
- ⁵ Morrison, *Guardian of the Forest*, 1-2.
- ⁶ "Our Carelessness, Their Secret Weapon." 1943. Online Image. *Smokey's Vault*. October 25, 2005. <http://www.smokeybear.com/vault/museum_main.asp>.
- ⁷ "Care will prevent..." 1944. Online Image. *Smokey's Vault*. October 25, 2005. <http://www.smokeybear.com/vault/museum_main.asp>.
- ⁸ Armo and Allison-Bunnell, *Flames in Our Forest: Disaster or Renewal*, 22.
- ⁹ Brown and Davis. *Forest Fire: Control and Use*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1973. 290.
- ¹⁰ Morrison, *Guardian of the Forest*, 28.
- ¹¹ William Safire. "Smokey the Bear." *New York Times*. April 21, 1975: 29.
- ¹² "They Help...Do You?" 1951. Online Image. *Smokey's Vault*. October 25, 2005. <http://www.smokeybear.com/vault/museum_main.asp>.
- ¹³ "Smokey's ABC's." 1963. Online Image. *Smokey's Vault*. October 25, 2005. <http://www.smokeybear.com/vault/museum_main.asp>.
- ¹⁴ "Please!" 1964. Online Image. *Smokey's Vault*. October 25, 2005. <http://www.smokeybear.com/vault/museum_main.asp>.
- ¹⁵ "Follow Smokey's ABC's..." 1966. Online Image. *Smokey's Vault*. October 25, 2005. <http://www.smokeybear.com/vault/museum_main.asp>.
- ¹⁶ "Please...help people be more..." 1953. Online Image. *Smokey's Vault*. October 25, 2005. <http://www.smokeybear.com/vault/museum_main.asp>.
- ¹⁷ "Smokey's Commandments." 1959. Online Image. *Smokey's Vault*. October 25, 2005. <http://www.smokeybear.com/vault/museum_main.asp>.
- ¹⁸ Armo and Allison-Bunnell, *Flames in Our Forest: Disaster or Renewal*, 23.
- ¹⁹ Armo and Allison-Bunnell, *Flames in Our Forest: Disaster or Renewal*, 24.
- ²⁰ Phil Knight. "Smokey Gets His Due." *EarthFirst!* 20 (2000): 2.
- ²¹ "Think." 1982. Online Image. *Smokey's Vault*. October 25, 2005. <http://www.smokeybear.com/vault/museum_main.asp>.
- ²² "Think before you strike." 1983. Online Image. *Smokey's Vault*. October 25, 2005. <http://www.smokeybear.com/vault/museum_main.asp>.
- ²³ "Think before you strike." 2001. Online Image. *Smokey's Vault*. October 25, 2005. <http://www.smokeybear.com/vault/museum_main.asp>.
- ²⁴ Rebecca Flass. "Smokey Gets Serious." *Adweek*. 51 (2001): 8.

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- “Please...help people be more...” 1953. Online Image. *Smokey’s Vault*. October 25, 2005. <http://www.smokeybear.com/vault/museum_main.asp>.
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“Smokey’s ABC’s.” 1963. Online Image. *Smokey’s Vault*. October 25, 2005.

<http://www.smokeybear.com/vault/museum_main.asp>.

“Smokey’s Commandments.” 1959. Online Image. *Smokey’s Vault*. October 25, 2005.

<http://www.smokeybear.com/vault/museum_main.asp>.

“They Help...Do You?” 1951. Online Image. *Smokey’s Vault*. October 25, 2005.

<http://www.smokeybear.com/vault/museum_main.asp>.

“Think.” 1982. Online Image. *Smokey’s Vault*. October 25, 2005.

<http://www.smokeybear.com/vault/museum_main.asp>.

“Think before you strike.” 1983. Online Image. *Smokey’s Vault*. October 25, 2005.

<http://www.smokeybear.com/vault/museum_main.asp>.

Images

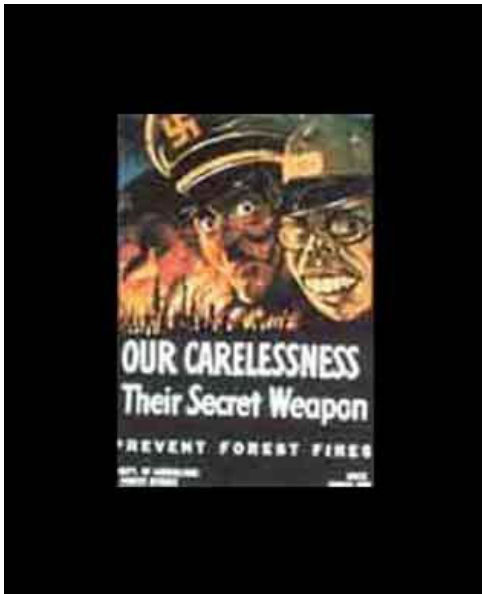


Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

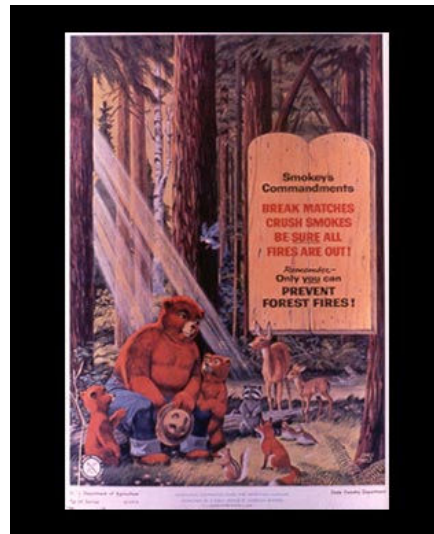


Figure 8

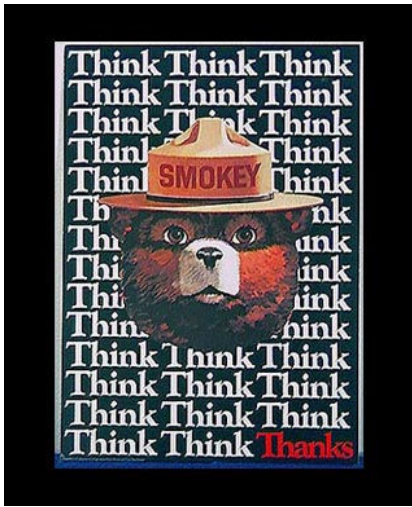


Figure 9

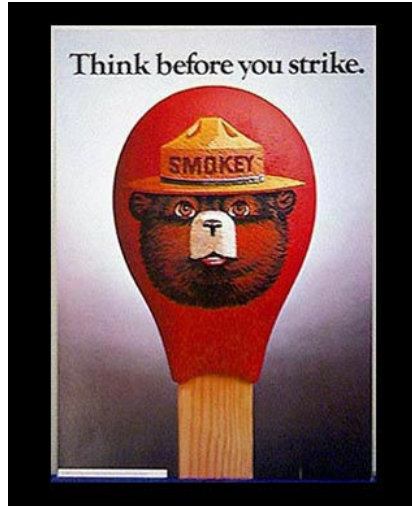


Figure 10



Figure 11