

The Mio fire: Was it really a disaster?

The U.S. Forest Service was kind enough to forward to the area desk a copy of its interim report on last May's Mack Lake fire, the "controlled burn" which got out of control, involving 25,000 acres of forest land, destroying 40 homes and claiming one life.

At last count, damages were expected to total about \$4 million.

But this report, delivered to Mack Lake residents at a public meeting two weeks ago, deals with the fire's impact on the wildlife and vegetation of the area. Its negative impact on human life in the area was, for the moment, ignored, although the Forest Service continues to be very much concerned about the victims and has assumed responsibility for losses.

The report left me amazed at nature's ability to rebound from such a calamity, and for that matter, made me wonder if it would have been a calamity at all had there been no human involvement.

We make value judgements on natural phenomena according to



WAYNE HEARNE

NORTHERN LIGHTS

their effects on human activity. When a volcano like Mt. St. Helens erupts, it can truly be called a "disaster" if human life or property is lost. The same with a hurricane, or in this case, a forest fire.

But are these occurrences "disasters" when they occur in remote, uninhabited regions? Were they "disasters" millions of years ago before humans appeared?

Would the so-called "disaster movies" continue to draw audiences if there were no victims? No heroes to cheer as they defend their lives and loved ones against menacing special effects?

I somehow doubt it. A college geology professor once showed us a color film of a volcano's eruption. There was no narration, just the natural sounds of the eruption. There was no reference to humans — nobody to worry about.

I remember a feeling of awe, a feeling of insignificance in the face of something I could see but not understand. It was like watching the ultimate fireworks display — "oohs and ahs" prompted by the beauty of what was on the screen, but nobody hiding their heads in fear.

It just wasn't a "disaster" without villages being swept away by the lava.

I realize the Mack Lake fire was a disaster in the truest sense of the word. The property damage alone, not to mention the loss of a single life, was enough to make it such.

But was it a disaster biologically? According to the report, nutrients were added to the soil. Jack pine regeneration was enhanced. Certain "young forest" species, like deer and turkey, are expected to flourish.

Fisheries in Mack Lake were unaffected.

Really, all the fire did to the forest was knock it back a generation or so. Geologically and biologically, that's just a drop in the bucket. Examination of fire scars of fourteen sample trees indicates the area has endured fires in excess of 10,000 acres in at least eight years since 1820. Each time, the forest has bounced back.

Although this fire was intentionally set by humans, it had the same results as a fire of natural causes.

Shortly after the fire, I was in an Oscoda County restaurant where a handmade sign above the counter read something like: "Roses are red. Fires are hot. Because of this bird (Kirtland Warbler), our forest is shot."

That bothered me then, and now I know why. It just isn't true — the forest wasn't destroyed. It just changed, as it has countless times since its creation.

The tragedy was that the fire occurred when and how it did and that innocent people suffered.