

## **The Adaptation of a Community to the Threat of Fire\***

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Today, with increasing intensity, people who live in wildfire-threatened locations are encouraged to work toward becoming a Fire Adapted Community. But, what is a Fire Adapted Community? A frequently seen description states that a Fire Adapted Community is one that can survive a wildfire, with little or no assistance from firefighters. While this is a concise statement of a desired outcome, it does not help us understand what is at the core of such a community.

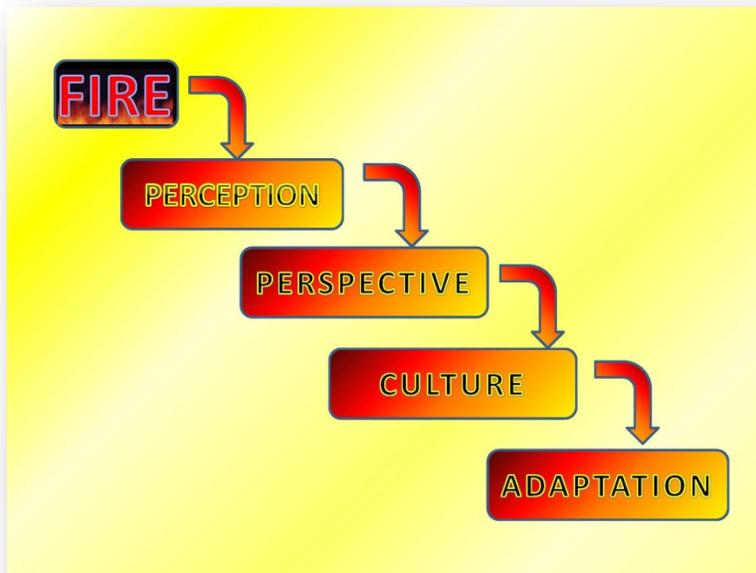
First, we must gain a common understanding of what we mean by the word community. A community is not a place. It is not a collection of dwellings defined by geographical boundaries, streets and intersections, nor permits for the development and construction of homes. A community is a social system of human connection and communication. The people within the community hold to common values, and experience a feeling of fellowship with others as a result of sharing their commonality. A community then is about people and relationships, and the adaptation that is called for is found within their shared values, interests and goals.

What do we mean by adapt? People adapt by changing their behavior, so that it is easier (and perhaps safer) to live in a particular place or situation. It implies that a modification has been made in recognition of and acceptance of changing circumstances. What circumstances have changed, and what modifications are necessary? The historical record points clearly to the fact that in the future there will be more fire, not less. Over the past fifty years, eight of the ten largest fires have occurred in the last decade. Not only will there be more fire, but the continued growth of housing developments in high fire threat locations will expose more homes to the threat of destruction, adding to the already soaring cost of firefighting. The reality of this potential for Nevada was highlighted in a recent study that concluded that only 10% of the available land in high fire threat areas has been developed. This changing circumstance means that people who have chosen to live in these areas are vulnerable, perhaps extremely vulnerable. They are vulnerable to the loss of their homes, their pets, their treasures, important records and documents, their way of life...perhaps even their actual lives.

The most fundamental adaptation required is not a change in the building code, or roofing materials, or the complex of brush and forest fuels, nor the type of landscaping and deck material, etc. The adaptation that is essential is a change in the way the members think about their community. The most fundamental change needed is to modify the way people perceive their community, and the way they incorporate their vulnerability to the destructive force of wildfire into their common culture. The culture of a community is characterized by the social system's dominant attitudes and beliefs,

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and by the way those attitudes and beliefs are turned into action. Therefore, a Fire Adapted Community is one in which the predominating way of thinking about, or perceiving, the community places a high priority on the common vulnerability to destruction by wildfire. The adapted community culture is one that includes the perspective of the wildfire threat, and the high probability of serious loss, as a routine way of viewing and characterizing the community. In response, the probability of changed behavior and the completion of threat mitigating measures now increase.



*The most fundamental adaptation required in addressing the threat of wildfire is to change the way people think about the place where they live. The vulnerability to the devastation caused by wildfire must be incorporated in the culture of the community. This adaptation will require changes in both people's perception of and perspective about the place they call home.*

To change the culture and realize the adaptation that is required, wildfire must be put on the agenda. It must surface on every agenda. In every gathering of the community, the vulnerability to wildfire must surface and become an integral part of the conversation. In every issue of every written publication, in every public meeting, the reality of shared community vulnerability must be expressed. The media must be engaged and special events must be organized and held. However, the perspective of the community must not only be about vulnerability, risk and threat. As a result of the adaptation and altered culture there must also be a call to action. The community perspective must also include a willingness to accept personal responsibility and fully engage in work that mitigates the threat and increases community survivability when wildfire comes to town.

*“The essence of community, its heart and soul, is the exchange of value; things we do and share because we care for others, and for the good of the place.”*

*Dee Hock*