

Burning the Land

An Ethnographic Study of Off-Site Fire Use by Current and Historically Documented Foragers and Implications for the Interpretation of Past Fire Practices in the Landscape

Fulco Scherjon, Corrie Bakels, Katharine MacDonald, and Wil Roebroeks Current

Anthropology, Published by:

[The University of Chicago Press](#)

on behalf of

[Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research](#)

Article Stable URL:

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/681561>

In popular culture, hunter-gatherers are usually seen as “living off the land”, hunting and gathering food resources freely available in their natural environments. Anthropologists have often stressed that this is a gross simplification, that hunter-gatherer lifestyles vary enormously, and that all to some degree do (and most likely did) modify their environments. A new study now shows that fire is a major landscape managing tool of hunter-gatherers, and probably has been so from the deep past onward. The study, published in *Current Anthropology*, provides the first broad systematic investigation into fire use in the landscapes of human foragers, with data derived from ethnographical, archaeological and historical sources. Hunter-gatherers fired their landscapes all over the world, in all types of biomes, with as only exception the tundra. Young and old, males and females used fire for a wide variety of reasons: to increase the yield of vegetation, to lure, find or to drive game, to clear tracks and wider areas, to communicate, as well as just for fun. Studying the antiquity of such practices calls for new systematic studies of the archaeological and geological record. Hunter-gatherer use of fire to modify the environment

is a long-neglected topic, and one that will shed new light on what constitutes a “natural” environment.

