

# Smokey Bear: American Icon

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"Remember, only you can prevent forest fires!"—*Smokey Bear*

Over the course of its history, the United States has suffered through countless forest fires that have destroyed millions of acres of land. Every summer it seems there is a national news story about a major forest fire. Some of these fires are caused by lightning strikes or controlled burns begun by forestry officials. Other forest fires are started by careless individuals who improperly dispose of cigarettes and matches or fail to extinguish campfires. The U.S. Forest Service in conjunction with the Advertising Council has played a major role in educating the public about forest fire prevention. Within the FDLR, there are numerous documents that examine and discuss fire management issues including the debate regarding the ecological need for controlled burns. Though created by a commercial advertising firm in conjunction with the private nonprofit Advertising Council, Smokey Bear's relationship to the FDLR is often overlooked. Smokey, one of the most successful advertising campaigns in the history of the United States, has represented the Forest Service for more than sixty years and federal laws were created to protect his image. Although Smokey's message is not without controversy, this well-known bear has been educating generations of Americans about preventing forest fires.

## The Early Days

During World War II, the Bankline Oil Refinery off the coast of Santa Barbara, California was shelled by a two-man Japanese submarine.<sup>1</sup> These bombs were intended to destroy the forests along the West Coast. The forests along the West Coast from California to Washington were important since lumber was intended for such things as ships and rifle stocks. Many Americans did not know that a "battleship required 300,000 board feet of flooring for each deck" or that one tree could provide 7,500 rifle cartridges.<sup>2</sup> This thwarted attack eventually led to the creation of Smokey Bear.<sup>3</sup>

With the threat that other attacks might occur on the West Coast, William V. Mendenhall, forest service supervisor

for the Angeles National Forest, began educating the public about forest fire prevention. Mendenhall contacted the Wartime Advertising Council for assistance. During the early 1940s, with help from the Council and assistance from the Los Angeles advertising firm Foote, Cone and Belding (FCB), a campaign was created. The first fire prevention posters (prior to Smokey Bear) of the early 1940s featured sayings such as "Careless Matches Aid the Axis" and "Our Carelessness, Their Secret Weapon."<sup>4</sup> These posters featured Nazis and Japanese soldiers and were not as successful as originally hoped due to their negative intimidating nature and anti-Axis propaganda.<sup>5</sup>

In 1944, Walt Disney's cartoon white-tailed deer, Bambi, was popular with the American public. Disney approved the use of Bambi in posters to teach the public about forest fire prevention, with the message "Please Mister, Don't Be Careless."<sup>6</sup> The Disney character was a huge success but unfortunately, Bambi was only on loan for the year. Since the war-slogan prevention posters were not as successful, and the American public, especially children, reacted well to an animal delivering a message, the Forest Service's Cooperative Forest Fire Prevention (CFFP) program and the Wartime Advertising Council chose a bear as the character to represent the forest fire prevention campaign.<sup>7</sup>

## Ad Council

The Ad Council, a privately funded nonprofit organization, assists advertising companies as well as the federal government in delivering public service announcements to the American people. According to the Ad Council's web site ([www.adcouncil.org](http://www.adcouncil.org)), the War Advertising Council (as it was originally known), was created to assist in the war effort by selling war bonds. The Council was able to encourage "advertisers and the media to contribute more than \$1 billion in advertising" to motivate the American public during the war.<sup>8</sup> In 1945, with the war over, the name was changed to just the Advertising Council. Phrases and images from the Ad Council's campaigns are a deep part of American culture. One of the most famous is "Keep America Beautiful" featuring Iron Eyes Cody's tear-

ful reaction to pollution. Other Ad Council slogans such as “Friends don’t let friends drive drunk” and McGruff’s “Take a Bite Out of Crime” have also become part of the American vernacular. Although these are all very famous, it was the phrase “Remember, Only You Can Prevent Forest Fires,” created in 1947, that became the longest running and most successful advertising campaign in Ad Council history. According to a biography on Smokey Bear, Ervin Grant, an account executive with the advertising firm FCB, is credited with creating the phrase.<sup>9</sup> In 2001, the Ad Council, with assistance from the Forest Service, altered the famous phrase to “Only You Can Prevent Wildfires” due to a rise in recent outbreaks as well as to keep the message current. With the talent and hard work of the Ad Council, FCB, and numerous artists, it is easy to understand why Smokey Bear and his campaign became so successful.

## The Artists

Albert Staehle, a German-born freelance artist, is credited with drawing the first Smokey Bear. Staehle gained his recognition as an artist with his cover drawings for the *Saturday Evening Post*. He submitted several different drawings of various animals with a squirrel as the leading choice.<sup>10</sup> A group working on the project eventually decided a bear was a better fit. On August 9, 1944, a letter from Richard Hammett, director of the Wartime Forest Fire Prevention Program, describes the characteristics of the desired bear as “nose short (Panda type), color black or brown; expression appealing, knowledgeable, quizzical; perhaps wearing a campaign (or Boy Scout) hat that typifies the outdoors and the woods.”<sup>11</sup> The bear Staehle drew was a “cute bear with floppy ears, big eyes, a humped neck and natural looking paws.”<sup>12</sup> It was the drawing of the bear that caught the attention of the committee and caused slight controversy. Forest Service personnel believed Staehle’s drawing would not appeal to the public; in addition it lacked Bambi’s star power.<sup>13</sup> They also wanted the project to keep people interested. In the end it was the humanizing effect that helped Smokey evolve from a cute bear into one with national appeal.

While the discussion of what this bear would look like was taking place, the topic of what to call the bear was also discussed. Who actually came up with the name Smokey is unknown. It seems inspiration was obtained from deceased assistant New York City fire chief “Smokey Joe” Martin. Martin was a legend in the New York City Fire Department, often risking his life, extinguishing fires, and saving the lives of others.<sup>14</sup> Staehle was asked to redraw the bear, (now named Smokey) per the changes requested. These changes can be seen in the first Smokey Bear prevention poster from 1944

featuring Smokey pouring water from a pail over a campfire with the phrase, “Smokey Says—Care *will* prevent 9 out of 10 forest fires.”<sup>15</sup>

Over the next few decades numerous artists worked on and produced drawings of Smokey, all of them contributing to what Smokey is today. The two artists who deserve most of the credit are Richard Stow, from FCB and Rudy Wendelin from the Forest Service. Stow, an art director, did not do much with the actual drawing of the bear but was influential in assisting the younger artists in the design and is seen as the person who “quietly guided the creation familiar to generations of Americans.”<sup>16</sup> While Stow was shepherding young artists behind the scenes on Smokey’s design, Rudy Wendelin helped maintain the bear’s image and “protected its development” as the character grew in popularity.<sup>17</sup> It is clear from the early posters of Smokey that he was more animal-like than what he is today. Wendelin was responsible for the transformation of Smokey from an animal with claws to a kind human-like character. During the course of his career, Wendelin oversaw creation of more than four thousand representations of Smokey. Wendelin’s Forest Service colleagues believed that it was Wendelin who “trained Smokey to be graceful and charming.”<sup>18</sup>

It was during this period of Smokey’s development that the Federal government began using color for its products. In William C. Lawter’s book *Smokey Bear 20252*, Wendelin related how forest fire prevention was one of the first campaigns to use color in its materials. He noted that color was not being used by any agencies other than Defense and that the GPO needed to be persuaded by FCB of the importance of using color for fire prevention materials.<sup>19</sup> Having convinced GPO to use color with fire prevention materials, Smokey would soon persuade Congress of the importance of his image in relation to the commercialization of his prevention message.

## Smokey Bear Act

Smokey Bear’s popularity grew very quickly, especially with children. Many in the marketing business were interested in capitalizing on this success and using Smokey for commercial purposes. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) decided they needed to act to protect licensing Smokey’s image and likeness through legislation. John Morgan Smith, an employee of the Forest Service, felt it was important that money generated from Smokey’s commercial ventures be used exclusively for fire prevention, and he assisted in writing the law. With help from three Democrats and three Republicans, the bill, sponsored by Senator Pat McCarran from Nevada, was placed on the calendar.<sup>20</sup> The bill passed both the House and the Senate unanimously. On May 23, 1952, President Harry Truman signed the Smokey Bear

Act into law. This act imposed a fine of not more than \$250 and/or imprisonment for the improper use of the Smokey Bear trade name and character. The act also established Smokey Bear as the official name.<sup>21</sup> With the backing of the law, the CFFP created a licensing policy stipulating that Smokey products would educate the public about fire prevention, be consistent with the message and image, and generate funds to further prevent forest fires. With federal laws and general policies in place, Smokey Bear would enter a new realm of entrepreneurship as well as "public recognition."<sup>22</sup>

## Real Life Smokey Bear

As Smokey Bear gained popularity in the late 1940s and early 1950s with his fire prevention message, a real-life bear displaced by a forest fire in New Mexico would become the living symbol of fire prevention for more than twenty-five years. In May 1950 a forest fire destroyed some 17,000 acres in Capitan, New Mexico. The Associated Press photographed a bear cub, badly burned in the fire, being treated by a doctor. In time, this photo was seen throughout the country. The burned bear was named Smokey after the mythical Forest Service bear and was soon just as famous. Once the cub's wounds healed, he traveled to Washington, D.C., and took up permanent residence at the National Zoo where he was visited by countless school children over the years and took part in numerous ceremonies. The real-life Smokey became a living reminder to people throughout the country to be careful and respect fire in forested areas. In November 1976 this living symbol of fire prevention and wildlife conservation died and the body was returned to Capitan, New Mexico, where a historical park honoring the real and fictitious Smokey Bear was completed in 1979.<sup>23</sup>

## Fire Prevention Success

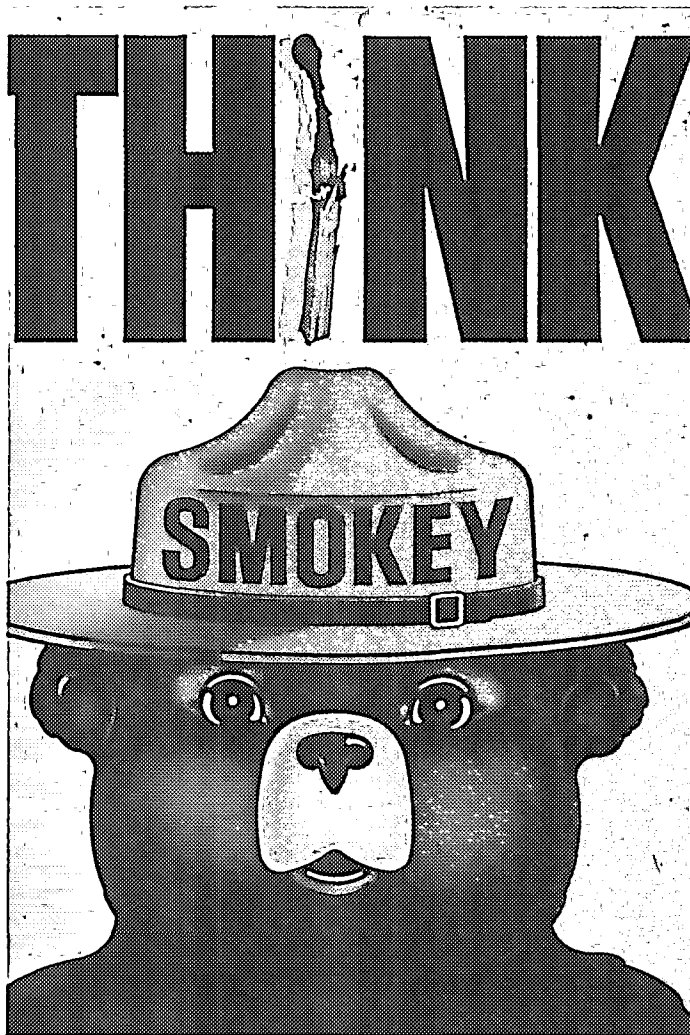
With a live bear in the National Zoo and the growing sponsorship of advertisers, the Forest Service, using Smokey Bear, was able to generate substantial public buy-in and help prevent forest fires. Although influence of Smokey's message is open for debate, Forest Service statistics indicate a trend toward forest fire reduction during the time of Smokey's rise in popularity. In 1942 there were 210,000 reported forest fires while in 1958 there were less than 100,000 fires and the total acreage burned had also been reduced dramatically from 30 million acres in 1942 to 3 million in 1958.<sup>24</sup> Over the last few years the average number of wildfires per year caused by human carelessness was 62,275.<sup>25</sup> It is difficult to say if the early popularity of Smokey Bear was responsible for these changes in statistics because the focus of the program has always been on educating children about fire and forest fire prevention.



Smokey Bear poster (image used with permission).

One of the brilliant strategies developed by the CFFP was the creation of the Smokey Bear's Junior Forest Rangers in 1953. This informal organization was geared toward children who submitted a written request and received a Junior Forest ranger kit. The kit was comprised of a letter from Smokey, membership card, window certificate, stamps, and a book-mark.<sup>26</sup> By appealing to children, this program also influenced parents' thinking about preventing forest fires. In a 1954 issue of *Fire Control Notes* from the USDA, Clint Davis, director of the CFFP, quotes a father from New Jersey who said, "Since my son became a Junior Forest ranger, I can't burn leaves or trash without him pulling his authority on me."<sup>27</sup> By the mid-1960s Smokey was receiving an exorbitant amount of mail. In an effort to offset the requests, the 20252 ZIP code was created in his honor.<sup>28</sup> It is apparent that the creation of Smokey, though geared toward children, had a profound effect in educating adults about forest fire prevention.

In a 1952 issue of *Fire Control Notes*, another story reveals the power of Smokey Bear. Two campers from San Francisco



Smokey Bear poster (image used with permission).

spent the weekend fishing on the McCloud River. Upon their return home the campers stopped at a store that had a Smokey poster with the message "You Can Stop This Shameful Waste!" After seeing this poster the two men questioned whether they had completely extinguished their camp fire. When they drove back to the site, the coals were still hot and the fire was beginning to spread. They were able to put out the fire properly before it got out of control. This event was recorded in the local newspaper, and Clint Davis noted it as the "first case history that documented Smokey Bear as actually preventing a forest fire."<sup>29</sup> Anecdotes such as this one showed the Ad Council that Smokey Bear was doing exactly what he was supposed to, to get the public thinking about forest fire prevention.

## Controversy

Although Smokey's message has always been about preventing accidental forest fires, there has recently been backlash by some who believe Smokey's message is out of date. Many think

Smokey misses the point about the importance of fire in the ecosystem. Fire historian Stephen Pyne from Arizona State University feels that Smokey has become a convenient symbol to those in favor of controlled and prescribed burning.<sup>30</sup> In his article entitled, "Only You Can Postpone Forest Fires," environmentalist Ted Williams likens Smokey to Winnie-the-Pooh, a bear with a very little brain. Williams goes on to suggest that Smokey has "been extinguishing ecosystems" and that "forest fires can only be postponed never prevented."<sup>31</sup> While this controversy has been playing out for years with those in favor of controlled and prescribed burns to thin out the overgrowth in our forests, Hutch Brown in *Fire Management Notes* sums the controversy up best by pointing out that Smokey never called for fire exclusion but that his message sought to discourage carelessness with fire by visitors.<sup>32</sup> Jimmie L. Turner, an ignition specialist for the Forest Service, believes that Smokey is *not* wrong with his message because Smokey is a valid symbol to the public, especially to children who must learn that carelessness with fire can have devastating consequences.<sup>33</sup> Many in the Forest Service believe the message today must focus on both Smokey Bear and his prevention policy as well as using controlled burns to further the natural balance within the ecosystem.

No one would have thought while our forests along the west coast were being threatened during World War II that one of the most successful advertising campaigns in U.S. history would result. Smokey has changed considerably from his first appearance as an awkward-looking bear to the current well-developed representative for the Forest Service and the Advertising Council. While some believe Smokey's message is out of touch with nature, his message has remained popular in the national consciousness and been very successful for decades. The importance of Smokey's message has always been to educate the younger generations to the dangers of fire and the destruction that can occur in wooded areas. Although Smokey is the product of the U.S. Forest Service, the advertising firm of Foote, Cone, and Belding, and the Ad Council, he is a hidden treasure within government publications.

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