

MOUNTAINS

The staying power of Smokey Bear



Word from the Smokies
Mike Hembree
Guest columnist

Many people of a certain age have a special affection for Smokey Bear, or “Smokey the Bear,” as he has also been called.

I remember reading Smokey’s story – how he was rescued from a wildfire in New Mexico in 1950 and became the symbol of fire awareness in the woods for generations. Posters and signs showing Smokey in a park ranger hat were ubiquitous in those first years after the bear’s appearance on the national stage.

As a kid riding in our family’s old Chevrolet into Great Smoky Mountains National Park, I made an immediate connection between Smokey and the Smokies and assumed that the names somehow were related. I admit, however, that I was confused about the two spellings: “Smokey” for the bear and “Smoky” for the park. I couldn’t reconcile that disparity in my young brain, and I’m sure the two spellings still confuse some folks.

Smokey’s story is one of survival against the odds. As fire swept through the Capitan Mountains in New Mexico, the black bear cub became trapped and apparently orphaned by the blaze. He climbed into a tree and managed to escape the worst of the flames but nevertheless sustained badly burned paws and legs before a firefighting crew found him.

After the cub was treated for his burns in Santa Fe and news of his harrowing experience continued to spread, he was made into a popular icon for fire prevention by the US Forest Service and eventually relocated to the National Zoo in Washington, DC. There, Smokey lived out his days becoming such a celebrity that the U.S. Postal Service granted him his own ZIP code to accommodate the fan mail.

After his death in 1976, Smokey was buried in a place of honor at Smokey Bear Historical Park in New Mexico. Often depicted with a firefighting shovel, Smokey remains a striking symbol for conservation and responsible stewardship across numerous landscapes – even if the nuances of his fire-prevention message have evolved over the years.

Today, SmokeyBear.com continues to share information about campfire safety, but Smokey’s website also features



In 1964, Great Smoky Mountains National Park was gifted an original copy of the first Smokey Bear poster signed by the iconic image’s creator, Arthur Straehle. The poster is still held within the Great Smoky Mountains National Park Archives. GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK ARCHIVES



After recovering from his burns in Santa Fe, Smokey Bear was flown to the National Zoo in Washington, D.C., where he lived for 26 years. Smokey received so many letters, the U.S. Postal Service granted him his own postal code. PROVIDED

educational resources about fire science and the ecological benefits of fire for different ecosystems. Keeping pace with

more contemporary understandings of fire ecology, Smokey helps young people learn about the oak-hickory forests and Southern pine communities that rely on fire disturbance to remove shade, reduce leaf litter on the forest floor, and disperse the seeds of certain trees with serotinous cones, like the Table Mountain pine found in the Great Smoky Mountains.

Smokey still sticks by his old catchphrase – “Only you can prevent wildfires.” But his message also acknowledges the importance of controlled burning and the long history of Native Americans using fire to reshape and rejuvenate the landscape.

This fall, a team including Great

Smoky Mountains National Park and Appalachian Piedmont Coastal Fire staff conducted prescribed burn operations in the Cades Cove area of the park. Although shifting weather conditions prevented the team from burning the entire 1,200-acre target area, the operation still helped to reduce fuels, restore meadow habitat for wildlife, and trial the use of drones to safely set and monitor the progress of fires in the park.

“It has been a pleasure to watch the current fire staff and other park staff involvement at all levels to see the completion of two burns, at Cable House and Sparks Lane, for a combined 250 acres,” said Fire Management Officer Brian Tonihka. “The team acknowledging weather patterns to ensure that we meet the objectives over just having completed acres is a testament to the professionalism amongst the fire staff in how prescribed burns should be managed.”

Tonihka says the strategic burns will resume in spring of 2023 and credits the success this fall to the close coordination of several partner organizations including the Nature Conservancy, Tennessee Department of Forestry–Blount County, the Bureau of Indian Affairs–Eastern Cherokee Agency, Townsend Volunteer Fire Department, and Cherokee National Forest.

Although controlled burns have been a routine part of park management for the last 20 years, the dangers posed by unplanned wildfires are still quite real in the Smokies, particularly during dry periods. On Sunday, Nov. 7, a motorcycle accident along U.S. 129 on the western boundary of Great Smoky Mountains National Park ignited a roadside wildfire that eventually impacted 40 acres before it was reported to be fully contained two days later. Approximately 60 wildland firefighters from the U.S. Forest Service and National Park Service assisted in fire suppression operations, which included hand-digging firebreak lines and aerial support from helicopter crews.

In the United States, nearly nine out of 10 unplanned wildfires are caused by humans, which means it’s more important than ever to pay attention to our old pal Smokey. Over at SmokeyBear.com, you can take the Smokey pledge:

- Be careful anytime you use fire or items that can cause sparks.
- Never leave your fire unattended.
- Drown, stir, drown again, and feel it’s cool with the back of your hand when you put out your fire.
- Do NOT use fire or operate equipment when it’s windy, dry, or hot.
- Make sure there are at least 15 feet between your fire and flammable things.
- Always have a water source nearby.
- Put out and discard smoking materials properly.
- Do NOT dump hot ashes from your BBQ grill or firepit.

Mike Hembree is a veteran journalist and the author of 14 books. He has visited 26 national parks and hopes to add many more to that list. Great Smoky Mountains Association Publications Associate Aaron Searcy provided an editorial update for this article after the November 2022 GSMNP fire.



Great Smoky Mountains National Park and Appalachian Piedmont Coastal Fire staff use drip torches to ignite a prescribed burn near Cable House in Cades Cove in November 2022. Periodic fire disturbance reduces the buildup of fuels and restores meadow habitat for wildlife including wild turkeys, deer, and ground-nesting birds. MATT WOOD/PROVIDED BY NPS

USA TODAY NETWORK

Dining Deals USA

FP99YH4
 BONUS CODE

- 1) Register and enter codes at: www.diningdealsusa.com
- 2) Enter today’s code before Monday, December 5, 2022 at 11:59 p.m.
- 3) Redeem today’s bonus code for coupon redemptions that interest you. Coupons cover restaurants, travel, family fun, automotive, shopping and more!

* Discounts vary by merchant, location and offer; subject to availability. Offers may change without notice. Total savings vary based on the number of discounts and coupons redeemed and value of offers.

TODAY’S BONUS CODE

Citizen Times

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

Customer service

To view important information online related to your subscription, visit aboutyoursubscription.citizen-times.com. You can also manage your subscription at account.citizen-times.com. Contact the Citizen Times for questions or to report issues via email at citizentimes@gannett.com or 1-800-672-2472.

Operating hours are:

- Monday-Friday: 8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.
- Saturday: 7:00 a.m. - 11:00 a.m. with limited support for Digital
- Sunday: 7:00 a.m. - 11:00 a.m.

Full access print and digital subscriptions

Subscribe and save today by visiting citizen-times.com/subscribe.

Corrections and clarifications

Our goal is to promptly correct errors. Email us at accuracy@asheville.gannett.com to report a mistake or call 828-232-5829. Describe the error, where you saw it, the date, page number, or the URL.

Contact us

Customer Service 1-800-672-2472
 Interim Executive Editor Karen Chávez | 828-236-8980
 Advertising 828-252-5611
 Obituaries 828-232-5966

Postal information

The Citizen Times, USPS# 236-000, ISSN# 0336-0000, is published 6 days per week excluding Saturday, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Christmas Eve and New Year’s Eve by Gannett Media Corp, 14 O. Henry Ave., Asheville, NC 28802. Periodicals postage paid at Asheville, NC and additional mailing offices. **Postmaster:** Please send address changes to Customer Service, PO Box 5830, Augusta, GA 30916.