Accompanying Text to “Why Wildfires are Getting Worse?”

This infographic looks at why wildfires in the West are getting worse. Brian Harvey, an assistant professor at UW SEFS reports that, “from the early 1980s to just before the turn of the century, there was one year where the U.S. exceeded six million acres burned. Since the year 2000, there have now been 13 such years” (environment.uw.edu). Each of the five points I identify in the visual shows a different way human activity and natural systems are intertwined and impacting the West’s fire season. The first two points connect to the hydrosphere; Smaller snowpacks, extended dry seasons, and human groundwater drilling is pulling moisture out of the soil, resulting in drier landscapes which are more ready to burn (**climate.gov**)(**Richardson et al. 2022)**. The third point is about the atmosphere, and how the emissions we spew into it are disrupting the climate patterns that once kept fire seasons in check**(science.nasa.gov)**. The fourth point is about the biosphere; A century of humans suppressing fires and mismanaging forests has left them overgrown and out of balance**(fs.usda.gov)**. The fifth connects where we choose to build our homes to how that impacts the number of fires started **(Schug et al.)**.

The goal of this visual is to raise awareness. I want someone who sees this to walk away thinking differently about how their world connects to the wildfire season out West. Not to feel guilty, but to understand that these recent extreme fires shouldn’t happen every season. These powerful fires are shaped by decisions we make every day at every scale, from how we manage forests to where we build houses and whether we commute by car.

My poster is is aimed at high school students. The viewer is someone who has heard of climate change and wildfires, and has a strong background, but hasn't necessarily thought about how they're connected to human systems. A student in an AP Environmental Science class would be my bullseye viewer and would have a good understanding of the points that I am trying to communicate. Anyone with a general curiosity about the environment could engage with it and make a new connection between humans and the environment. I'd envision this being shared in a high school setting. They could be hung up in a science classroom or posted on a school's Instagram for Earth Day. It could also fit well on a platform like National Geographic Education or the EPA's student resources page, anywhere that students are already going to learn about the environment.

For this project, I did not use any standalone AI platform besides Google's AI summaries that naturally appear during web searches. I did not use a large language model for my art, ideas, or content. However, I did find Google’s AI summaries useful as a guiding or reference point to initially orient my focused research. For instance, when searching for reputable sources, the overviews of highly cited papers helped me avoid sources that seemed helpful but would have been unhelpful. The tool works well at summarizes huge swaths of information that could be used to answer the question you are asking the search engine. I find these AI summaries most helpful when I have a quick question that I am comfortable being answered by a unreputable source. However, in this context it was important that I was in control of the sources to evaluate their reputability, so it was best to avoid the use of AI in this context.

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