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The Environmentalist Fires

By [John Berlau](#)

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Last week, CNN delayed for a few hours the scheduled Tuesday night broadcast debut of its much-hyped documentary series "Planet in Peril" due to live coverage of the tragic wildfires that have displaced more than 500,000 people in Southern California. But that didn't keep CNN "golden boy" reporter Anderson Cooper from using the tragedy to tout the program he starred in as much as he could.

Cooper constantly claimed during the week that the fires provided further confirmation of the documentary's prediction of an eco-catastrophe. Cooper said that higher temperature due to global warming may have

been a factor. It was a "timely documentary," Cooper said last Tuesday on CNN's "Larry King Live", because "California certainly seems to be in peril."

But ironically, much of the reason California is in peril is due not to climate change, but to the very environmental policies championed by Cooper's documentary and our new Nobel laureate, Al Gore. While, in its [statement](#) praising Gore, the Nobel Committee said that global warming may "threaten the living conditions of much of mankind," the current wildfires show that the more immediate threat to man comes from the champions of the gnatcatcher, kangaroo rat, and the Delhi Sands Flower-Loving fly.

Environmental mandates have made fire safety for humans take a back seat to the well-being of the aforementioned California creatures, as well as that of every bug and rat lucky enough to be listed as an "endangered species" under federal and state law. For over a decade, environmentalists have hamstrung Californians in their efforts to clear the dry brush that is providing the fuel for this massive fire. If any of these endangered or even "threatened" species are found in shrubs or bushes on public or private property, it becomes very difficult to give this vegetation even the slightest haircut. This is true even if city codes require firebreaks to be built.

An example of the legal strait jacket that homewoners faced in the areas hit by the fires is the "[brush management guide](#)" on the City of San Diego web site. The confusing instructions state that vegetation within 100 feet of homes in canyon areas "must be thinned and pruned regularly." But then, the same sentence goes on to state that this must be achieved "without harming native plants, soil or habitats."

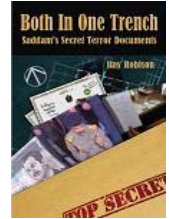
Then in fine print at the bottom of the page, the real kicker comes in:

"Brush management is not allowed in coastal sage scrub during the California gnatcatcher nesting season, from March 1st through August 15th. This small bird only lives in coastal sage scrub and is listed as a threatened species by the federal government. Any harm to this bird could result in fines and penalties."

Coastal sage scrub is a low plant ubiquitous near coastal California that grows like a weed

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under almost any condition. And since gnatcatcher nesting season lasts almost six months, there could be much buildup of sage scrub that becomes hard for homeowners to control. Especially since the maintenance rules severely restrict the use of mechanical brush-clearing devices even when gnat nesting season is over.

The tragedy is that this shows that not much has changed even after previous warnings from experts that environmental rules were on a collision course with fire safety in California and many other places, because they prevented the removal of "excess fuel" for fires from dense stands of trees and vegetation. [Southern California homes were lost in 1993](#) after the federal Fish and Wildlife Service told homeowners that mechanical clearing of brush would likely violate the Endangered Species Act. The reason: it could alter the habitat of a newly-listed endangered species called the [Stephens kangaroo rat](#).

Some exemptions were made, and clarifications were issued, but landowners still face the lingering risk that the simple act of building a firebreak can send them down the river if an endangered species is anywhere near their property. California's Blue Ribbon Fire Commission, which had been created after wildfires in 2003 by then-Governor Gray Davis and whose members included Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., as well as state legislators of both parties, [concluded that](#) "habitat preservation and environmental protection have often conflicted with sound fire safe planning."

But did this bipartisan finding or any of the documented harms to fire safety from environmental rules make it into CNN's exploration of possible causes of the current fires? Not a gnatcatcher's chance. Instead, climate "expert" Cooper told viewers Wednesday night that the wildfires were "symptoms of a planet in peril. Fire, drought, deforestation; it's all connected."

Yet the data show that temperature for areas hit by the fire was well within average ranges, and came nowhere near the record highs. On Monday the 23rd, for instance the high temperature in [Escondido](#) was 84 degrees, and the high in [Santa Ana](#) was 87 degrees. According to temperature statistics from the [National Weather Service](#), the mean high in both cities for that date is 79 degrees. What's more, the record high for that date is 102 degrees in Escondido (in 1929) and 103 degrees in Santa Ana (in 1965). So tell us again, Anderson, how global warming is to blame, when the weather where the fires struck was not nearly as hot as it was more than 40 years ago and almost 80 years ago!

What about those harsh Santa Ana winds? Well, they are pretty strong. Here's [one writer's](#) description: "It was one of those hot dry Santa Anas that come down through the mountain passes and curl your hair and make your nerves jump and your skin itch."

Woooo! What a great description of the winds last week. Except that this passage wasn't written last week, last month, or last year. It was written by detective fiction master Raymond Chandler to describe the Santa Ana winds of about 70 years ago. It's in the opening paragraph of his famous short story "Red Wind," first published in 1938. So rough winds are nothing new under the California sun!

What's really changing the "climate" in Southern California is that there is more fuel for fires, since much less of the brush, as well as disease-infested trees, can be cleared, thanks to environmental mandates.

The problem is even worse on land owned by the federal and state governments. To satisfy the feds, San Diego has placed more than 170,000 acres off limit to development for the exclusive purpose, in the city's words, of "protect[ing] habitat for over 1,000 native and non-native plant species and more than 380 species of fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals." Hugh Hewitt, the California radio talk show host and author who is also a real estate attorney, has [noted](#) in the *Weekly Standard*:

"The land that has passed into 'conserved' status is at even greater risk of fire than private land that is home to a protected species because absolutely no one cares for its fire management policy. The scrum of planners, consultants and G-11s that put together these plans should be monitoring these areas closely. Instead, they regulate and move on to savage the property rights of the next region."

And enviro groups also get more and more land locked up by conveniently finding more species to petition the government to protect. In California, as in other places, it's often a case of creative subdividing of essentially the same species. First it was the Stephens kangaroo rat whose designation as endangered put much brush clearance off limits. Then, in 1998, the [San Bernardino kangaroo rat](#) got listed. Also under federal protection is the [Fresno kangaroo rat](#). And so on and so on.

Across the country, fires have become more destructive as trees and shrubs gain "protected" status preventing them from being cleared. As Bill Croke [noted](#) last week in *American Thinker*, In the last two decades annual timber production on the national forests in the West has decreased from roughly 12 billion board feet to less than 3 billion today. This has resulted in brush-choked forests with large "fuel loads."

The ironic thing is that all this "protection" at the expense of humans doesn't necessarily work out for the gnatcatchers -- not to mention more majestic creatures -- anyway. According to the [Associated Press](#), the fires struck close to the San Diego Wild Animal Park, threatening condors, a cheetah, and many other animals. The Blue Ribbon Fire Commission found that the 2003 wildfires resulted in "the loss of valuable watershed, wildlife, and critical environmental habitats."

Of course, saving species never really was the objective of many enviros. It's just a subterfuge for their main interest of controlling the human species.

Endangered Species Act abuses, including those that prevented fire breaks in Southern California, were an issue [that helped get the GOP in power](#) in 1994. But with some exceptions like former Rep. Richard Pombo of California, Republicans began to abandon this issue, lest they be branded as anti-green. It's time for the GOP, as well as truly moderate Democrats, to befriend again the threatened species known as the beleaguered property owner.

And if the Nobel Committee really wanted to give an award to folks preventing a hazard threatening mankind, they should rescind Al Gore's prize and hand it to the brave California firefighters whose jobs have been made so much harder by the nonsensical practices of the environmental movement.

John Berlau is the author of the Amazon best-selling book [Eco-Freaks](#). He is director of the Center for Entrepreneurship at the [Competitive Enterprise Institute](#).