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Painting the Landscape with Fire: Longleaf Pines and Fire Ecology

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Abstract

Carol Lynn Price reviews Den Lathem's *Painting the Landscape with Fire: Longleaf Pines and Fire Ecology*.

Keywords

book review, Den Lathem



BOOK REVIEW

Painting the Landscape with Fire: Longleaf Pines and Fire Ecology

Den Latham

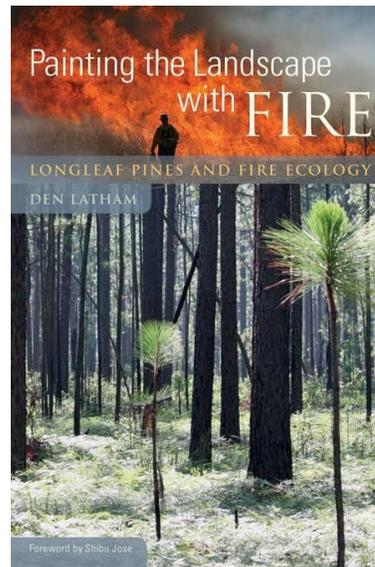
University of South Carolina Press, 2013, \$29.95

Fire is Good

On a warm, humid day in late spring, I found myself entering the Carolina Sandhills National Wildlife Refuge looking for longleaf pines. I've lived in the Carolinas and Georgia for over thirty years and see pine trees every day, but on this day, I needed to see longleaf pine trees. What made longleaf pines any different than the pine trees all around me? After reading *Painting the Landscape with Fire* I wanted to see first-hand what author, Den Latham had spent ten years researching to write this book.

Painting the Landscape with Fire by Den Latham is about using prescribed burns to save the rare ecosystems in longleaf pine forests. Longleaf pine forests once covered ninety million acres in the southeastern United States. Today only two percent remain or about two million acres. Latham tells us that a longleaf pine forest can support almost eight hundred plant species that thrive only in this ecosystem. These forests are home to endangered species such as the red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW) that have dwindled to 14,000 from 900,000 back in precolonial times. The RCW makes its home in the heartwood cavity of longleaf pine trees. A home that may take years to build is started by one RCW and may be lived in for thirty years by six generations of RCW's.

Latham wrote this book to educate the public about the need for prescribed burns and fire ecology. Those of us who grew up with Smokey the Bear were taught that fire is not good. Since 1957, Smokey taught us that it was everyone's job to prevent forest fires, and today his message is still true. However, we



now know that controlled fire or prescribed burns are essential to maintaining valuable ecosystems.

Longleaf pines are the most fire-resistant forests. They

can live through more lightning strikes than any other forest in North America. A prescribed burn helps to renew the growth of legumes and herbaceous plants needed by wildlife. It removes invasive shrubs, lets in sunlight for new growth and keeps down the possibility of wildfires that could kill the entire forest. Many species are invigorated by fire. Within a few weeks, the prescribed burn area has completely recovered bursting with new life. The general public knows very little about the value of prescribed burns and Latham does a good job of explaining why we need the burns and how carefully the fires are managed.

As he is writing the book, Latham meets with park rangers, biologists, and foresters to learn about land management and to go out on prescribed burns. His first person narrative makes the reader feel as if he is along for the trip and the dialogue he uses reveals how dedicated these professionals are to saving the longleaf pine ecosystem.

Latham's writing is engaging and easy to read, but it does not lighten his message about the need to preserve the longleaf pine forest ecosystem. His descriptions of the longleaf pine forests, plant and animal life, create vivid images in your mind. Latham says the first time he drove through the Sandhills forest it was just a forest, but after he had worked on this book, he realized it is one of the world's greatest ecosystems. It's hard to believe that when he started this book he was just looking for a new topic to write about as he states in his forward.

This book is a must addition to every public library. Book clubs should make this a monthly selection to create awareness and discussion about the necessity of prescribed burns.

As I drove further along Wildlife Drive at the Sandhill's I saw huge long leaf pines with charred bark about six feet up the trees. Below these stately trunks, new, bright green vegetation was everywhere; a wonderful contrast of colors and of life.

Carol Lynn Price is a book reviewer and a free-lance librarian.