REVIEWS

The Biogeography of Fire in the San Bernardino Mountains of California—A Historical Study. By RICHARD A. MINNICH. University of California Publications in Geography Volume 28, University of California Press, Berkeley. 120 pp. plus plates, soft cover.

This modest size book (74 pp. text) deals with more than the ecology of wildfires. Half of the pages are devoted to a historical account of the biogeography of plant communities in this eastern-most section of the southern Californian Transverse Range. Minnich provides a fascinating description of the anthropogenic impact on the ecology of plant communities in this region. The thoroughness of the library research behind this history is suggested by the countless references to relatively obscure documents and the >60 pages of tables, figures and appendicies.

Although this historical account of the San Bernardino Mountain Region could stand alone, it is layed out here to provide a backdrop for Minnich's thesis on the ecological impact of 20th century fire suppression. Briefly, the thesis is that although humans ignite as well as suppress most wildfires, it is the latter activity which has most dramatically affected the contemporary landscape. As this paradigm dominates modern forestry management, it should be well received by many. Professor Minnich uses historical accounts of wildfires to support the hypothesis that prior to fire suppression there were always sufficient fire ignitions to produce conflagrations whenever fuel loads were suitable for fire spread. Due to the inherent characteristics of historical documents, they leave much to the reader's imagination and provide fertile ground for speculation. The author takes full advantage although there is an inordinate use of the word "probably" throughout the latter half of the book. Minnich does an admirable job piecing together a cogent story from many disperate pieces of information though in some instances the author was too quick to dispatch data contrary to his thesis. For example, authors in the early part of the 20th century commented that the range of bigcone spruce was shrinking due to increasing frequency of anthropogenic fire ignitions. As this conflicts with the thesis, Minnich suggested, without much evidence, that botanists such as Sudworth, Jaeger and others had a poor grasp of the biology of this tree.

Occasionally the author uses physical geography jargon that may be unfamiliar to some readers, but in context it does not present an obstacle to those of us unfamiliar with such terminology. This is a very readable book from which both students and professionals will benefit.—JON E. KEELEY, Department of Biology, Occidental College, Los Angeles, CA 90041.

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