

Interview with
Joëlle Zask

When the Forest Burns

[Quand la forêt brûle]

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Joëlle Zask, Quand la forêt brûle
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Your book comes at a time when the reappraisal of work is becoming unavoidable. What was your starting point?

The starting point for this book was a personal experience in July 2017: the total combustion of a forest I knew well in the a French Mediterranean Var department, and out of that experience, a feeling of desolation for the irreversible disappearance of a landscape, the impression that something in nature had become unhinged. What happens to our relationship to a landscape when it disappears entirely? The book's structure evolved as I gradually discovered a phenomenon of inconceivable gravity: the megafires. My impression that something was amiss, that this wildfire in the Var had been neither "normal" nor "natural", only grew more certain. However, the question of how one's personal experience of a landscape contributes to shaping individuality remained a central one. Because what we destroy by disrupting the climate, by clearing forests, by using fire as a weapon, by polluting the air and the soil, is not the planet but the landscape, and the very conditions for human life on Earth.

What was your writing process?

I remained faithful to that first impulse: to use the example of the megafire, not so much for conceptualising the ecological "catastrophe" itself (I am not at all qualified for that), but to build out of the catastrophe experience a proclimate activist discourse. I chose to offer a perspective

on the current situation, raising awareness and presenting alternatives for actively safeguard landscapes. My book is the result of research that seeks to frame megafires (requiring extensive study just to identify them) as the symptom of a cultural climate deficiency. As a consequence, we remain stuck in a binary: either exploit nature until the end, or conservation. This situation casts us into a cultural crisis where we are incapable, as citizens, of being objective about what is happening, because we have no way to act, no means to repair or build landscapes, individually or collectively

Working in the social sciences also means participating in debates in which your role as a researcher is to challenge prejudice. What is a major misconception that you would like to see challenged?

I have long stood against the idea of setting up a body of experts acting between the public and government, already at the heart of Dewey's social critique. The megafire is the most brutal indicator of a failure in expertise, for at least two reasons. First, no one foresaw the extent to which megafires would become both the consequence and a major cause of climate change. Why? What is it about the organisation of our sciences and government that allowed such a catastrophic phenomenon to pass under the radar? I think that it is the ideology of expertise itself – which also afflicts the social sciences – that is responsible. It is also responsible for the invalidation of the so-called “traditional” knowledge (but I prefer “science”) of people distant or near. Yet the megafire is the symptomatic ecocide of ethnocide. In this case, it affects “fire cultures”: fires that are controlled, directed, surface, selective and seasonal. Disregarding expertise can help us understand how to better manage nature, both in terms of living with it, and of minimizing its disruption.