

The Chronicle of a Fire Foretold [C2]

I devastanti incendi di Los Angeles sono una tragica conseguenza del cambiamento climatico e un chiaro segno dei costi che comporta ignorare le lezioni del passato continuando a non intervenire per prevenire le catastrofi.

The fires **raging** in and around Los Angeles were huge, and they were terrible, and they were also the latest in a series of catastrophic fires in Los Angeles county and the region, the latest consequence of heat and **drought** and wind that have long created the region's volatile fire weather. The climate crisis has made it hotter and drier and made **wildfire** worse here and across the west and around the world, but this region's ecology has always been **wedded** to fire. Homes built in and around natural landscapes — canyons, chaparral coastal hills, forests, mountainsides — with a history of **wildfire** that are pretty much guaranteed to burn again sooner or later create the personal tragedies and losses and the pressure for **fire crews** to try to contain the **blazes**. But suppressing the **blazes** lets the **fuel load build up**, meaning that fire will be worse when it comes. It was only recently that the Franklin fire, **fanned** by the dry Santa Ana winds from the east **gusting** up to 50mph [80kph], burned four thousand acres [1,618 hectares] around Malibu in forty-eight hours. The Station fire burned 160,577 acres [64,983 hectares] in 2009 to set the record as LA's largest and the Woolsey fire in 2018 burned 96,949 acres [39,233 hectares] and destroyed 1,643 structures, while the 1970 Malibu fire destroyed 31,000 [12,545 hectares] acres, incinerated hundreds of structures, and killed ten people, **fed** in part by six months of no rain. Los Angeles has a history of catastrophic fire. As Mike Davis, in his **bluntly** titled 1998 essay The Case for Letting Malibu Burn, noted: "Malibu, meanwhile, is the **wildfire** capital of North America and, possibly, the world. Fire here has a relentless staccato rhythm, syncopated by **landslides** and **floods**. The **rugged** twenty-two-mile-long [35 kilometres] coastline is **scourged**, on the average, by a large fire (**one thousand acres [404 hectares] plus**) every two and a half years, and the entire surface area of the western Santa Monica Mountains has been burnt three times over the 20th century." The case for letting Malibu burn is that it is inevitably going to burn, over and over, but fire departments protect

structures as long as they can. None of these facts make what is happening now less terrible. And it is terrible – to me personally as well; people I know have lost not just their homes but their neighbourhoods; friends and family have had to evacuate not knowing if they'll have homes to return to. But these facts do perhaps make it all less surprising. While central and northern California has been **soaked** by successive storms since November, LA remained **parched**, dry season being pretty much the same as fire-vulnerable season in California. When you're a coastal Californian, almost all your weather **blows in** from the Pacific, but in the fall with the Bay Area's Diablo winds and LA's famous Santa Ana winds, the weather comes as dry wind from the deserts to the east. This is a dangerous time, especially if the winds from the east come before the rains from the west. I remember the October 1991 fire that raged across the Oakland Hills, destroying three thousand homes in two days. The dry winds fanning the flames reportedly reached 65mph [104kph]. In 2011, Santa Ana gusts in the LA region were reported to have reached a record 167mph [269kph]. The winds that **fed** the current fires were not record speed, but they were scary fast — up to 100mph [160kph]. California's catastrophic autumn fires since 2017 are in some ways not a repeat of history — they're the violent arrival of a new era, just as Hurricane Helene was when it **swept** hundreds of miles **inland** to smash into western North Carolina only four months ago. But you could remember the warnings, which have been abundant from climate scientists, fire experts and climate journalists. And remember that this place was already **prone to** fire and how the suppression of the natural fire cycle **set up** fire to be devastating rather than renewing. I say that not to **blame** the devastated who have lost their homes or evacuated from them — if anyone's to **blame**, it's the civic institutions that allowed development in dangerous places and, according to the LA city **councilwoman** serving the Pacific Palisades region, underinvested in infrastructure, including water systems, to fight such fires, and had vehicles out of service **due to** lack of mechanics. On 17 December, the city's fire chief complained in writing that cuts for "variable **staffing hours**" were **undermining** the department's ability to "prepare for, **train** for, and respond to large-scale emergencies." Decisions about institutions and budgets that seem boring in ordinary times are life-and-death matters in a crisis. Stephen Pyne, a scientist who has devoted his

career to studying fire, writes of the current **blazes** in Los Angeles county: “The **unholy mingling** of built and natural landscapes guaranteed that fire protection was compromised in its very constitution. Cities want no fire; many countrysides need fire, and if **mild** fires are suppressed, the unburned fuel encourages monsters. If every urban fire that **is put out** is a problem solved, many wildland fires put out are problems **put off**.” In places we built in, we suppressed fire to protect structures. In wild places, the managing agencies, including the Forest Service and National Park Service and many state agencies, suppressed fire throughout much of the 20th century because they forgot that Native Californians and nature itself burned these places regularly. The suppression of fire builds up the **fuel loads** so that when fire comes it is devastating. Fire **belongs** here. Catastrophic fire **erases** what was there before. So does forgetting. Memory is a resource for facing the future; it’s equipment for imagining, planning, preparing. Forgetting creates terrible vulnerabilities to the return of **foreseen** disasters, to misinformation (including Trump’s social media **blasts** blaming Joe Biden and Gavin Newsom for the fires), and vulnerability to unrealistic expectations — including that each disaster at least since Hurricane Katrina will be the “**wake-up call**” that will change everything. “Weather can’t do the work of politics,” declares Daniel Aldana Cohen, a climate sociologist in a study of New York City’s response to 2012’s Hurricane Sandy. We cannot know the future, but remembering the past with care and **accuracy** equips us to navigate it. That past includes decades of warnings from climate scientists that we are **heading into** a more turbulent and destructive era. They and climate activists have offered not just warnings but clear knowledge of what to do to limit how bad it gets. We are deciding whether or not to act on that knowledge now, including with who we elect and what we support. We know that the future is being reshaped by human-caused climate change, and we do know exactly what to do about it and who is preventing us from doing it. We are often **urged** to be prepared for our local disaster, be it blizzard, earthquake, hurricane or fire, but no personal preparation can compensate for the lack of the collective preparation that is meaningful international climate action. The fires were reminders of the costs of forgetting.

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Glossary

- **prone to** = incline a, soggetto a
- **put off** = rimandare, posticipare
- **belongs** = appartenere
- **wildfire** = incendio boschivo
- **fire crews** = squadre di pompieri
- **erases** = cancellare
- **fed** = alimentar
- **staffing hours** = orari di lavoro
- **undermining** = indebolire
- **mild** = moderati
- **blasts** = critiche
- **urged** = esortare, incitare
- **set up** = preparare
- **train** = formarsi
- **blazes** = fiamme
- **fanned** = accrescere
- **gusting** = soffiare a raffiche
- **landslides** = frane
- **rugged** = accidentata
- **swept** = spazzare, travolgere
- **unholy** = nefasta
- **mingling** = mescolanza
- **foreseen** = previsti
- **heading into** = dirigersi verso
- **blame** = incolpare
- **is put out** = spegnere
- **parched** = seccata, prosciugata
- **blows in** = piombare
- **raging** = propagarsi
- **drought** = siccità
- **floods.** = inondazioni
- **scourged** = flagellare
- **one thousand acres [404 hectares] plus** = più di mille

- **soaked** = inzuppare, bagnare
- **inland** = verso l'interno
- **wake-up call** = campanello d'allarme
- **build up** = accumularsi
- **due to** = a causa di
- **wedded** = legato
- **fuel load** = carico di combustibile
- **bluntly** = senza mezzi termini
- **councilwoman** = consigliera comunale
- **accuracy** = precisione