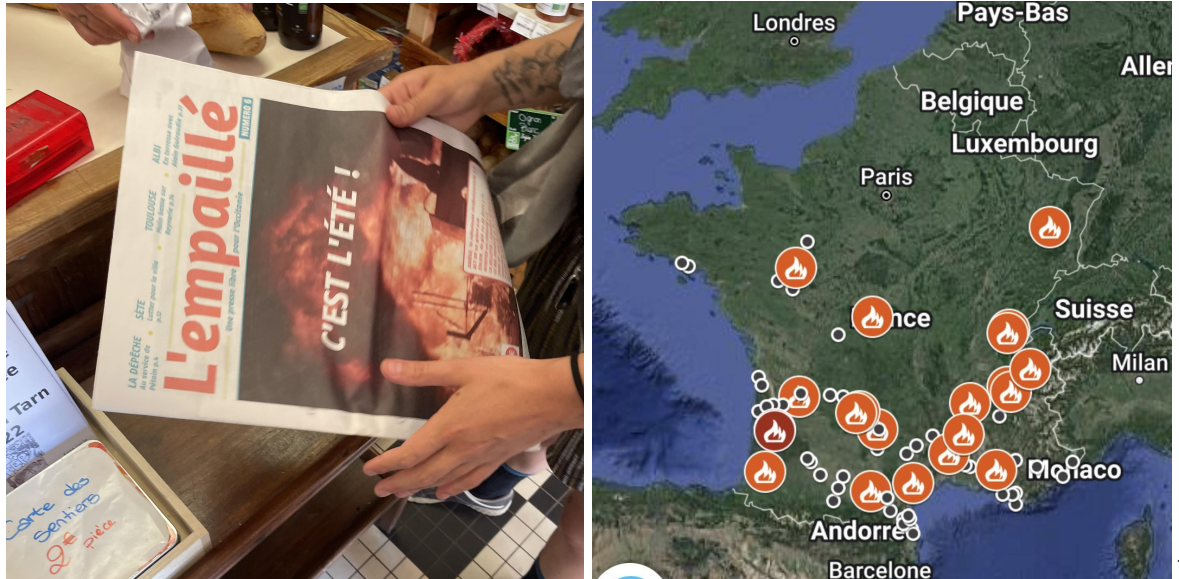


“During disasters, you hear a lot of praise for human resilience. And we are a remarkably resilient species. But that is not always good. It seems a great many of us can get used to almost anything, even the steady annihilation of our own habitat”

Naomi Klein in *On Fire: the case for the Green New Deal* (2019)



‘C’est l’été ! / It’s summer !’ used to be the announcement of fun rather than a warning sign. This summer I will remember as the latter, the first of many to come, or so to quote the internet; ‘the warmest yet and the coldest to come’. Me, raised in Netherlands, I had always imagined my first environmental frontier to be water. The excess of it, as this scenario saturates the cultural imaginary since forms of a Dutch Deluge have occurred repeatedly throughout history. This summer is rather that of a Drought. On the 3rd of August, the Dutch State officially announced a water shortage. The country needs more water than that which it naturally receives through its rivers and precipitation. The division of water is now managed by the crisis team (Management Team Watertekort MTW). This division aims to prioritize people over private companies and nature over amusement. The elements, fire, water, earth and wind work in unison, drylands give rise to floods, but I hadn’t imagined I would be confronted to Fire - yet.

¹ A real time map of the wildfires in France can be found through ; <https://feuxdeforet.fr/cartes/feux/>

While the Netherlands this summer dries out, temperatures in the UK exceed 40 degrees Celsius for the first time on record and Europe (Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain and France) burns more brightly than it ever has. Copernicus, the European Earth Observation Programme, and European Forest Fire Information System (EFFIS), recorded 1,926 wildfires in Europe this year till July, juxtaposed to the recorded average of 520 fires in the same period between 2006 and 2021. The long standing heat waves and wildfires we experience in Europe right now at the hands of climate change, bear an unmistakable human fingerprint.

Around 5 in the afternoon on August 8th from Bécours, South of France, we noticed a wildfire as a dark column of smoke rose and gradually took over the blue sky. After that, the first planes scouting the region followed quickly. By now, the fire at Mostuéjols, l'Aveyron, has been on for over 2 days and is estimated (by the mobilised firemen) to take another 3 days to be extinguished completely. During the first 24 hours 700 hectares of land were burnt and 3,000 people were evacuated, who knows how many of other species. While helpful, these sterile numbers in no way manage to capture the depth of this environmental - and infrastructural damage nor the emotional distress brought along with it.



2

The fire at Mostuéjols is only one, and a relatively small one at that, among many raging through France. Since the beginning of this year, more than 47,000 hectares have burnt in France. A record of burned areas in France was reached as early as July, according to the (EFFIS), which had maintained comparable statistics since 2006. More than a third of this surface, 20,800 hectares, was burnt in 10 days by two big fires in Gironde - the Southwest of France.

² These pictures showing a time-line of the fire were taken by Clitch

We at the Bécours were some 12 kilometers, a river and highway divorced from the fire. But from our location and lack of centralized information, it was hard to tell how (un)safe we ought to feel ; would the wind blow the fire in our direction? Could we reach the only highway out of the valley without directly facing the fire? Would it be safer to stay or to leave?

Through a combination of news outlets and real time maps we gathered that a metal piece of an agricultural vehicle which scraped the sun-baked tar had sparked the fire. The causes can be so small, accidental and almost shocking in their banality; a dropped cigarette butt or a flinter of ash, but grotesque in their effect. Once the fire is on, control is lost.

We learnt that the winds, working in unison with the fire, would for that moment blow in our favour, at the expense of what we didn't know. We read how the 70 mobilized firefighters turned into 250 and 600, employed from all over the country. We saw the 2 *canadians*³ flying overhead turn into 3 of the 12 France possesses. With Clitch, who I'm spending my time in France with, we talked about this number in contrast to the 90 tanks the French state can employ against protesters, which painfully reflects the inaccurate identification of the threat of our century.

The fire at Mostuéjols was difficult to extinguish because the firefighters weren't able to reach the fire completely nor could they switch it off for long enough before it would relight itself due to the extreme heat. The stress on the available means to extinguish the fire didn't make it much easier. There was a demand for more Canadians but they couldn't be granted as new fires in Girdones started up again.

At the Bécours, people kept saying we would be safe. 'This territory has never burnt before'. But I cannot help but not be comforted. That something hasn't happened yet does not mean it is logically impossible. Improbable. Climate change does mean that things are changing. The fact is that the land is on fire, that Europe has been on fire all summer in a way it never has.

On Clitch and my mind were questions such as ; what do we do as a collective when this happens under our eyes? How do you collectively respond and in what ways could we be of help for those evacuated or those putting all their energies into having our backs attempting to extinguish the fire?

To see the land on which we depend, go up in flames in front of you, is to see our habitat deteriorate at a startling speed. Eco-anxiousness. We cannot be safe when our habitat is not.

³ Airplanes employed for dropping water

Resources:

<https://feuxdeforet.fr/cartes/feux/>

<https://www.tf1info.fr/amp/environnement-ecologie/incendie-feu-entre-la-lozere-et-l-aveyron-au-moins-700-hectares-brules-et-1200-personnes-evacuees-2228829.html>

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/fires-in-southwest-france-stabilize-after-destroying-20-800-hectares-of-forests/2643418#>

<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2022/08/03/water-moet-worden-verdeeld-door-aanhoudende-droogte>

<https://mobile.twitter.com/CopernicusEU/status/1551834386101927936?s=20&t=xfmIZIRrjOSilw6ofTBhNg>