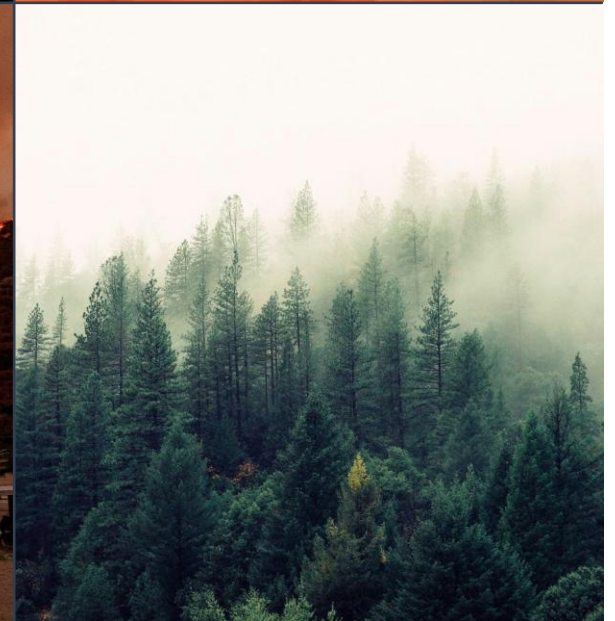
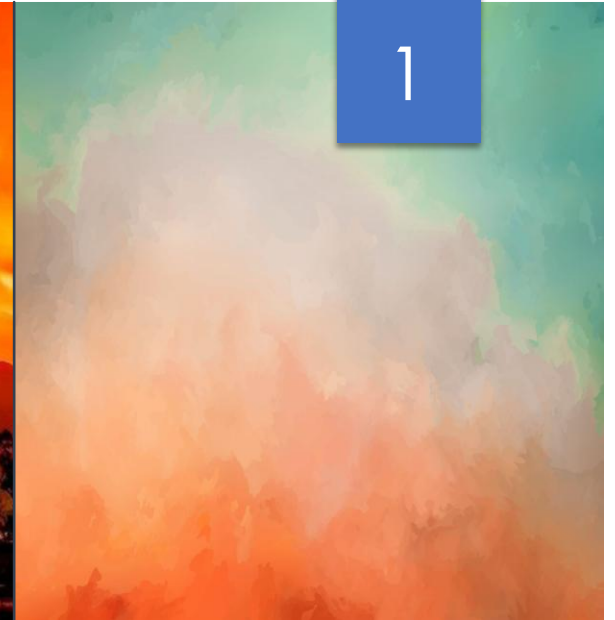


How A Booming Population And Climate Change Made California's Wildfires Worse Than Ever

An Analysis of the BuzzFeed News article
By Venkateshwaran Balu Soundararajan
Feb-10-2025



Creation Process of the Article



Who Created It?:

The article was created by Peter Aldhous, a reporter for BuzzFeed News.



Data Used:

The data used in the article includes records of areas burned by wildfires in California from 1950 to 2017, as well as information on the state's population growth and human activities that contribute to wildfires.



Data Source:

The data comes from Cal Fire's records and studies by ecologists like Alexandra Syphard from the Conservation Biology Institute.



Data Processing:

The data was processed to visualize the frequency and size of wildfires over the decades, and to analyze the impact of human activities and climate change on wildfire patterns.



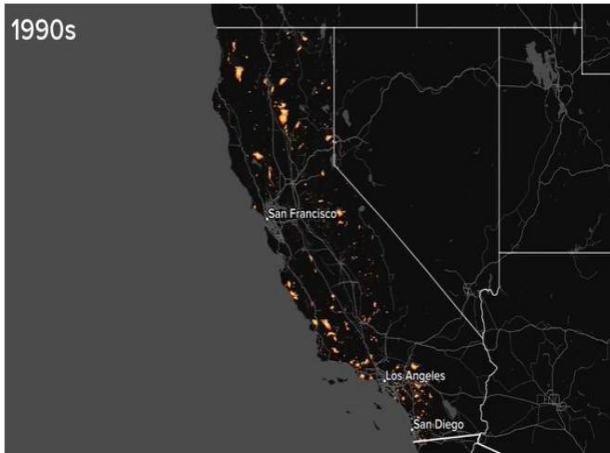
Tools Used:

The article includes visualizations created by BuzzFeed News, data processing and visualization tools such as Python libraries (e.g., Pandas, Matplotlib, Seaborn) and JavaScript libraries (e.g., D3.js) for creating interactive visualizations.

Visualization Glimpses

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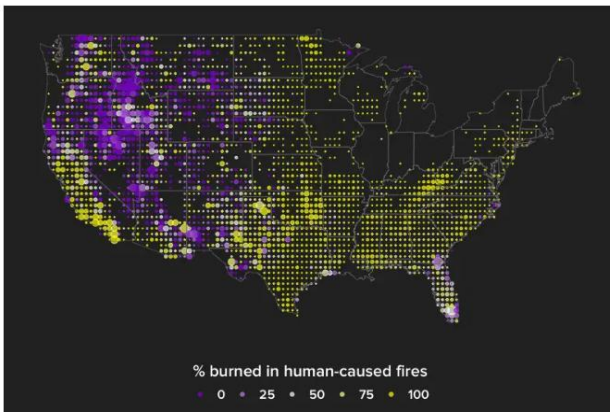
1990s



Cal Fire's records of areas burned by decade, 1950–2017.

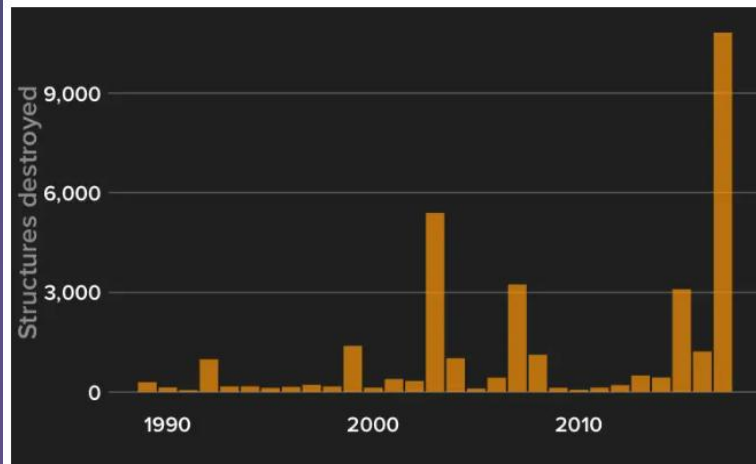
Peter Aldhous for BuzzFeed News / Via frap.fire.ca.gov

California's problems with human-caused fires set it apart from most of the West.



Wildfires from 1992–2015, shown in a grid of half a degree longitude and latitude. Dots in each grid cell are scaled by the total area burned, and colored by the extent to which that area corresponds to human-caused fires. Yellow dots show areas dominated by human-caused fires; purple shows areas where natural fires dominate.

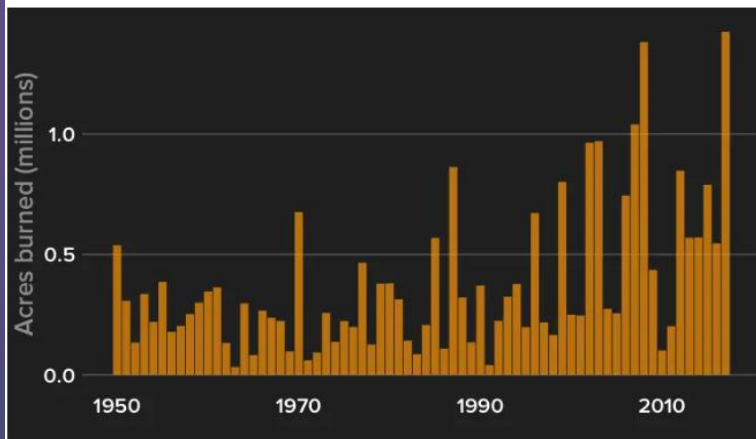
Peter Aldhous for BuzzFeed News / Via fs.usda.gov



Buildings destroyed by wildfires in California, 1989–2017

Peter Aldhous for BuzzFeed News / Via Cal Fire

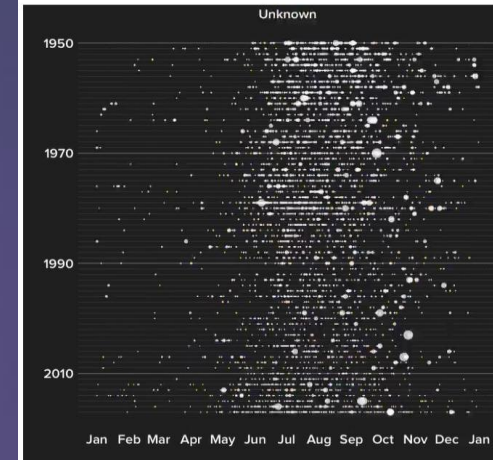
But if California can't reduce the number of catastrophic fires, last year's record season may become the new normal.



Total area burned by wildfires recorded by Cal Fire, 1950–2017.

Peter Aldhous for BuzzFeed News / Via frap.fire.ca.gov

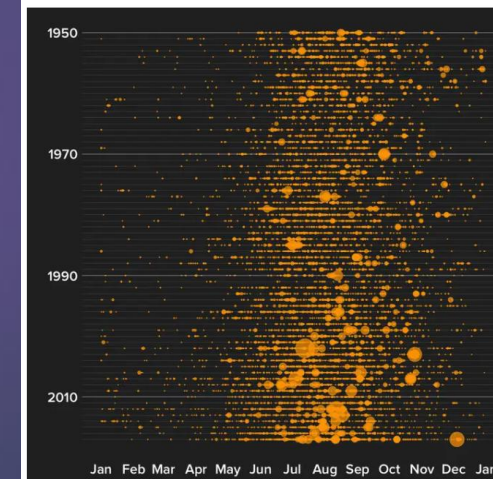
But the pattern is different for natural and human-started fires.



California wildfires by year and alarm date, by cause.

Peter Aldhous for BuzzFeed News / Via frap.fire.ca.gov

Big fires have gotten more common.



Each fire is a dot that is scaled by the area that ultimately burned, centered on the date on which the alarm was sounded.

Peter Aldhous for BuzzFeed News / Via frap.fire.ca.gov

Overall Message and Key Takeaways

Impact of Climate Change

Climate change has led to warmer and drier conditions in California, making the environment more susceptible to wildfires. The data shows an increase in the frequency and size of wildfires over the decades, correlating with rising temperatures and prolonged dry periods.

Role of Human Activities

Human activities, such as campfires, arson, electrical equipment, and power lines, are responsible for starting the vast majority of fires in California. The data categorizes the causes of wildfires, highlighting the significant proportion caused by human activities.

Population Growth and Urban Expansion

The state's growing population and expansion into rural areas have increased the risk of wildfires and the potential for damage to lives and property. The data includes information on population growth and urban expansion, showing how these factors contribute to the increased risk of wildfires.

Historical Trends

The analysis provides a historical perspective on wildfire patterns, showing an increase in both the frequency and severity of wildfires over time. The visualizations illustrate the trend of larger and more frequent wildfires from 1950 to 2017.

Need for Immediate Action

Immediate actions are needed to protect people and property from wildfires. This includes better fire management practices and urban planning to reduce the risk of wildfires. The data highlights the increasing threat of wildfires and the need for proactive measures to address the crisis.

Strengths of the Analysis and Visualizations

Comprehensive Data Integration

Combines wildfire records, climate data, population stats, and fire causes for a holistic view.

Clear, Engaging Visuals

Uses maps, grids, and graphs to show trends like human-caused fires and increasing fire size.

Focus on Human-Caused Fires

Highlights preventable ignition sources (power lines, campfires, arson) with specific examples.

Climate Change Linkages

Connects longer fire seasons, larger burns, and tree mortality to warming and drought.

Interesting Observations

Notes paradoxes like fewer fires but more area burned, challenging simplistic narratives.

Actionable Insights

Proposes solutions: power line safety, limiting sprawl, and preemptive power shutoffs.

Critique of the Analysis and Visualizations

Data Collection

Potential Bias in Data Sources: The reliance on specific data sources, like Cal Fire and particular studies, may introduce biases. Including a wider range of data sources could provide a more comprehensive view.

Historical Data Limitations: The analysis spans from 1950 to 2017. While this is an extensive period, some historical data might be incomplete or inconsistent, potentially affecting the accuracy of the analysis.

Analysis

Attribution of Causes: The analysis attributes a significant portion of wildfires to human activities. However, the method of categorizing and attributing causes could be more transparent. Detailing the criteria for classifying wildfires would enhance the credibility.

Complex Interactions: The analysis touches on the interaction between climate change, human activities, and population growth but could delve deeper into how these factors interplay. A more nuanced analysis of these interactions would provide a richer understanding.

Visualization Design

Clarity and Accessibility: While the visualizations are generally clear, some might be overwhelming due to the amount of data presented. Simplifying certain visualizations or providing interactive elements could improve user engagement and comprehension.

Color Choices: The use of color in some visualizations may not be optimal for all viewers, especially those with color vision deficiencies. Ensuring color contrast and providing alternative text descriptions could make the visualizations more accessible.

Suggestions for Improvement

Broaden Data Sources:

- Incorporate data from a wider range of sources, including more recent studies, satellite data, and independent research, to provide a more comprehensive analysis.

Deepen Analysis:

- Explore the complex interactions between climate change, human activities, and population growth in more detail. A deeper analysis would provide a richer understanding of the contributing factors.

Simplify Visualizations:

- Simplify some visualizations or add interactive elements to improve user engagement and comprehension. Ensure that visualizations are easy to understand and not overwhelming.



Credits:

Original Article:

Author: Peter Aldhous, BuzzFeed News

Thank You!