

## The Case for Letting Malibu Burn

*Many of California's native ecosystems evolved to burn. Modern fire suppression creates fuels that lead to catastrophic fires. So why do people insist on rebuilding in the firebelt?*



AP Photo/Ringo H.W. Chiu

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*"Homes, of course, will arise here in the thousands. Many a peak will have its castle."  
—John Russell McCarthy, These Waiting Hills (1925)*

Late August to early October is the infernal season in Los Angeles. Downtown is usually shrouded in acrid yellow smog while heat waves billow down Wilshire Boulevard. Outside air-conditioned skyscrapers, homeless people huddle miserably in every available shadow.

Across the Harbor Freeway, the overcrowded tenements of the Westlake district—Los Angeles's Spanish Harlem—are intolerable ovens. Suffocating in their tiny rooms, immigrant families flee to the fire escapes,

stoops, and sidewalks. Anxious mothers swab their babies' foreheads with water while older children, eyes stinging from the smog, cry for paletas: the flavored cones of shaved ice sold by pushcart vendors. Shirtless young men—some with formidable jail-made biceps and mural-size tattoos of the Virgin of Guadalupe across their backs—monopolize the shade of tienda awnings. Amid hundreds of acres of molten asphalt and concrete there is scarcely a weed, much less a lawn or tree.

Thirty miles away, the Malibu coast—where hyperbole meets the surf—basks in altogether different weather. The temperature is 85°F (20 degrees cooler than Downtown), and the cobalt blue sky is clear enough to discern the wispish form of Santa Barbara Island, nearly 50 miles offshore. At Zuma surfers ride the curl under the insouciant gazes of their personal sun goddesses, while at Topanga Beach, horse trainers canter Appaloosas across the wet sand. Indifferent to the misery on the “mainland,” the residents of Malibu suffer through another boringly perfect day.

Needless to say, the existential differences between the tenement district and the gilded coast are enormous at any time. But late summer is the beginning of the wildfire season in Southern California, and that’s when Westlake and Malibu suffer a common lot: catastrophic fire.

According to previous estimates, Westlake (including adjacent parts of Downtown) has the highest urban fire incidence in the nation: one of its two fire stations was inundated by an incredible 20,000 emergency calls in 1993. Some tenements and apartment-hotels have continuous fire histories dating back to their construction in the early twentieth century. The notorious Hotel St. George, for instance, experienced fatal blazes in 1912, 1952, and 1983. Moreover, almost all of the deadly tenement fires in Los Angeles since 1945 have occurred within a one-mile radius of the corner of Wilshire and Figueroa, Downtown.

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 22-mile-long coastline is scourged, on the average, by a large fire (one thousand acres 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 twentieth century. At least once a decade a blaze

in the chaparral grows into a terrifying firestorm consuming hundreds of homes in an inexorable advance across the mountains to the sea. Since 1970 five such holocausts have destroyed more than one thousand luxury residences and inflicted more than \$1 billion in property damage. Some unhappy homeowners have been burnt out twice in a generation, and there are individual patches of coastline or mountain, especially between Point Dume and Tuna Canyon, that have been incinerated as many as eight times since 1930.

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In other words, stand at the mouth of Malibu Canyon or sleep in the Hotel St. George for any length of time and you eventually will face the flames. It is a statistical certainty. Ironically, the richest and poorest landscapes in Southern California are comparable in the frequency with which they experience incendiary disaster. This was emphasized tragically in 1993 when a May conflagration at a Westlake tenement that killed three mothers and seven children was followed in late October by 21 wildfires culminating on November 2nd in the great firestorm that forced the evacuation of most of Malibu.

But the two species of conflagration are inverse images of each other. Defended in 1993 by the largest army of firefighters in American history, wealthy Malibu homeowners benefited as well from an extraordinary range of insurance, land use, and disaster relief subsidies. Yet, as most experts will readily concede, periodic firestorms of this magnitude are inevitable as long as residential development is tolerated in the fire ecology of the Santa Monicas.

On the other hand, most of the 119 fatalities from tenement fires in the Westlake and Downtown areas might have been prevented

had slumlords been held to even minimal standards of building safety. If enormous resources have been allocated, quixotically, to fight irresistible forces of nature on the Malibu coast, then scandalously little attention has been paid to the man-made and remediable fire crisis of the inner city.

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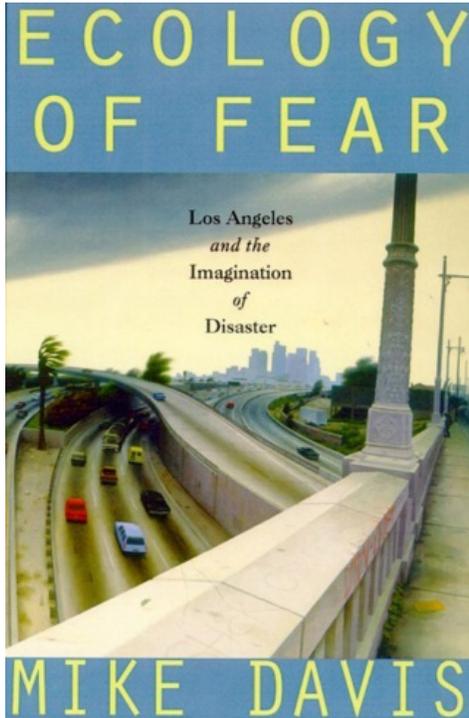
From the beginning fire has defined Malibu in the American imagination. In *Two Years Before the Mast*, Richard Henry Dana described sailing northward from San Pedro to Santa Barbara in 1826 and seeing a vast blaze along the coast of José Tapia's Rancho Topanga Malibu Sequit. Despite—or, as we shall see, more likely because of—the Spanish prohibition of the Chumash and Tongva Indian practice of annually burning the brush, mountain infernos repeatedly menaced Malibu through the nineteenth century. During the great land boom of the late 1880s, the entire latifundio was sold at \$10 per acre to the Boston Brahmin millionaire Frederick Rindge. In his memoirs, Rindge described his unceasing battles against squatters, rustlers, and, above all, recurrent wildfire. The great fire of 1903, which raced from Calabasas to the sea in a few hours, incinerated Rindge's dream ranch in Malibu Canyon and forced him to move to Los Angeles, where he died in 1905.

From the time of the Tapias, the owners of Rancho Malibu had recognized that the region's extraordinary fire hazard was shaped, in large part, by the uncanny alignment of its coastal canyons with the annual "fire winds" from the north: the notorious Santa Anas, which blow primarily between Labor Day and Thanksgiving, just before the first rains. Born from high-pressure areas over the Great Basin and Colorado Plateau, the Santa Anas become hot and dry as they descend avalanche-like into Southern California. The San Fernando Valley acts as a giant bellows, sometimes fanning the Santa Anas to hurricane velocity as they roar

seaward through the narrow canyons and rugged defiles of the Santa Monica Mountains. Add a spark to the dense, dry vegetation on such an occasion and the hillsides will explode in uncontrollable wildfire: "The speed and heat of the fire is so intense that firefighters can only attempt to prevent lateral spread of the fire while waiting for the winds to abate or the fuel to diminish."

Less well understood in the old days was the essential dependence of the dominant vegetation of the Santa Monicas—chamise chaparral, coastal sage scrub, and live oak woodland—upon this cycle of wildfire. Decades of research (especially at the San Dimas Experimental Forest in the San Gabriel Mountains) have given late-twentieth-century science vivid insights into the complex and ultimately beneficial role of fire in recycling nutrients and ensuring seed germination in Southern California's various pyrophytic flora. Research has also established the overwhelming importance of biomass accumulation rather than ignition frequency in regulating fire destructiveness. As Richard Minnich, the world authority on chaparral brushfire, emphasizes: "Fuel, not ignitions, causes fire. You can send an arsonist to Death Valley and he'll never be arrested."

A key revelation was the nonlinear relationship between the age structure of vegetation and the intensity of fire. Botanists and fire geographers discovered that "the probability for an intense fast running fire increases dramatically as the fuels exceed twenty years of age." Indeed, half-century-old chaparral—heavily laden with dead mass—is calculated to burn with 50 times more intensity than 20-year-old chaparral. Put another way, an acre of old chaparral is the fuel equivalent of about 75 barrels of crude oil. Expanding these calculations even further, a great Malibu firestorm could generate the heat of three million barrels of burning oil at a temperature of 2,000 degrees.



“Total fire suppression,” the official policy in the Southern California mountains since 1919, has been a tragic error because it creates enormous stockpiles of fuel. The extreme fires that eventually occur can transform the chemical structure of the soil itself. The volatilization of certain plant chemicals creates a water-repellent layer in the upper soil, and this layer, by preventing percolation, dramatically accelerates subsequent sheet flooding and erosion. A monomaniacal obsession with managing ignition rather than chaparral accumulation simply makes doomsday-like firestorms and the great floods that follow them virtually inevitable.

For a generation after Rindge’s death, his widow, May, struggled to keep the family Shangri-la isolated and intact in the face of state attempts to push a highway through the rancho. Like one of the iron-fisted heroines played by Barbara Stanwyck, the so-called Queen of the Malibu closed the ranch roads in 1917, strung barbed wire along the perimeter, and posted armed fence-riders with orders to “shoot to kill.” In one episode during the 1920s, Rindge

cowboys provoked a tense confrontation with deputy sheriffs after driving away a road survey crew at gunpoint. Hysterical newspaper headlines warned of “Civil War in Peaceful Southern California!”

But the pressure during the 1920s boom to open the coastal range to speculative subdivision was unrelenting. In the hyperbole of the era, occupation of the mountains became Los Angeles’s manifest destiny. “The day for the white invasion of the Santa Monicas has come,” declared real estate clairvoyant John Russell McCarthy in a booklet published by the *Los Angeles Times* in 1925. In anticipation of this land rush, the county sheriff had been arresting every vagrant in sight and putting them to work on chain gangs building roads through the rugged canyons just south of Rancho Malibu. (Radical critics at the time denounced this system as “deliberate real-estate graft” meant only to enhance land values in mountain districts “which the population of this city does not even know exists.”)

Widow Rindge, in any event, would not be allowed to stand in the way of “the march of adventuring Caucasians,” as McCarthy put it. After one of the most protracted legal battles in California history, the court granted the state right-of-way through Rancho Malibu. Opened to traffic in 1928, the Pacific Coast Highway gave delighted Angelenos their first view of the magnificent Malibu coast and introduced a potent new source of ignition—the automobile—into the inflammable landscape.

The indefatigable May Rindge continued to fight the road builders and developers in the courts, but in the end the costs of litigation forced her to lease choice parts of Malibu beachfront to a movie colony that included Jack Warner, Clara Bow, Dolores Del Rio, and Barbara Stanwyck herself. The colony’s unexpected housewarming was a lightning-swift wildfire that destroyed 13 new homes in late October 1929. Exactly a year later, walnut pickers in the Thousand Oaks area

accidentally ignited another blaze, which quickly grew into one of the greatest conflagrations in Malibu history.

\*The 1930 Decker Canyon fire was a worst-case scenario involving 50-year-old chaparral and a fierce Santa Ana. Faced with a five-mile front of towering flames, 1,100 firefighters could do little except save their own lives. As the firestorm unexpectedly wheeled toward the Pacific Palisades, there was official panic. County Supervisor Wright, his nerves shaken by a visit to the collapsing fire lines, posted a hundred patrolmen at the Los Angeles city limits to alert residents for evacuation. Should the “fire raging in the Malibu District get closer,” he gasped, “our whole city might go.” Ultimately, this apocalypse (which may have given Nathanael West the idea for the burning of Los Angeles in his novel *Day of the Locust*) was avoided—no thanks to human initiative—when the fickle Santa Ana abruptly subsided.

In hindsight, the 1930 fire should have provoked a historic debate on the wisdom of opening Malibu to further development. Only a few months before the disaster, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.—the nation’s foremost landscape architect and designer of the California state park system—had come out in favor of public ownership of at least 10,000 acres of the most scenic beach and mountain areas between Topanga and Point Dume. Despite a further series of fires in 1935, 1936, and 1938 which destroyed almost four hundred homes in Malibu and Topanga Canyon, public officials stubbornly disregarded the wisdom of Olmsted’s proposal for a great public domain in the Santa Monicas. The county of Los Angeles, for example, squandered an extraordinary opportunity in 1938 to acquire 17,000 acres of the bankrupt Rindge estate in exchange for \$1.1 million in delinquent taxes. At a mere \$64 per acre, it would have been the deal of the century.

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Instead, in December 1940, an impecunious and heartbroken May Rindge was forced to put her entire empire on the auction block. Potential buyers were advised to make “an early selection” of “ocean-front lots, sites for villas, hotels, golf clubs, estates, beach and yacht clubs, income and business lots, small summer home places, ranchitos, 100–640-acre ranchos, and acreage for further subdivision.” The disconsolate Queen of the Malibu died two months later.

During the Second World War—severe drought years on the West Coast—hundreds of firewatchers were sent into the Southern California mountains to guard against rumored Axis saboteurs. A few months after the watchers were withdrawn, 150 Malibu homes were incinerated in another November fire. Yet this new disaster failed to discourage a postwar migration of artists, printers, book-dealers, poets, screenwriters, and architects (including Olmsted himself)—many of very modest means, some seeking to escape the scrutiny of McCarthyism—who envisaged Malibu as Carmel south. In an engaging memoir of this period, UCLA librarian Lawrence Clark Powell described a genial way of life devoted to Mozart and beachcombing.

He also provided a classic account of the onslaught of the terrible firestorm of Christmas week 1956, which, burning its way to the sea, retraced the path of the 1930 blaze.

The wind was still savage when we went to bed at ten, the sky swept clear, aglitter with stars, Anacapa flashed its warning light. The cypresses, pines and eucalyptuses were noisier than the surf. Cats’ fur threw sparks when

stroked. We slept in spite of the sinister atmosphere.

I woke abruptly at four to see “a fierce glow in the sky.... God, the whole face of the mountain was burning, in a long line just below the summit, and moving toward us on the wind. Fear dried my mouth. I knew doom when I saw it.”

A Forest Service analysis of this disaster, which killed one person and destroyed one hundred homes, stressed the impossible challenge of combating such erratic and untamable natural forces.

Malibu fires combine most known elements of violent, erratic and extreme fire behavior: fire whirls, extreme rates of spread, sudden changes in speed and direction of fire spread, flashovers of unburned gases complicated by intense heat and impenetrable smoke held close to the ground.

Indeed the conflagration, which coincided with a waxing of Cold War anxieties, had unexpected political repercussions. “If the government could not defeat wildfires in the Santa Monicas,” critics asked, “how would it deal with possible nuclear holocausts?” Accordingly the Eisenhower administration acknowledged the Malibu blaze as “the first major fire disaster of national scope,” and Congress—more concerned with the credibility of a vast civil defense establishment than with the tragedy of local homeowners—debated how to provide “complete fire prevention and protection in Southern California.” (Large Malibu fires, moreover, would later be used by researchers to model the behavior of nuclear firestorms.)

According to fire historian Stephen Pyne, the Malibu blaze also marked the transition from the traditional forest fire problem to a “new fire regime” characterized by the “lethal mixture of homeowners and brush.” This artificial borderland of chaparral and suburb magnified the natural fire danger while creating new perils

for firefighters who now had to defend thousands of individual structures as well as battle the fire front itself. “Whereas it was often remarked that chaparral, particularly that composed largely of chamise, is a fire-climax community, it is now joked that the same is true of the Southern California mountain suburb.”

Ultimately the 1956 fire—followed by two blazes, one month apart, in 1958–59 that severely burned eight firefighters and destroyed another hundred homes—proved the beginning of the end for bohemian Malibu. A perverse law of the new fire regime was that fire now stimulated both development and upward social succession. By declaring Malibu a federal disaster area and offering blaze victims tax relief as well as preferential low-interest loans, the Eisenhower administration established a precedent for the public subsidization of firebelt suburbs. Each new conflagration would be punctually followed by reconstruction on a larger and even more exclusive scale as land use regulations and sometimes even the fire code were relaxed to accommodate fire “victims.” As a result, renters and modest homeowners were displaced from areas like Broad Beach, Paradise Cove, and Point Dume by wealthy pyrophiles encouraged by artificially cheap fire insurance, socialized disaster relief, and an expansive public commitment to “defend Malibu.”

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In the absence of fire-risk zoning of the sort that Olmsted had earlier advocated, the only constraint on development was the limited supply of water for firefighting and domestic consumption. The completion of a trunk water line, connecting Malibu to Metropolitan Water District reservoirs, was the signal for a new land

rush. The county's Regional Planning Commission promptly endorsed developers' wildest fantasies by authorizing a staggering 1,400 percent expansion of the Malibu population over the next generation: from 7,983 residents in 1960 to a projected 117,000 in 1980. Although the California coastal acts of 1972 and 1976, under the populist slogan "Don't Lock Up the Beach!" eventually slowed this real estate juggernaut (as well as squelching such nightmarish proposals as a Corral Canyon nuclear power plant and an eight-lane freeway through Malibu Canyon), the urbanization of the Malibu coast—Los Angeles's "backyard Big Sur"—was a *fait accompli*.

Yet, even as they were opening the floodgates to destructive overdevelopment, county and state officials were also turning down every opportunity to expand public beach frontage (a miserable 22 percent of the total in 1969). Nor did they show any interest in creating a public land trust in the mountains, which were now entirely under private ownership, right down to the streambeds. Consequently, most of Malibu remained as inaccessible to the general public as it had been in the Rindge era. (For people of color, moreover, it was absolutely off-limits.) As historians of the coastal access battle put it: "The seven million people within an hour's drive of Malibu got Beach Boys music and surfer movies, but the twenty thousand residents kept the beach."

Returning for a final look, UCLA librarian Powell bitterly decried the aristocratization of his beloved coast:

In a feverish buying and selling of land, the coast has become utterly transformed and unrecognizable. Each succeeding house, bigger and grander, takes the view of its neighbors in a kind of unbridled competition.... Once lost, paradise can never be regained.... Developers have bulldozed the Santa Monicas beyond recovery.

The Malibu nouveaux riches built higher and higher in the mountain *chamise* with scant regard for the inevitable fiery consequences. The next firestorm, in late September 1970, coupled perfect fire weather (drought conditions, 100-degree heat, 3 percent humidity, and an 85-mile-per-hour Santa Ana wind) with a bumper crop of combustible wood-frame houses. According to firefighters, the popular cedar shake roofs "popped like popcorn" as a 20-mile wall of flames roared across the ridgeline of the Santa Monicas toward the sea. With the asphalt on the Pacific Coast Highway ablaze and all escape routes cut off, terrified residents of the famed Malibu Colony took refuge in the nearby lagoon. Firebrands fell like hellish rain on the beach, and day became night under the gigantic smoke pall. Coalescing with another blaze in the San Fernando Valley, this greatest of twentieth-century Malibu firestorms ultimately took 10 lives and charred 403 homes, including a ranch owned by then-governor Ronald Reagan.

Furious property owners—ignorant of the true balance of power between fire suppression and chaparral ecology—denounced local government for failing to save their homes and demanded new, expensive technological "fixes" for Malibu's wildfire problems. "Elected officials, acutely sensitive to Malibu's national prominence in political fund-raising, were quick to oblige. A celebrated example occurred in the late 1970s when the Malibu Colony was being pounded by the heaviest surf in a quarter-century. Larry Hagman, *Dallas*'s J. R. Ewing, is reported to have told Jerry Brown, the governor of California: "Jerry, do something. Goddammit, we're in real trouble. Get your ass down here!" In short order, Malibu was declared a disaster area and National Guardsmen were helping sandbag Hagman's—and sometimes Brown date Linda Ronstadt's—homes.

Meanwhile, developers—racing to stay ahead of proposed "slow growth" coastal legislation—redoubled their subdivision efforts. The

subsequent boom only provided more fuel for the three successive “Halloween” fires that consumed homes in October 1978, 1982, and 1985. The first two blazes both began in Agoura and roughly followed the route of the 1956 fire through Trancas Canyon, while the third repeated the itinerary of the 1930 Decker Canyon conflagration.

The 1978 fire, which consumed million-dollar homes in the Broad Beach area (where Powell had lived in the more humble 1950s), also set a new speed record: the fire crossed 13 miles of very rugged terrain in less than two hours (the 1970 fire had taken twice the time). One eyewitness described how the rampaging fire front “turned thousands of wild rabbits into balls of flaming fur that darted insanely about, only to start new fires at the spots where they fell.” The surviving beasts—domestic pets and wild animals alike—“mingled in chaos with human evacuees along the beach at Point Dume while oblivious surfers rode the waves.” Traumatized Malibu residents, also battered by disastrous floods and landslides in 1978 and 1980, could be forgiven for imagining that nature was getting angrier at them.”

#### A Brief Postscript:

When most of us build or buy a home, we carefully appraise the neighborhood. In Malibu the neighborhood is fire. Fire that revisits the coastal mountains several times a decade. In the past sixty years, ten of these frequent events have turned into all-consuming firestorms. The latest conflagration, the Woolsey Fire, has incinerated 1,500 homes and killed at least three people. It started in dry grasslands just south of Simi Valley, the site of the notorious trial of Rodney King’s assailants, then crossed a freeway to ignite dense coastal sage vegetation on the northern flank of the Santa Monica Mountains. The range’s deep canyons, perfectly aligned with the seasonal Santa Ana Winds, once again as bellows, accelerating the fire’s rush to the coast where it burned beach homes. The

large number of residences lost attests not only to the ferocity of the conflagration but also to the amount of new construction since the 1993 firestorm.

Why more mansions in the fire-loving hills? Because of a perverse fact: after every major California blaze, homeowners and their representatives take shelter in the belief that if wildfire can’t be prevented, nonetheless, its destructiveness can be tamed. Thus the recently incorporated City of Malibu and the County of Los Angeles responded to the 1993 disaster with aggressive regulations about brush clearance and fire-resistant roof materials. Creating ‘defensible space’ became the new mantra, and it was soon echoed across California in the aftermath of other great fires, such as those that swept San Diego County in 2003 and 2007, burning 4,500 homes and killing 30 people. So instead of a long-overdue debate about the wisdom of rebuilding and the need to prevent further construction in areas of extreme natural fire danger, public attention was diverted into a discussion of the best methods for clearing vegetation (rototillers or goats?) and making homes fire-resistant. And if edge suburbs and backcountry subdivisions, in fact, could be fire-proofed, then why not add more? Since 1993, almost half of California’s new homes have been built in fire hazard areas. Yet, as a contemporary Galileo might say of defensible space, ‘still it burns.’ In the last eighteen months 20,000 homes and perhaps a 1,000 lives have been lost in one super-fire after another.

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Such fires are both old and new. Two different causalities are involved. First vegetation and topography, annually orchestrated by our dry hurricanes, define persistent fire patterns and frequencies. Without human intervention, however, lots of small fires ignited by late

summer lightning create an intricate patchwork of vegetation of different ages and combustibility. The one-hundred-thousand-acre firestorms that we now experience annually did occur occasionally in the aftermath of epic droughts, but in a 'natural' fire regime they were rare. Fire prevention in the twentieth century, however, nurtured large areas of chaparral and forest into old age, creating perfect conditions for great fires. But as long as so many California towns were surrounded by citrus groves and agricultural land, fire even in its new, larger incarnation was usually stopped before it encountered housing. Today our horticultural firebreaks are gone, strawberry fields are now aging suburbs, and the quest for beach fronts, mountain view lots and big trees has created fire hazards that were once unimaginable.

Climate change, meanwhile, is coming to California in the form of drought and extreme summer heat, along with episodes of record torrential rain. Although scientists debate whether or not median annual precipitation averaged over decades will actually decline, more of it will fall as rain not as snow, a serious concern given that our water system depends on the Sierra snowpack to store and modulate the release of the water that irrigates cities and agribusiness. Moreover, rainfall is no longer an accurate predictor of fire risk. The winter of 2016-17 was the wettest in the history of Northern California, and spring brought the most glorious wildflower display in generations. But July was torrid and coastal temperatures, usually in the 70s, broke 100°F for a week. The greenery of spring was punctually baked into a bumper crop of brown fire-starter. When the winds began to blow in October, first Santa Rosa, north of San Francisco, and then Montecito, just south of Santa Barbara,

caught fire. Three thousand homes were lost and several dozen people, mostly elderly and unaware of the approaching menace, died. But nature in California saves one last act and when the heavens opened up on Montecito's bare burnt hills in January another 25 people disappeared in the fast-moving debris flows. This same encore awaits Malibu and the Sierra foothills over the next few months.

Finally, a word or two about Malibu and Paradise. The two cities share three common characteristics: both are very white (the Black population of Malibu is 1.5%; Paradise, 0.1%), relatively geriatric (double the state's median percentage of over-65s), and inhabit notorious fire corridors.

Indeed the Paradise area plays in the same elite fire league as Malibu with six massive blazes since 1950, including back-to-back fires in the summer of 2008 that necessitated evacuations that gridlocked Paradise's roads — the shape of chaos to come. But otherwise the cities are avatars of two completely different Californias. Home values in Paradise are half of the state's median and a tenth of Malibu's — making it one of the last affordable places in the state. Household income in Paradise is \$13,000 below the state median; Malibu's \$60,000 above. Paradise also has a unique distinction: nearly 20 percent of its under-65 population is enumerated by the last Census as disabled. This extraordinary proportion of elderly, sick and disabled people undoubtedly contributed to the huge, inconsolable death toll. Two kinds of Californians will continue to live with fire: those who can afford (with indirect public subsidies) to rebuild and those who can't afford to live anywhere else.

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