

# Wildfire as a 'Matter of Care'

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## 1. Background

Geographers have long sought to push the boundaries on **conceptualising and problematising care**. Indeed, their work has furthered understanding of the discrete **temporalities, spatialities, materialities and relationalities** of care.<sup>1</sup>

Various **crises** have also increasingly compelled geographers to ask about the adequacy of established notions of care.<sup>2</sup> Despite this, the more **radical potentials of care**, including **researching and thinking through care**, remain largely unexplored.

## 2. Research Focus

In my research, I critically examine the radical potential of care, asking how **care comes to matter in the context of wildfire**.

I aim to extend geographical debate by exploring and assembling **forms of and encounters with care(ing)** during the complex relations between **people, practices and phenomena** that attempt to sustain **wildfire risk management**.

## 3. Care(ing)

I see value in de la Bellacasa's (2017) **definition of care**:

"care is everything that *is* done to maintain, continue, and repair 'the world' so that *all* can live in it as well as possible. That world includes... *all* that we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web."<sup>3</sup>

Tronto (1993; 2013) presents five principles and values of an 'ethics of care':

- **caring about** [attentiveness]
- **taking care of** [responsibility]
- **care-giving** [competence]
- **care-receiving** [responsiveness]<sup>4</sup>
- **caring-with** [solidarity]<sup>5</sup>

## 4. Researching Care(ing) in Wildfire Risk Management

My research focuses on wildfire risk management in **Sonoma County, California** - which experienced highly destructive wildfires between 2017 and 2020. My research methods were guided by **feminist 'ethics of care'** scholarship.<sup>6,7</sup>

### Participant Observation

Participated and observed ongoing wildfire risk management in Sonoma County - remained curious and responsive to care "in the middle of things".

### The go-along

Accompanied people doing wildfire risk management - reflected on taken-for-granted and hidden care(ing) and its entanglements with material and immaterial objects.

### Storytelling

People shared stories related to wildfire risk management that mattered to them - enabled the multidimensionality and messiness of care to percolate the research.

## 5. Results

In wildfire risk management, care takes forms and is encountered in ways that we might not expect.



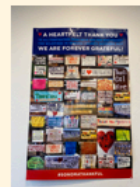
- **Community grazing project**
- People described joy and hope in 'hooves and hands' working together to stay, to heal and to coexist in a fire ecosystem.



- **Fire Safe Sonoma outreach at a community fair**
- The everyday work of organisations like Fire Safe Sonoma sustained wildfire risk management in Sonoma County.
- These practices were considered as 'acts of care.'



- **Prescribed burning**
- The practice of putting 'good fire' on the land, and the flames themselves, demonstrated care as entangled with human and non-humans.
- Feelings of gentleness, reciprocity and healing provides a way to navigate coexistence with wildfire.



- **Thank you sign in local fire station**
- These small acts of recognition and gratitude were often discussed as moments where people felt particularly cared about.
- The sense of a community coming together and being stronger for it.



- **Ribbon-cutting for new aerial firefighting helicopter**
- This could be considered as care on 'stand-by'.
- The grandeur of this event celebrated material traces of care in wildfire response. This contrasts the often hidden labour of wildfire prevention work.



- **Fire personnel mapping vegetation management projects and evacuation routes**
- Wildfire risk management is ongoing throughout fire-season and off-season. However, the forms of care change depending on the rhythm of the season.
- Activities in the off-season are in anticipation and preparation of the approaching fire season.

## 6. Conclusion

It is evident **care weaves in and extends out of wildfire risk management practices**; and, in and out of the relations between people, practice and phenomena which enable wildfire to managed as a disaster.

Care is **transformative, non-innocent** and also **entangled** with humans, non-humans and more-than-humans. It can provide a way to **navigate and re-make wildfire** and its risk management.

Reference: 1. Hanrahan, K.B. and Smith, C.E., 2020. Interstices of care: Re-imagining the geographies of care. *Area*, 52(2), pp.230-234. 2. Dowling, E., 2022. *The care crisis: What caused it and how can we end it?*. Verso Books. 3. de La Bellacasa, M.P., 2017. *Matters of care: Speculative ethics in more than human worlds* (Vol. 41). U of Minnesota Press. 4. Tronto, J., 1993. *Moral boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care*. Routledge. 5. Tronto, J., 2013. *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice*. NYU Press. 6. Brannelly, T., 2018. An ethics of care research manifesto. *International Journal of Care and Caring*, 2(3), pp.367-378. 7. Hall, T.E., 2022. How should we research disaster? with care? *RADIX Blog*.