

# Leaders

## We Would Like to Meet

Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program



### Interview with Sue Husari

by Brian Lawatch



Sue Husari on fire at the beginning of her career.

#### Professional Pioneer

Sue Husari has spent her career pioneering new roles for women in wildland fire management. Throughout her impressive career, she has moved through the ranks with her unique blend of operational and scientific knowledge.

#### Background

Sue's career as a wildland firefighter spanned parts of five decades, starting in 1975 as a 20 year-old crew member on the Klamath National Forest,

Happy Camp Ranger District. In 1977, Sue joined a hotshot crew as one of the first female hotshots, following that up with time in helitack and on engines. Like many other seasonal firefighters, she fought fires in the summer while going to school the rest of the year. Her studies in botany at Humboldt State University led her to combine her academic knowledge with her professional firefighting experience and have a very successful career in fire management.

Her first management experience came as an assistant fire management officer at Everglades National Park, where she helped develop and execute prescribed fire, prescribed natural fire and fire monitoring programs. In 1987 she took over the fire management officer position at Everglades. From 1991-2001, Sue served as the Assistant Director (AD) of Fire and Aviation Management for the Pacific Southwest Region of the US Forest Service. It was as AD that she networked extensively with fire researchers, local and state governments and other federal agencies, and university professors from across the country in an initiative to include fire management in scientific investigations and large scale planning efforts.

In 2002 Sue returned to the NPS as regional fire management officer (RFMO) for the Pacific West Region where she spent the majority of the remainder of her career. As RFMO, Sue oversaw 44 parks with fire management plans. Now retired, Sue plans to stay involved in fire management, advising fire managers on risk management issues.



Sue Husari

**“Trust your people, listen to them, seek out mentors, and ask for help.”**

## Who do you think is a leadership role model and why?

I think of a number of people as leadership role models. Someone who comes to mind in the NPS is Cicely Muldoon, currently the superintendent at Point Reyes National Seashore. She is funny, low key and smart, values her employees and people love to work for her. Outside our organization - I have been very impressed by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton - a wonderful model of public service. I also think Jon Jarvis is one of the better agency heads and appreciate his emphasis on adaptive management and science based management in parks.



## If you were to pick the three most important character traits for an effective leader, what would those characteristic traits be?

I think honesty, also in addition to that, good common sense, and the ability to listen.

## Are leaders born or made? Explain.

I would say it's a mix of the two. But I can tell you for sure that I don't think I was a born leader. It took a tremendous amount of work for me to get to the point where I felt like a leader. Part of that had to do with the fact that I really didn't have any role models that were women, so it took me a number of years to get the sense of how to be a leader in a male-dominated organization. In my case, I think I have some innate traits. I am very verbal, have a good education, great parents and very, very good early supervisors in fire management. But taking it from that point to being a leader, I think it was a long process that involved good supervision of me, and also reading and understanding and developing the self-confidence to be a leader.

## What do you consider your strengths to be?

My sense of humor gets me through a lot. And at this point, I am in a place where I can mentor other employees and future leaders. More than anything else, I think the relationships that I have with the interagency

community - Cal Fire, Oregon, Department of Forestry, the Forest Service, BLM, Cal-EMA – and the ability to build good strong, trusting relationships with other agencies have been good for me and very good for the National Park Service.

## Do you have any weaknesses?

I sometimes jump to conclusions too fast about what is behind the motivations of other people, and that is a weakness. Sometimes I don't listen enough. One of my skills is the ability to integrate a lot of information quickly, and sometimes I go too fast and don't bring other people along to explain assumptions. I've tried to stop doing that. I listen more, explain more, and of all those things, I have worked fairly hard in the last few years to do that. It has made me a better supervisor, as well as a better leader.

## What are the biggest improvements you have witnessed in the wildland fire service?

I think the biggest improvements are not necessarily technological, although some of the planning tools we have make the job easier. We're less of a top-down organization today in fire management and have become much less militaristic. We ask for and utilize the opinions of everyone; from the first season firefighter to leadership at the top in decision-making. Things like AARs have made a huge difference in really getting a sense of what we're doing. I know you've probably heard this from a number of people that served in the 70's, quotes like: "we don't pay you to think," and "if I wanted your opinion I'd ask for it." That was pretty common and I'm not being critical of it. That was the leadership supervisory style of that time. So the big change is that we really do ask everyone to participate in decision-making when appropriate. We analyze risk now much more thoroughly and I think better than we did before. We are much more of a learning organization than we were in the past, and I don't think that concept even existed in the mid 70's. So, most of the improvements have to do with shared leadership and integration through the organization. And another important improvement is in some of our analytical tools related to what fires do. The biggest improvement I think is how we integrate data and information and translate it into action.

Again, I would say the most important thing is understanding or at least acknowledging human factors in firefighting and leadership, and also integration of a lot of opinions and diverse points of view in making decisions and analyzing risk.

## What would you consider the worst changes you have seen in your time in service?

I think the decisions in firefighting for a wide variety of reasons have become highly political. And that has become a negative for firefighting in general because leaders and agency administrators are forced to consider the political risks they are taking in the implementation of fire management, and that can make all of us, including me, risk-averse in doing the right thing for the parks. This year is a prime example of that, where we weren't able to implement a lot of the use of lighting fires for multiple objectives, for resource management. It's an election year, but also there were political and financial considerations that came into that. I'm sure you're aware of all that, it's been in the news lately. And it's made a big difference in what we do. Also, the willingness to spend huge amounts of the taxpayers' money on some suppression efforts with political considerations in mind has been something that has been disturbing.

The real time information that's available to everyone has a good and a bad side, because it makes it possible for people to be involved in decision-making based on what they see largely on the Internet. We do provide a lot of information and that's good, but it's almost as though people could make decisions remotely, and it's very difficult to make fire management decisions on individual incidents while at a desk in San Francisco or Washington that are as good as can be made on the ground.

## Describe a few of the toughest decisions or dilemmas that you have faced.

I think some of the toughest decisions and dilemmas relate to accidents. I find that when we are involved with a fatality in fire management - it always seems the people were so young and had such good motives and it seems so random - but I always have long period of soul searching anytime we end up with a fatality. A couple of them that come to mind of late were Dan Holmes and Andy Palmer who were both young firefighters in the National Park Service in our region. When you look back and really question "what could I have done to make a difference? What didn't I do or didn't I say to change that outcome?"

The other thing that I find particularly difficult, and this is very fresh, is that this year we were in a situation where we had to really encourage the parks to curtail the management of lightning fires because of the political sensitivity. We miss many good opportunities for management of lighting in the landscape and pay the price later in more severe fire behavior or ecosystems that are even more out of whack. It's always difficult for

me to ask parks to be very conservative when they want to proceed with management of some of fires.

The other thing that's been particularly difficult this year and the last couple of years, is watching the situation where we have budget cuts in fire. We know that we're also forgoing opportunities for future leaders because we're cutting back on the employment of very promising young people, because we simply don't have the funding to keep them working. They will go elsewhere for employment and are doing so. Because of the way downsizing works in agencies, we tend to keep people that are in permanent positions, and we lose the opportunity to do what I think is one of the really big strengths of the National Park Service and fire and bring in young and diverse people who will be the leaders of the future. That's difficult, too.

## When did you realize that you had a significant influence on others?

That's a really interesting question. I'll tell you that when I first had a supervisory position in the US Forest Service, I had a friend, Caroline, who was also on an engine in a lower-level supervisory position and one day she came to me and said "you know, I finally figured out they work for me, I do not work for them." I think what she was talking about - and it really resonated with me - both of us were having a really hard time supervising, and this was just a few people, who were questioning our every decision, and we both came to the realization about the same time. This was a long time ago, I was probably in my late 20s, we realized we were actually the supervisors and that regardless of whether the people who worked for us were happy with that or not, that we were in charge. And I think it's a point in your career where you stop questioning yourself. I don't know if this was unique to the time and place, women in the all-male organization and not having complete support from our supervisors, but that was part of the realization. I think the other part - and this was from the help of a number of mentors that I had - I realized that I could integrate my science background with my operational fire experience to create a hybrid that was fairly unique in management where understanding how ecosystems work and managing them using fire was when I realized I could do very good things. I don't know whether that, you used the word "influence," but I think where I've had the most satisfying parts of my career is integrating science and operational fire. I was able to exercise that most completely when I was working at Everglades National Park because of the large amount of fire activity, and the opportunity that I had there to work directly with scientists at the South Florida Research Station that was located within the park. So the integration was daily, the adapted management was

constant, and the learning and understanding was continual.

### **Did you enjoy Florida?**

Actually I did, I think that's why I stayed so long. I love south Florida. I really do. I was really interested in the ecosystems there, plus I was able to go over to the Bahamas quite a bit and see those pine ecosystems. I liked the place because of the ecological diversity with the merging of the tropical and temperate ecosystems and flora and the human community for much the same reason. For me, I lived in the park for quite a while and that was great and then I moved outside the park. When I lived there I was involved in a lot of restoration work: with tropical ecosystems, pines, hammocks, all of what makes Everglades unique. I believe the reason I loved it so much is because I'm a botanist. There's no better place. But also because I loved the music, and culture, and just that Caribbean influence. Not everyone finds it easy to work down there.

### **What handful of lessons learned would you offer to a young leader today?**

I wish I could offer to young leaders the opportunity to experiment and learn in a much less critical environment. I wish that I could offer the opportunity for young leaders to make mistakes, because that's where you learn. But I think the level of scrutiny on all fire management decisions now is so much more intense. When I was learning and growing I had a lot of latitude that doesn't exist these days in decision-making. But as far as lessons learned go, trust your people, listen to them, seek out mentors, and ask for help. All those kinds of lessons learned will benefit anybody in any career. There are so many people out there with so much knowledge that are just waiting for you to ask questions and are very happy to help you. So ask for the help, also take advantage of the leadership curriculum that is available now that was not available in the past. The whole leadership curriculum fast-forwards people to become leaders and that wasn't available. The other thing I would suggest is that whenever somebody asks you to be on a review or participate in an AAR, a facilitated learning analysis (FLA), or a lessons learned review, those kinds of opportunities benefit the agency, but I've learned more from those opportunities that I was given than anything else because in examining an accident or escaped prescribed burn, you really learn more about yourself than you do about what happened.

So take advantage of those opportunities when they come. And don't come up too fast. Stay at each stage in your career for enough time to really soak it in. There's no reason to be in a hurry because you can never go back, or it's very difficult to go back once you advance in your career. Stay in the field as long as possible.

### **What is a book that you have read recently that you would recommend to others?**

I just read *Cloud Atlas* by David Mitchell. It's a work of fiction but a wonderful book. It's even hard to describe. I think it has a lot of meaning to me because I'm interested in writing and he's a wonderful writer. It also has observations about our society, its trajectory, and where it might go in the future, that play out in the book. It also has, to me, an optimistic viewpoint on the future of humanity.

### **Are there any ideas or projects that you want to work on that you now have the time and ability to?**

I got some really good advice from Dean Clark (retired deputy fire management officer for the Intermountain Region of the NPS). He advised me to "plan not to plan." But the projects that I am committed to working on, first of all I want to learn to speak Spanish. I'm planning on going into an intensive Spanish program in Nicaragua within the next five or six months. I have committed to do some additional work on risk management with our Chief Ranger, Scott Wanek. I would like to take the time to actually read the articles on that and put together a literature search for him. A long-time project in the making is to get a little cabin built on a piece of property that we have on the mountains, and train my dogs. Just so many things. But in terms of specific projects, my initial plan is to, immediately after retirement, work on this year's election and do some volunteer work. So that's what's on my plate and I am sure I will come up with some more stuff, but that's what's there for now.

Sue Husari was interviewed by Brian Lawatch, former National Park Service Student Intern at the National Interagency Fire Center. The interview was transcribed in September 2012.