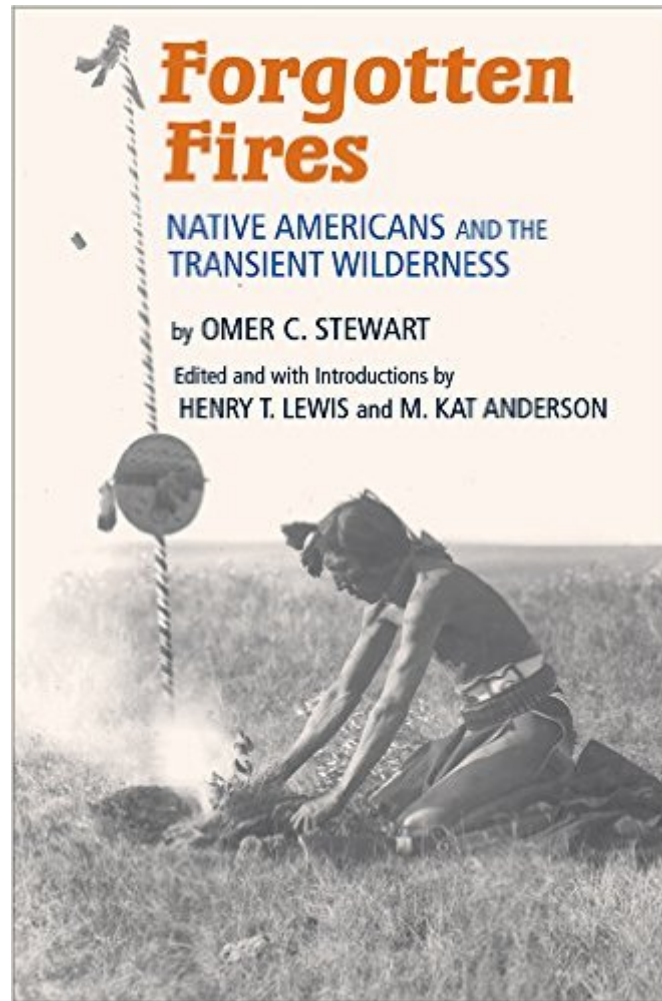


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# Forgotten Fires: Native Americans And The Transient Wilderness



## Synopsis

A common stereotype about American Indians is that for centuries they lived in static harmony with nature in a pristine wilderness that remained unchanged until European colonization. Omer C. Stewart was one of the first anthropologists to recognize that Native Americans made significant impact across a wide range of environments. Most important, they regularly used fire to manage plant communities and associated animal species through varied and localized habitat burning. In *Forgotten Fires*, editors Henry T. Lewis and M. Kat Anderson present Stewart's original research and insights, presented in the 1950s yet still provocative today. Significant portions of Stewart's text have not been available until now, and Lewis and Anderson set Stewart's findings in the context of current knowledge about Native hunter-gathers and their uses of fire. This volume shows that for thousands of years, the North American landscape has been regularly shaped and renewed by the land and fire management practices of North American Indians.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

First presented in the 1950s, yet just as relevant today, *Forgotten Fires: Native Americans And The Transient Wilderness* by Omer C. Stewart dispels the longstanding cultural myth that Native American communities had no impact on the natural environment surrounding them. Taking a close look at the effects Native American civilization had upon nature's ability to incorporate them into the ecosystem, with an especial eye toward how some regularly used fires to manage plant and animal communities through localized habitat burning, *Forgotten Fires* is a thoughtful study about

mankind's true interaction with the environment, presenting straightforward facts instead of romanticized legend. This highly recommended edition for Native American Studies and Environmental History reference shelves and reading lists has been collaboratively edited by Henry T. Lewis and M. Kat Anderson for the contemporary reader.

In this book, the editors have gathered various papers published by Omer Stewart (Professor of Anthropology at the University of Colorado in Boulder) over several decades in the 20th Century when scholars viewed the Native Americans as naive, primitive people who had little impact on the landscape. Omer observed, documented and publicized some of the last accounts of elders showing that the burning of prairies in the Upper Midwest (the only widely accepted use of fire among natives acknowledged by scholars at the time) was the tip of the iceberg. Fire was used on a massive scale from coast to coast. Stewart was not aware of the massive extinctions of Pleistocene animals, likely caused by the ancestors of the more recent burners, but it is very likely that Indians resorted to fire to help eliminate the vast forests that closed in with the extinction of so many herbivores. This same explosion of forests occurred when the Indians succumbed on a massive scale to Smallpox and all the other European diseases, and finally at the hands of Europeans themselves. Today, forests throughout America are experiencing massive die off of trees, tremendous predation by beetles and insects of all sorts, and fires on a mythical scale. Omer anticipated much of the research that documents these phenomena (encapsulated so brilliantly in the recent best-seller, 1491): the sections written by the editors about the hysterical and dictatorial response to Omer's research during his lifetime, leading to his ostracism and professional isolation. This obscure, seminal book was given to me by J. Scott Peterson, Botanist for the United States Department of Agriculture: I wish that land planners, religious zealots and nay-sayers would read this to see the personal damage that can be wrought by myopic scholars and hysterical zealots. The revenge, however, is Omer Stewart's: practically every word he wrote has turned out to be true. This classic volume, lovingly edited and produced should be in the hands of land stewards, ecologists and students of the American landscape generally. It is a classic!

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