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Hotshots, history and the human choices behind megafires

What happens when a sharp, young anthropologist joins an elite wildland firefighting crew — when scholarship co-mingles with blood, burns and sweat on the frontlines of America's largest fires?

In his book [“When It All Burns”](#) (Penguin RandomHouse, 2025), UC Santa Barbara's Jordan Thomas sets out to answer a straightforward question: What led to the megafires currently scorching the West? What emerged was an immersive account of a changing world.

“These wildfires we’re encountering in California are not natural disasters,” said Thomas, a doctoral candidate in the Anthropology Department. “They're products of choices that real people have made historically and continue to make today.”

On Oct. 9, Thomas will discuss the genesis of California's wildfire crisis at UCSB's Interdisciplinary Humanities Center to kick off their new programming series, “On Fire.” The event is free and open to the public; details are available at the [IHC website](#).

Thomas sports the lean physique and bright eyes of a man at home on the trail or the track. Yet, it's still difficult to imagine him cutting firebreaks for 12-hour shifts after sleepless nights under orange skies. Because this image juxtaposes against the thoughtful, measured voice of a scholar whose intellect and curiosity are matched

only by his fierce conviction.

Thomas wants to understand why people do the things they do, and he's particularly interested in fire. Most ecosystems in California, and many around the world, evolved with certain kinds of fires: periodic ground fires that clear underbrush and open up meadows, or brief infernos that release pine seeds onto sunlit soils. Expecting such landscapes to be healthy without fire is akin to expecting others to be healthy without precipitation, Thomas explained in an interview. For thousands of years, humans around the world have recognized this and fostered healthy levels of fire on the landscapes in which they lived.

Jordan was studying the use of fire in tropical agroforestry when he left the University of Cambridge to pursue a master's degree at UCSB with Professor [Jeffrey Hoelle](#). He then began his doctorate under Professor [Barbara Herr Harthorn](#). In Santa Barbara he found the perfect intellectual environment for his research. "I've never been in a space open to such interdisciplinary thinking," he said. "Fire touches anthropology, sociology, biology, meteorology — most disciplines, really — so it was invaluable to exist in a community willing to think across disciplines."

He followed this curiosity and interest — guided slightly by the need for a job — into joining a beginner wildland fire crew for the U.S. Forest Service. The further he went, the deeper he got, the more questions he had.

The young Kansan proved his mettle, and after two fire seasons he was encouraged to apply to become a hotshot, the nation's preeminent wildland firefighters. The work is grueling, the peril real, and the pay meager. But the prospect of steeping himself in the deep knowledge of this elite group proved strong. "When you're invited to something like this you just don't say no," Thomas explained. "This is not an opportunity that comes around multiple times in a lifetime."

The men on his hotshot crew put a human face on an issue that is often only understood through the lens of abstract destruction. As readers come to empathize with these characters, Thomas hopes that they'll become more invested in the issues themselves, and the well-being of the firefighters.

"I had the real privilege of coming in very naïve," Thomas said, "because I got to really understand and analyze the whole process."

Hotshot training requires you to subordinate your own needs and wants to become a small part of a much larger endeavor. Each teammate's skills and experience is critical to the whole enterprise. Firefighting isn't plug and play, Thomas said; it can't be innovated from Silicon Valley or Capitol Hill and then dropped on-scene. And understanding this has major implications for how society invests its money and resources.

Firefighters are busy people. So are graduate students. Thomas was both. And yet, those fierce convictions compelled him toward this project. "I wrote this book because I had an opportunity to, and because I felt like I had to," he reflected. "Being on the hotshot crew is bearing witness to changes on our planet that very few people have access to."

In his book, Thomas follows history, ecology and sociology wherever they lead, shying away from nothing he might encounter. He discusses how colonialism and industrialism stamped out the beneficial fires Indigenous peoples historically lit across North America, and indeed the world. He highlights the ruthless genocide European Americans conducted against Indigenous peoples, and how timber barons commandeered the Forest Service into protecting their own financial interests. Throughout it all, Thomas considers who bears the cost and who reaps the rewards from the choices we've made.

"I didn't go into this trying to make a statement about colonialism or about genocide," Thomas said. "I was just trying to understand how these fires became so violent." That pursuit led him into some of the darkest parts of California's history. "You actually can't understand fire in California without understanding those histories."

Some may bristle at the conclusions Thomas reaches, but he's interested only in the story that the facts bear out. "I refuse to avoid certain topics that are a matter of life and death for real people in order to make the book more palatable for people in politics," he stated. That would simply incentivize powerful people to politicize issues they don't want written about, he explained. By bringing these topics into public discourse, he hopes to encourage people of various backgrounds to engage with them.

This ethos reflects Thomas' time at UC Santa Barbara. "I've found UCSB's spirit of collaboration, experimentation and interdisciplinary thinking to be so incredibly generative," he said. He recalled messaging professors during summers on the fireline to better understand what he was encountering. In winter, he took intensive seminars combining history, ecology and political economy to place his experiences in a wider context. And after leaving the Los Padres hotshots, he was able to attend [prescribed burns](#) conducted in partnership with UCSB. "We had internationally renowned scientists from our university on the fireline with everyone else, swinging tools," he said.

As for solutions, Thomas offers a few. The first is to stop burning fossil fuels as quickly as possible. "There is no forest management technique that will work if we allow the fossil fuel industry to continue causing climate change at the current rate," he said. "The fossil fuel industry has produced more carbon in three short decades than was emitted in all of human history combined, with knowledge of the consequences," Thomas writes.

The second is to reintroduce the kinds of fires that once characterized our landscapes, especially in concert with tribes. "We need to put as much fire on the ground as possible," Thomas said. "In a place as fire-evolved as California, you shouldn't need to justify why you want to burn your land — you should need to justify why you're not burning your land."

All of this will require moving beyond what Thomas calls the "empty rhetoric of 'supporting our firefighters'" and actually increasing our investment in the skilled individuals tasked with containing destructive fires and facilitating prescribed burns. The people sacrificing their health, safety and security to stem the destruction from societal negligence and malfeasance.

This means ensuring a large, well paid workforce with basic health benefits and wage protections, not the outdated, seasonal contract positions the Forest Service still hires under. "We need to be able to fully staff our crews and retain people with expertise," Thomas said. "Right now, it's difficult to do either." And as public agencies are gutted, profiteering corporations fill the vacuum, creating perverse incentives that fuel more megafires, he explained.

Thomas hopes his book sparks collaboration. "I view it as an opportunity to bring these topics into spaces where people from various political viewpoints will engage

with them,” he said. “Because fire and firefighting are both topics that span the political divide.”

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