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Opinion

Mt. Wilson's famous, and besieged, observatory

Man once viewed the heavens by flickering firelight; now a raging blaze threatens a site where stargazing history was made.

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There has been tragedy and loss aplenty in the fire ravaging the Angeles National Forest, but it has been particularly poignant -- and, somehow, humbly circular -- to watch what's probably the first natural element man subdued to his purpose threatening one of the great monuments of modern science.

The 101-year-old observatory at the top of Mt. Wilson houses some of the most productive scientific instruments of the 20th century, and it continues to play a cutting-edge role in various branches of astronomy, though the ambient nighttime light rising from the metropolis that now sprawls up its foothills makes deep space observation too difficult. Paradoxically, it was the Los Angeles Basin's inversion layer -- and the "stable air" it created -- that originally made the mountain a perfect site for the great telescopes that revolutionized mankind's notion of its place in the universe.

Beginning in 1919, the astronomer Edwin Hubble used the Mt. Wilson Observatory's famous 100-inch Hooker telescope to prove that our Milky Way was but one galaxy among billions of stellar aggregations coming to life and dying across the universe. It was through his observations on the mountain that Hubble also realized that creation's most primal impulse, the force of that singular event we now call the Big Bang, continues to echo through our universe, creating new distances where none had existed just a moment before.

You'd think the place and instrument that so fundamentally altered our notions about ourselves and our relation to the cosmos would be a place of pilgrimage. But, for whatever reason, we don't really turn the sites of our great intellectual realizations -- and that, more than "discoveries," are what they are -- into shrines the way we do other historical venues. Who, for example, now bothers to visit the Zurich flat where the young Albert Einstein worked out his special theory of relativity and first jotted down the most famous equation of the 20th century? Does anybody still visit the drafty Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge where James Watson and Francis Crick first constructed a model of DNA and, as the latter modestly announced to colleagues in the Eagle Pub that night, "discovered the secret of life"?

Perhaps it's simply in the nature of science and those who pursue it to keep their eyes fixed on the forward horizon, though it's hard not to feel that the rest of society undervalues the scientific contribution to our collective life, because we don't hold in our memories and adequately value the triumphant moments achieved in places like Mt. Wilson. If this country taught the true history of science to its children, would we still suffer through the endless know-nothing-ism of pointless controversies like creationism?

Perhaps, though, the best mementos of Hubble's contribution you can collect today are the stunning pictures of other galaxies taken from the space telescope that bears his name. They're now available at www.hubblesite.org > www.hubblesite.org, and there's even a section that lets you handily adapt them as wallpaper for your computer screen. Still, it would be a shame to lose forever the place where such genuinely mind-bending work was done.

On the other hand, if this "angry" Station fire has done nothing else, it has reminded us that we remain rather small and often helpless before the most basic of terrestrial elements -- fire, water, wind. Those huge pyrocumulus clouds looming over downtown L.A. on Monday were like monuments to a kind of heedlessness and vanity that flourishes with particular force in this city -- where a fantasy of control long ago took hold. How do you accept implacable nature of the sort that's been on display for the last week in a city where so many believe they can reinvent their lives, their looks and even their psyches?

The last time fire burned all the way through what's now the Angeles National Forest was in 1897, eight years before astronomer George Hale began work on the first phase of the Mt. Wilson Observatory. Dave Boucher, the L.A. County Fire Department's historian, and other local scholars of fire ecology believe that the Station blaze already has surpassed that conflagration in size.



Almost all of the largest fires in California history -- including the largest, the 273,246-acre Cedar fire in San Diego County six years ago -- have occurred in this century, products of urban sprawl, the thoughtless propagation of non-native plants, unwise fire suppression policies and, probably, global warming.

The dreams that propelled Hubble toward the world-altering discoveries he made atop Mt. Wilson may very well have had their origins in our ancestors' reveries beside their flickering fires. It's sobering to witness how easily it can become once again an element of dread.

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