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## Lightning Strike

by Olivia Sprinkel

“I didn’t study science at university. I didn’t know as a girl whether I could do science. So I studied anthropology.”

I was speaking to Dr Kristen Shive, Director of Science, at the Save the Redwoods League. I asked her what led her to make the switch.

“The summer after I graduated, I went to work as an intern in the visitor centre of Bandelier National Monument in New Mexico.” Bandelier is an ancient site, with a human presence going back 11,000 years. I had visited and walked the narrow paths leading to the cave dwellings in the cliffs, and seen the petroglyphs on the rock walls. I could understand why it would have been of interest to an anthropology graduate.

Kristen continues. “I arrived a month after they had lost control of a prescribed burn in the forest. Because of the damage caused, the burn was controversial.” In total, 400 families lost their homes as a result of the Cerro Grande fire in 2000, including some members of the park staff who Kristen was working with. The Los Alamos National Laboratory also suffered damage. Reports relate that a combination of the drought conditions and high winds led to the fire becoming out of control. But if they hadn’t proceeded with the burn, there was the risk that a lightning strike or human carelessness would have started a fire, and the results could have been even more devastating.

In learning about the fire, Kristen became interested in how to use our understanding of the forest to manage it better. She started to work on prescribed burn crews, and also fire-fighting crews. It wasn’t in one lightning strike, but gradually she became immersed in the science of forest and fire.

She went on to study for a masters in forestry, and then a PhD in Environmental Sciences at the University of Berkley, specialising in fire ecology. Not bad for a girl.

Now, a key part of her role is outreach and education.

“In California, there is no no fire situation. The idea is not to prevent fires. We want to make the forests more resilient for when fires do happen.”