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Climate Change in Wildlands: Pioneering Approaches to Science and Management

Andrew James Hansen PhD, William Monahan, David M. Theobald PhD, Mr. S. Thomas Olliff MS

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Scientists have been warning for years that human activity is heating up the planet and climate change is under way. In the past century, global temperatures have risen an average of 1.3 degrees Fahrenheit, a trend that is expected to only accelerate. But public sentiment has taken a long time to catch up, and we are only just beginning to acknowledge the serious effects this will have on all life on Earth. The federal government is crafting broad-scale strategies to protect wildland ecosystems from the worst effects of climate change. The challenge now is to get the latest science into the hands of resource managers entrusted with protecting water, plants, fish and wildlife, tribal lands, and cultural heritage sites in wildlands.

Teaming with NASA and the Department of the Interior, ecologist Andrew Hansen, along with his team of scientists and managers, set out to understand how climate and land use changes affect montane landscapes of the Rockies and the Appalachians, and how these findings can be applied to wildlands elsewhere. They examine changes over the past century as well as expected future change, assess the vulnerability of species and ecosystems to these changes, and provide new, collaborative management approaches to mitigate expected impacts. A series of case studies showcases how managers might tackle such wide-ranging problems as the effects of warming streams on cold-water fish in Great Smoky Mountain National Park and dying white-bark pine stands in the Greater Yellowstone area. A surprising finding is that species and ecosystems vary dramatically in vulnerability to climate change. While many will suffer severe effects, others may actually benefit from projected changes.

Climate Change in Wildlands is a collaboration between scientists and managers, providing a science-derived framework and common-sense approaches for keeping parks and protected areas healthy on a rapidly changing planet.

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