LIVING WITH WILDFIRE

Imagining, Narrating and Acting upon a Changing Climate (LiFi)

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More info:

INTERNATIONAL PROJECT

LiFi works in a transdisciplinary perspective with fire-affected communities to examine changing priorities, recovery, sustainability, and visions for future

STARTING POINTS

Climate change and biodiversity loss have for long hinged on apocalyptic images of future catastrophes that must be acted upon before it is too late. Recent scientific, artistic, and activist narratives suggest socio-ecological catastrophe is already here and inescapable. LiFi engages with these post-apocalyptic narratives through the lens of Extreme Wildfire Events (EWEs). We investigate both the traumatic dimensions of EWEs and their potential to transform community imaginaries, agency and political organization.

1- What kind of narratives emerge in wildfire-surviving communities about living in and adapting to climate change?
2- In what ways does the emotional and psychic experience of Extreme Wildfire Events spur a (re)negotiation of societal values and priorities, also between adaptation actions and other sustainability goals and mandates?
3- How do emotional and psychic factors dynamically shape community responses to crises in relation to other factors?

FIRESCAPES

Wildfires open a window to the 'new planetary real', forcing us to grapple with a dissonant world of dangerous volatility. LiFi uses 'firescapes' as a lens to trace how communities respond to wildfires in terms of affect, emotion, and community support. While the fire events studied disrupt our belief in technology and the welfare state's ability to provide care, they simultaneously suggest that climate extremes can forge loose networks of solidarity and connection across borders. To fully grasp the micro-political possibilities prompted by the post-apocalyptic era, firescapes need to cross the boundaries between new materialist, scientific, and political approaches to the Anthropocene.

CASE STUDIES **Sweden** (Hälsingland), **Turkiye** (Akyaka), **Portugal** (Pedrógão Grande), **Brazil** (Pantanal), **Australia** (Eurobodalla Shire)

CASE STUDY PORTUGAL: 2017 PEDRÓGÃO GRANDE WILDFIRE AFTERMATH

TRACING POLICY WINDOWS

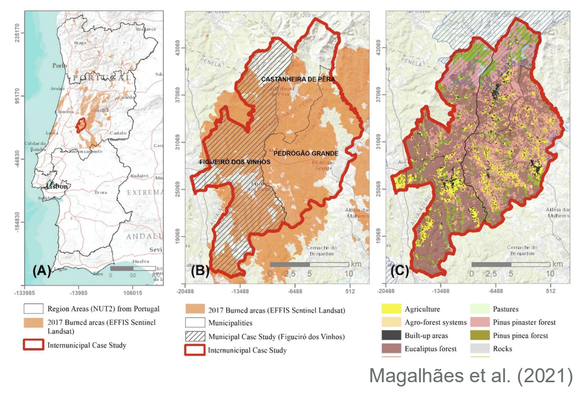
With increasing frequency and severity, extreme events are challenging communities and institutions to develop integrated strategies for disaster response and risk mitigation. From the perspective of climate change policy, extreme events such as wildfires and flashfloods not only reverse the gains associated with mitigation efforts, but also signal proximity to critical thresholds related to climate adaptation. Proposals such as "teachable moments", "focusing events", "social tipping points", and "policy windows" capture how such moments of disruption can lead to reorganization, allowing relatively small interventions to trigger transformative change. However, fostering transformation in the aftermath of loss and disruption essentially requires engagement of the affected communities as well as broader public legitimacy.



PEDRÓGÃO GRANDE, JUNE 17th and AFTERWARDS

The 2017 wildfire season exposed vulnerabilities and weaknesses in risk management and brought them to the national agenda. The Pedrógão Grande fire alone killed 66 people, injured more than 250, and caused profound social and territorial impacts. Pedrógão Grande became a "focusing event", with legal and political consequences extending beyond the human losses, inscribing 2017 as a milestone in Portugal's risk prevention, risk communication, and forest policies (Beighley & Hyde, 2018).

After the 2017 fires, Portugal adopted new and strict fuel management rules (Decree-Law 10/2018), new fire prevention measures for landowners, and created the Agency for Integrated Rural Fire Management (AGIF, Decree-Law 12/2018). The Integrated Rural Fire Management System (SGIFR) followed in 2021 (Decree-Law 82/2021).



Magalhães et al. (2021)





METHOD

The case study research in Portugal focuses on the long-term aftermath of the 2017 Pedrógão Grande wildfire, the deadliest disaster in Portugal's recent history. To examine how responsibilities were attributed and how change and stability were articulated, it focuses on two Portuguese-language datasets, as well as ethnographic methods. The first dataset of social media discussions on the Pedrógão Grande wildfire consists of N=512 Facebook posts made between 2017 and 2023. The second dataset consists of N=22 interviews with fire-affected community members, including farmers, students, firefighters, and municipal officials. The ethno-graphic work involves a long-term collection of policy-relevant communications and a co-creation workshop.

The catastrophe is already here, it's just not evenly distributed.

Yuen (2012), in Cassegård & Thörn (2018)







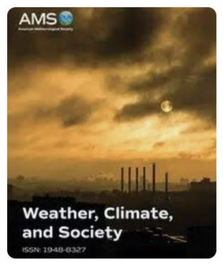


THREE PORTUGAL CASE-STUDY OUTPUTS

PUBLISHED

Social Media Debate and Criticisms in the Post-disaster Context: Attribution of Responsibility after the Pedrógão Grande Wildfire

Mehmet Ali Üzelgün & Juliana Santos (2026). Weather, Climate, and Society, 18(2), 507–517. DOI: 10.1175/WCAS-D-25-0058.1



SIGNIFICANCE STATEMENT

This article investigates how the most deadly wildfire disaster in Portugal's recent history was debated on social media and how the causes and responsibilities were variably attributed. The results highlight the importance of understanding not only "who" is held responsible but also "how" local and global factors are articulated in the postdisaster debate. As in other deadly disasters, political blame and the government's responsibility remain in the foreground of the social media debate. However, this responsibility is also connected and extended to many other causes and agencies, offering local narratives of vulnerabilities linked to global and structural issues. The paper thus argues that tensions between global climate change and local vulnerabilities should be seen as a matter of discursive linking between various layers of agency and evidence, to which communicators must be attentive.

IN PREPARATION

Causal Claims in Post-Disaster Public Debates: From Underlying Vulnerabilities to Risk Discourses in Portugal's Pedrógão Grande Wildfire

Presented at the VII International Congress: Natural Resources, Energy and Society: Global Risks and Pathways to Sustainability, University of Coimbra, Portugal, 26–29 May 2026

Identifying causal factors and relations is a prerequisite, rather than a complement, to studies of vulnerability and risk mitigation. Public reasoning from the impacts of an unnatural disaster to the underlying vulnerabilities is a key component of disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation efforts. Local narratives and public discourses thus contribute significantly to the distribution of burden and responsibilities. Connecting political blame, extreme event attribution, and symptomatic reasoning, this paper aims to contribute to the study of causality discourse in post-disaster public debates. It focuses on how responsibilities were attributed and how causal relations were constructed in the public debate on the 2017 Pedrógão Grande wildfire.

IN PREPARATION

Disruption and Policy Windows: Narrating Change and Continuity in the Aftermath of the Pedrógão Grande Fire

Extreme events may both destroy a region's adaptive capacity, and stimulate transformative change that may enhance both adaptive capacities and socio-ecological resilience. Disasters may open a window to a long-term view of social and political change required for climate change action. The IPCC introduces the policy window hypothesis (Kingdon, 1995), which suggests that "immediately following a disaster, the political climate may be conducive to legal, economic and social change which can begin to reduce structural vulnerabilities" (IPCC, 2007, p. 733).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What changes and what persists in community narratives after the 2017 fire?

2. How do local narratives account for what persists?



Beighley, M., & A. C., Hyde (2018) Portugal wildfire management in a new era: Assessing risks, resources and reforms. Centro de Estudos Florestais, Instituto Superior de Agronomia, Universidade de Lisboa Rep., 20 pp.
Cassegård, C., & H., Thörn (2018). Toward a postapocalyptic environmentalism? Responses to loss and visions of the future in climate activism. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, *1*(4), 561-578.
Magalhães, M. R., N. Cunha, S. Pena, & A. Muller (2021). FIRELAN: An ecologically based planning model towards a re resilient and sustainable landscape. A case study in center region of Portugal. *Sustainability*, *13*, 7055.

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